BELISARIUS CAWL
THE GREAT WORK

GUY HALEY

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BELISARIUS CAWL
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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 Astra Militarum 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.

Fed on stars of dying light,
Broken now, and scattered far,
For sins of violence and deceit
Soul greed brought down those bright
Enduring beings more luminous than we,
Numinous, who saw worlds born, and burn,
Made monsters
By their greed,
And by their art making more,
Are banished by steel children.
Defeated, undefeated yet asunder,
Warnings for seer and shepherd seen
Beware!
Soul hunger has no sating
What rests awakens
They wait, they stir, they starve,
These gods that sleep,
And dream.

– Aeldari lay of unknown origin,
translation by Rollof Uzmartinequa of Dane
(executed 879M39)

CHAPTER ONE

BORROWED TIME

Circa 10,000 years ago

Ezekiel Sedayne was dying.

There was a time when he stood tall among men, as much a physical as an intellectual giant, but those days were done. He was old. He was at the end. His seven-foot frame had shrunken in. His spine curled with calcium loss. His hands were knotted with arthritis. His skin was slack, flowing around brittle bones like draped cloth. His lustrous black hair had turned as fine and white as the silk of a spider's nest. It spread around his head on the pillow as if it, like his skin, had been laid there, and if he stood, if he had been capable of standing, he would have left it behind as a cloud of down.

Sedayne's life had lasted longer than any child of Terra had a right to expect, but all things are finite, and his existence was coming to a close.

Human beings are aware of their mortality, yet they deny it to the very last. Sedayne regarded his intelligence to be in excess of most others. He believed he was free of the delusions that ruled the mind to reason's detriment, yet now he succumbed. He could scarcely believe death was knocking at his door.

This cannot be happening to me, he thought. But it was.

Sedayne had come from nothing to become one of the greatest scientists of his age. Despite his failing body his mind was sharp. His insight clear. In numb amazement, he insisted he felt young in his soul. The ravages of age on his body gave the lie to that.

He appeared in many respects like a corpse. Lips drew back from yellow teeth made long by the recession of dark gums. No matter how fast his thoughts raced, his body barely moved. His chest trembled with the bird flutter of his heart.

Every inhalation was a bellow's wheeze.

But he was not dead yet. The breaths kept coming, and when the door to his bedchamber creaked wide his eyelids flickered open and his eyes, which were strikingly moist in the dry valleys of his parchment skin, swivelled to fix themselves upon his visitor.

'The Altrix Herminia,' he wheezed. His top lip stuck to his teeth for want of saliva, spoiling his smile. He was drying up from the inside out, like a spice pod left out to desiccate in the sun. Soon every drop of life would be wrung out of him, and there would only be an arid husk left. Then there would not even be that.

The Altrix came forwards with a rustle of layered, soft, plastek clothing. Upon her breast pocket she wore a caduceus in red and white that contrasted with the pale green of her dress. The uniform was formal and tightly laced, a symbol binding her to her duty, but though her garments were restrictive she moved with easy grace that suggested athletic, if not dangerous, power.

'My lord director,' she said, dipping her head respectfully. The sharp curve of her fringe swung neatly over her eyes.

'Your arrival pleases me.' Sedayne's head moved feebly to the side so he could follow her approach. The appetites of a younger man tormented him. 'Age does not agree with me,' he said. He was tiring, his breath rasping harder. He was a machine close to shutdown. He looked to the Altrix's face, then at the fat syringe she carried in her hand.

'The time… is close…' Each word was an individual effort. Each syllable required him to assign it a painful breath. Such care and attention his words received now, when once they were spent so carelessly.

'It is, my lord,' said the Altrix. 'You are dying.'

Sedayne gave a death's-head grin. 'I can always trust you to dress things up prettily for me,' he said. 'How goes the search?'

'I have identified seven possible candidates, all acolytes of Diacomes. Recovery missions are outbound.'

'Then administer the last of the elixir. I want to walk and move again. I have been confined here too long.'

'You are sure?'

He nodded his head painfully. 'You brought it. You knew what I would say.'

'This is the last,' she said. Marbled, opaque, silvery liquid that moved to currents of its own filled the glass cylinder. 'The Adarnians are gone. The last rendered down. Their world is empty. Once I inject this dose, there will be no

more. I am sorry.'

The Adarnian race was decreed harmless during the Great Crusade, and allowed to live under an Imperial protectorate. It had not prevented them being harvested to extinction. Unluckily for them, their body chemistry had miraculous effects on the human organism.

'A shame… I… never…' he swallowed twice, trying to summon enough spit to lubricate his creaking larynx. 'Learned how to synthesise it,' he said in a breathless rush.

'Are you certain that now is the time, my lord? We could delay a few days. There is sufficient here to return you to health for a few months, no more. It may be better to wait until a candidate has been selected and returned to Terra.'

He closed his eyes. 'No. Do it now.'

He was too weak to hold out his arm, so Herminia pulled it gently from under the covers, fetched a stirrup rest and strapped the limb in place. The veins in the crook of his elbow were ruined by repeated injection, and it took an amount of coaxing to find a suitable place for the needle. The drug had to be administered directly into the bloodstream in large amounts; pneumatic injection or skin absorption would not do.

Adarnian elixir was the last resort of dying men when all other rejuvenats failed. It came with many prices, not least the atrocity of its making. The elixir was illegal, its use punishable by death. Sedayne didn't care about the xenos or the law, but there were other, more immediate costs. Firstly, when the elixir's positive effects were exhausted, the user returned to a worse state than before. Every dose brought the certainty of hurried deterioration. This last dose would kill him.

Secondly, there was pain.

'Are you ready?' she said.

He blinked his assent. She set the needle to his arm. She had no need to tell him it would hurt.

The bee sting of the needle piercing his flesh made him gasp. The real pain came with the plunger's depression. Health-giving poison pressed from the organs of sentient beings flooded his system, and with it came a fire that scoured age back with its heat, reforging frayed genes and kick-starting the machineries of life.

Stolen youth ran riot through his body.

Ezekiel Sedayne screamed.

CHAPTER TWO

THE AEGIDAN ORBITAL

Now

Glittering debris surrounded the corpse of the planet. Grey as old bone, drier than dust, a shroud of shining particulates gathered solemnly around the corpse as it proceeded about the sun. The track the world ran was the most amenable to life, and yet life was absent entirely.

The broken remains of a single void station hung at equatorial high anchor, its decaying orbit recently stabilised. The soft shine of atmospheric shields closing the breaches in one section was just visible against the sun's glare. Three ships occupied the orbital's near space. Between the station and the world was a light cruiser bearing rich heraldry of yellow and black. Crossed scythes of gold on a sable background adorned its stern shield plates. In the glare of the sun the scars all over its hull were starkly visible. The scrollwork upon its hammerhead prow bore the name *Sterope,* one of the ten legendary steeds of Sotha.

Closest to the orbital was a small vessel of the Mechanicus tech-priests. Much of it was bare metal, the rest painted in the rich reds of Mars. It had no name displayed, but several identification plates bore the same number string – 0-101-0. Small in size, it was nevertheless packed with manufacturing facilities and dock points, and a constant stream of drone craft passed between the ship and the station.

The vessel furthest out was a larger Space Marine strike cruiser of new design, fresh from the shipyard, and free of damage or alterations to its original plan. Its deep blue livery was unmarred, the horned ultima displayed in many places remaining crisply white. It was a young yet fierce ship, and was named the *Lord of Vespator,* for it bore the ruler of that world as he travelled throughout his

kingdom.

A hangar door opened in the side of the *Lord of Vespator*. A single gunship emerged. Exhaust stabbing from the engines made a blade of blue plasma fire and the ship's hull shone as bright as a jewelled hilt, so that it resembled a sword thrown handle-first to a beleaguered warrior battling a monster.

But the weapon came too late. The monster had triumphed. The world was dead.

So did Decimus Felix, Tetrarch of Ultramar, come to survey the ruin of his domain.

'A tight fit,' said Daelus. The Techmarine altered the ship's path with minute adjustments to the flightsticks. Felix looked out through the armourglass blister. The cockpit was set high back above the transport bays, and the ceiling passed within inches of his face, close enough that he could examine the damage to the metal, and name the bioweapons responsible.

Only Daelus' skill saw the Overlord squeeze into the hangar. His left hand moved swiftly over the ship's array of buttons. Jets fringed the blocky double hull with bursts of light and vapour in response.

'This is not ideal,' said Felix.

'I've landed in tighter spaces, my lord,' said Daelus, tense with concentration. 'Not many, I'll admit.'

Daelus' crew consisted of a further Primaris Marine in the red of the forge and three Chapter serfs. They were far too preoccupied with landing to speak to the tetrarch, but peered at their instruments nervously. Troncus, the Techmarine co-pilot, was immobile. Only the tiny movements of his hands as he corrected Daelus' few errors showed that a living being occupied his armour.

Proximity alarms trilled from several quarters. The prow lights hit a solid wall.

'Emperor's will, this is getting worse!' Daelus said.

The landing bay had suffered catastrophic damage. Efforts to patch it up had shrunk its space by half. A wall of plasteel plating fixed in place with metallite foams divided the bay. Bracing girders holding the wall upright angled into the hangar, making Daelus' task all the more difficult.

'Nearly got it,' the pilot said, more to himself than to anyone else.

Felix watched ruptured metal pass by. The Aegida had possessed many landing decks. The monsters of Hive Fleet Kraken had wrecked them all as they boarded. Only this smaller docking portal had been returned to operational use.

The Overlord's power core whined up and down as Troncus adjusted the energy

flow in preparation for landing. The ship swayed. Troncus looked at the pilot.

'That's not my fault,' Daelus said to his unspoken rebuke. 'Grav-plating's no good in here,' he grumbled. 'Nothing's good in here. Troncus, run landing sequence. This is the best position we're going to get.'

Felix's ear beads clicked. Daelus had opened an unencrypted vox channel.

'Sergeant Cominus,' Daelus said. 'I'm setting down.'

'Ready. Open the forward hatches,' Cominus voxed back.

'Depressurising holds. There's no atmosphere. I'm sure you've got your helmets on.'

'I need not remind you I find your levity irritating, Daelus.'

'He's no fun, that one,' said Daelus, making sure Cominus heard before he shut the channel.

'He serves well,' said Felix.

'He could smile while he was doing it,' said Daelus. 'Life does not all have to be drill and duty, not even for us.'

The atmospheric retention field was out, leaving the hangar open to space. Daelus joggled the flight sticks against the outrush of air expelled from the twin passenger compartments. The ramps opened as the vessel's engines gave out one last burst. The starboard wing squealed noisily down the partition wall, causing Felix to grit his teeth.

'I said it was tight,' Daelus muttered.

Before the Overlord settled onto its landing claws, eight Space Marines ran out, bolt rifles at the ready, and took up guard at various points of the hangar. Each wore Mark X Intercessor pattern power armour in differing heraldries, but all were united by their richly decorated left pauldrons, where the sigil of the Tetrarch of Vespator was displayed on golden plating. Cominus was more obvious for his manner than the bright red and white wargear he wore or his sergeant's insignia. He stood in front of the Overlord's nose, directing Felix's bodyguard with a flurry of battle-sign, his bolt rifle held upright.

The engines wheezed. The ship sank down on its hydraulics and ceased moving.

'That's it, we're in,' Daelus said. Troncus clicked a dozen buttons. The serfs visibly relaxed and began post-flight checks. The power plant quieted to a hum. Daelus' armour sighed as it disconnected from the umbilicus set into the back of the seat. The armour was heavy on him without power, but he turned round naturally enough, and angled his helm to look up at Felix.

'Welcome to the Aegida Orbital, my lord. Welcome to Sotha.'

They left the hangar, Cominus first. The sergeant insisted on taking point himself, as he did every time the tetrarch ventured out from the Regia Tetrarchia on Vespator. Felix followed his men, the blue of his Ultramarines armour dark in the badly lit station.

Felix disliked pomp but he accepted the bodyguard. Another warrior of his skill might be annoyed by the constant watch, and the implication he could not take care of himself. Felix was pragmatic enough to know that being annoyed by his attendants would do nothing to change the fact of their presence, so he did not allow himself to feel anything much about it, and thanked them often for their service. Likewise, Cominus' terse, officious manner failed to irritate him. Felix did his best to follow Lord Guilliman's example in all things, and see a thing for its potential utility, not for how it made him feel.

When he did examine those feelings, he resented the constant cosseting his position forced on him. These moments of weakness only strengthened his resolve to behave as Lord Guilliman would wish. The bodyguards and all his many attendants back on Vespator had purpose and they must therefore be allowed to fulfil it and not be hampered nor criticised merely for being. Theoretical, practical – the Ultramarian way served him well.

But emotions are disobedient creatures, and he found himself glad that he had only his bodyguard with him. He welcomed the break from his staff. Since being appointed as tetrarch, one of the four lords of Greater Ultramar, by Roboute Guilliman, Felix had done his best to visit every sector. This was his first trip this far into the old Sotharan League. His lord castellan on Vespator had pointedly remarked that Felix took his tours to avoid politics. There was perhaps truth in that.

Felix turned his attention outwards to the ruin of the orbital. The signs of recent reoccupation grew more obvious as they made their way towards the command hub. Again his emotions rose up from beneath his conditioning.

'It is strange the way this makes me feel,' he said to Veteran Brother Cadmus, who hailed from the Scythes of the Emperor Chapter to whom the station had belonged. 'There is so little evidence of what happened here, but what remains is as clear as a sword cut in ancient bone. While the tale of the attack is only implied, the evidence tells a more poignant story than a bloody corpse would.'

They continued down a corridor lit by lumens on poles linked by suspended cable. There was no air and no gravity, so the eleven of them walked with the strange, deliberate gait of warriors with active maglocks. 'I see everywhere the signs of bioweapons. Puncture wounds to the metal, acid burn, the marks of teeth

and claws, but no organics remain, all reabsorbed by the Kraken, I assume.'

'That is the way of the xenos, my lord,' Cadmus said. Cadmus was a Scythe, but he was also a Primaris Marine, and had never been to Sotha. His voice was level, if a little distant, leading Felix to suspect he too wrestled with what he felt and what he was supposed to feel.

'You have fought the tyranids?' Felix asked.

'My Chapter makes a point of confronting them where they can,' said Cadmus. 'I have faced splinters only, the left-behind and the lost. Nothing compared to the fleet that devoured Sotha, but deadly nonetheless.'

Felix nodded. The effects of the tyranid weapons had sculpted the metal. Ahead, sunlight streamed through a huge breach in the hull. It was curious that the deck remained level, he thought, without the distortion to the deck plating one could expect from more conventional weaponry. When they drew level with the hole he saw that the cause of the breach was not a weapon, but partial absorption; the metal had been devoured. The scrapings of tiny teeth were still bright at the edges a century later.

'They consume more than organics,' said Cadmus, following his lord's gaze. 'The tyranids will take everything.'

'Then why not all?' said Felix. He paused in the breach, and his security detail came to an instant halt, arrayed by order of march in a perfect protective pattern.

'A question for the archmagos, when he gets here,' said Cadmus.

Felix nodded. 'If anyone knows, I am sure he will. Did you serve the Scythes of the Emperor long before you joined the Chosen of the Tetrarchy?'

Cadmus stared out into the void. Such blackness in such strong light created an odd, velvety effect that appeared unreal, no matter how many times it was seen. 'Six years, by the Sotharan date stamp.'

Felix knew this. He selected every man for his Chosen personally, but he preferred to hear the information from the men himself, when he could. There was no soul in cold data. A commander learned a lot from his warriors by listening to them, even if they only said what could be more easily read; the way they spoke, the way they held themselves and how they handled particular subjects revealed their innermost thoughts in a way written words did not. Speech revealed a humanity not even Adeptus Astartes conditioning could blunt.

'I was there on Hamagora. Most of my experience has been fighting the traitors and their daemons, my lord. The xenos are something else.' Cadmus paused to better formulate his words. 'It is impossible to overestimate the hatred my brothers in the Chapter hold for the tyranids. The veterans are fixated, but it

affects we Primaris brothers too. It is a contagious hate. It defines us all.'

'Then it should be made use of,' said Felix.

'I agree,' said Cadmus. 'Hate is a sharp blade, but there is something else to them that concerns me. A distance to the last few of the original Scythes.' Cadmus looked at Felix. 'I apologise, my lord, if I speak out of turn. It is not my place to criticise a man as great as Chapter Master Thracian.'

'You will speak as you will, Cadmus,' said Felix. 'I understand your reticence, but in the matters of the Scythes of the Emperor, I ask you to be my advisor, and not merely my bodyguard. If anything at all gives you reason to doubt, to pause, you must share it. Not all of the Chapters accepted their Primaris brothers easily.'

'It is not that,' said Cadmus. 'We were welcomed as saviours, my lord. We are feted and honoured beyond what our achievements should have earned.'

The orbital was spinning slowly. Its motion brought cold, dead Sotha into view. Stripped of life, it shone mirror bright, white as a polished skull.

'Then your worries go deeper?'

Cadmus nodded. 'There were so few of them left, my lord. A handful. The last of the original Scythes are secretive and grim.'

'They lost much. I have read what records there are. If we are to be honest, they performed poorly in battle. They bear responsibility for their own near-destruction.'

'I agree with this, but it is more than shame,' said Cadmus. Again he paused, reluctant to voice his doubts.

'What, then?' prompted Felix.

'I believe they are hiding something, my lord.'

Glaring sunshine cut across them quickly as the movement of the station turned the Aegidan orbital from the planet, swept past the sun, and plunged them back into gloom. Cadmus' red helm lenses glowed. In the dark, Felix saw the eyes behind them, and the silvered effect of retinas glowing under direct laser data writing. As he confessed his human fears, Cadmus looked far from human.

That was the fate of the Adeptus Astartes. To remain a man, yet to be divorced from mankind, fighting monsters in the dark.

'I note it well,' Felix said. 'And I thank you for your counsel, Brother Cadmus. Advance,' Felix said to the others. 'To the central hub. Let us meet these heroes ourselves, and judge them as we find them.'

His bodyguard moved on, weapons at the ready.

The approach to the hub was scarred with bioweaponry discharge and the telltale starburst damage of boltgun fire. Fighting had been heavy there. Further along the scars of acid and claw disappeared under fresh plating. A temporary airlock barred the corridor near the command deck, where new wall sections had been welded in place. A servitor on a tracked unit waited, inactive, outside. A pair of tripod-mounted twin plasma sentry guns, painted the red of Mars and stamped with the maker's mark of Belisarius Cawl, tracked the Space Marines, their charging coils glowing in readiness.

The way was wide and tall, big enough to take the larger Dreadnought models, but the airlock was small, enough to admit only one Space Marine at a time. A temporary measure.

A skull mounted at the apex of the arch over the airlock came to life. Ocular sensors at the back of eye sockets glowed with sudden alertness. A fleshless jaw worked around a vox-caster, snapping together so hard that had there been an atmosphere in the corridor, it would have rattled out a bony percussion.

'State purpose and name,' a grating machine voice blurted into their helmet vox.

Cominus stepped forward.

'Cominus, veteran sergeant, seconded from the Sons of Orar Chapter Adeptus Astartes, group leader for the Chosen of Vespator, tetrarchy security unit assigned to Tetrarch Decimus Felix of that world.'

'Ranking officer required. Tetrarch Felix will present himself,' said the skull. 'Stand aside.'

Cominus stood his ground until Felix ordered him to step back.

'I am Tetrarch Decimus Androdinus Felix of the Ultramarines, born of Laphis, Lord of Vespator and the Eastern Marches.' Felix datapulsed his credentials and the seal of his office to the machine. 'Allow us entry.'

'A moment,' the machine said. The lights went out in the skull's eyes. The jaw hung slack.

'Friendly,' said Daelus. The Techmarine's servo arms followed the motions of his hands as he gestured at the plasma guns. 'They are well made, though.' He bent down so that his faceplate was level with the weaponry and moved his head from side to side. The guns tracked his movement. 'Very responsive.' The reactor cores spooled up and the coils glowed brighter.

'You take too many risks,' said Cominus.

Daelus stood. 'Everything I do is weighed against the balance of probability. Theoretical and practical every step of the way. Ultramarian dialectic is a

tradition of thought your Chapter could do with reinstating. You can't hold it against me if I calculate risk better than you do.'

Cominus grunted dismissively.

The skull's eyes relit, prompting an instant reaction from the Chosen. Bolt rifles aimed smoothly at the door and emplaced weapons.

'Identity confirmed,' said the machine. 'Please proceed within, tetrarch.'

The airlock door rolled back. Cominus made to lead, but Felix stepped ahead of him and entered the pressure chamber first. The chamber had been adapted from the corridor, and was therefore large enough for all eleven of them.

Blast doors of ancient design faced the airlock entrance. They had been repaired, but the great gouges inflicted by tyranid melee weapons were evident as outlines, filed down and filled though they were. The remains of the turrets that had protected the doorway were boxed in with fresh plates. Around these, too, were the score marks of huge claws.

Air rushed into the chamber from a newly installed pipe leading into the command deck. Sound returned to Felix's auto-senses. The doors screeched back on buckled tracks.

A serious attempt had been made to bring the Aegidan command hub back to a useable state. Besides a supply of air the gravity plates were operational. Wrecked machinery had been cleared away and the holes their removal left had been plated over. Little of the original layout was therefore intact. The central dais and the gallery around the room were integral to the structure and remained, again much-patched, but most else was gone, leaving a large, empty space. Seams of bright metal showed where elements had been cut out. Dull plasteel covered the worst damage. Loose plates provided bridges over utility ducts currently open for repairs. Temporary workstations lined one wall, power cables snaking off from them out through a fresh hole cut to allow access to a functional energy conduit. Alcoves around the room housed statues of ten horses in various states of action. All but one had been damaged in some way. The worst of them had been caved in entirely, turning them into wrinkled bronze sacks with incongruous equine details. They reminded Felix of the abominations of Chaos, and he looked away from them.

A large section of wall had been torn away. This damage had so far been left untouched, and the breach was closed off by an atmospheric energy screen stretching from one side of the room to the other. On the far side of the field's blue shimmer, void frost glimmered on the ragged deck.

Thirteen Space Marines waited for the tetrarch. Five other beings of human origin occupied the room. Four were mind-slaved combat servitors, two outfitted for close range gunfights, the other pair pure melee models. The fifth was almost as heavily augmented but of free will, being an adept of the Cult Mechanicus. His humanoid body was entirely made of plasteel, though the face atop the banded neck was of flesh and blood. He wore no protection beyond a calming smile. A number of small, subsidiary arms tapped restlessly inside his robes.

The majority of the Space Marines were facing the door in anticipation of Felix's entrance; those that weren't were in the process of getting up as he entered. They arranged themselves in groups according to friendship rather than squad, if their markings were anything to go by.

The Chosen filed in and faced the Scythes of the Emperor. Felix had never seen a bigger difference between two groups of loyal Space Marines. His Primaris Marines wore burnished armour with perfect heraldry. The Scythes' wargear was scuffed and dinged, the yellow and black applied over mismatched components from differing armour marks. There was an Apothecary among them, and a Forgemaster whose presence was marked out by the better state of his wargear as much as by his rank marks and red colouration. A lack of uniformity was common in Space Marine units forced to fight unsupplied for a long time, but the Scythes of the Emperor took it to an extreme. Four of the warriors wore Terminator plate. Three of these were neatly presented, but the fourth's armour was an ugly mix of different sets, and many elements had been hastily repaired. In a force less desperate, Felix thought, the fourth suit would not have left the armoury. Even his own Scythe of the Emperor, Cadmus, looked apart from his supposed brethren despite their shared heraldry, so clean he appeared like an imposter.

Felix was reminded of the Ultramarines' tyrannic war veterans. All of the Scythes sported trophies of xenos bone and chitin in faded shades of crimson and cream. They were individuals. There was no coherency to their unit or their attitude. Some stood to attention, others looked ready for combat, one was insolently slouched. Felix realised that although the Chapter had been restored to full strength by the influx of Primaris Space Marines, what was stood in front of him was the remnants of a dying brotherhood. They were the last.

At their head was their Master. His armour was hung with more teeth and claws than all the rest, burying his more conventional honours under a savage display.

Soft chimes in Felix's helmet informed him that the atmosphere was suitable for breathing, and that the temperature, though frigid, was tolerable. He had

barely formed the thought of removing his helm when Cominus privately voxed him.

'I advise you, tetrarch, to leave your helmet on.'

'A meeting like this is best conducted face to face,' Felix said aloud.

He lifted his hands to his head, always an awkward motion thanks to his boltstorm gauntlet. A further barrier was the cowl common to all Gravis armour, but he had had much practice taking out the helm, and he managed it smoothly. Seals hissed. An inrush of freezing atmosphere replaced the breath-warm air in his power armour. He clasped his helm beneath his arm. His features were strong but bland in the mass-produced way of many Space Marines. He had pale brown skin, a last reminder of his homeworld's thin air. A heroic jaw, a nose that echoed Guilliman's, piercing grey eyes and black hair. He would have been handsome, were he fully human, but his features were too much blunted by the process of apotheosis to be so. He wore his intelligence for all to see.

'Do not worry yourself about your master's wellbeing. I assure you gentlemen, that the atmospheric shield I and my servants fitted to this orbital functions perfectly,' said the tech-adept.

'Who are you?' asked Felix.

The adept dipped his head. 'I am Qvo-87. I was sent ahead by the archmagos to prepare this station for our rendezvous. I apologise that it has not yet been returned to full functionality, but the damage is extensive. Returning the Aegida to its original glory will take time.'

'As is evident.' Felix looked at the blue field holding in the air. 'You have done well in such a short period.'

Qvo-87 dipped his head again. 'It will suffice for now. For ten thousand years, the Aegida has stood sentinel over Sotha. It will do so again.'

'If you can achieve that, Magos Qvo, then you will have my respect.' One of Felix's tasks was to evaluate the station for repair. Sotha might be dead, but it was still strategically important. Reports had led him to believe the station was irreparable, but what he had seen so far had been promising.

'You must be Chapter Master Thracian,' said Felix, turning to face the leader of the Scythes.

Thracian responded by removing his own helm and showing a scarred, fierce face to the tetrarch. 'I am he,' said Thracian. Burns mottled his left cheek; the eye they crossed was milky white.

'I thank you for attending and for giving your permission to use this orbital.'

'I could not likely refuse one of the tetrarchs,' said Thracian. 'You speak with

the authority of the primarch.'

'You have a reputation as a loyal servant of the Emperor. My thanks are genuine.'

Thracian shrugged. His patched armour wheezed as it matched his movement.

'The galaxy is in turmoil and Sotha is gone,' Thracian said with obvious emotion. He looked through the atmospheric field where the planet's bare skull was rising again. 'The primarch himself has given over this portion of the Imperium to you to rule as you see fit. I would not deny you.'

Sotha's seas were empty bowls, the denuded continents showed networks of dry water channels and the spidery fractals of mountain ranges. It was like a precise geological model of a world.

'Behold the bounty of your realm,' Thracian said bitterly. Sotha's barrenness filled the breach side to side. In the harsh light of the star, reflected from the world, the room turned hard monochrome. Every scratch and crack in the ceramite of Thracian's armour was mercilessly illuminated. The colours that disguised the worst of the damage bleached away. The sockets of the skulls adorning his armour were caves of night staring hungrily at the tetrarch. Thracian's face was battered, bald, craggy, broken, luminous; the living spirit of the planetary corpse. 'This is the extent of your forces?'

'As requested, I brought no more than my bodyguard. I assume the remainder of your men are aboard your cruiser?'

Thracian laughed. 'This is the extent of *my* forces. The Primaris young bloods sail the void at Guilliman's behest aboard the *Heart of Cronos*. These few veterans you see here are all that remains of the original Scythes of the Emperor. We have business below that is ours alone to undertake.'

'Cadmus informed me your contingent of original Space Marines had become small.' Felix frowned. 'How did this occur? The most recent Munitorum estimate put your Chapter at two companies' strength at the time of the Primaris reinforcement.'

'Those figures are a century out of date,' said Thracian. 'The rest have fallen into shadow. We are all that remains. When we die, our geneseed will be laid to rest and the Primaris Marines will take our place. They are the future, Emperor be thanked for the gift of Cawl. We are the past.'

'You brought none of your new warriors with you?' asked Felix.

'We welcomed their coming, and honour them, but this mission is not for the new.' The rotation of the platform pivoted shadows across Thracian's features as Sotha crept away. 'Sotha is our world. It never belonged to the children of Cawl.

Let them have a fresh beginning as we fade away. It sorrows me that you bring Brother Cadmus to see the source of our shame.' He watched the world rolling past. 'The rest of our Chapter have no memory of Sotha, and I have no wish to risk the reborn Scythes on this expedition into the past. The Emperor's Watch is no place for them, or us. Not any longer.'

'What risks do you anticipate?'

'My warriors have a great deal of experience in fighting the tyranids, lord tetrarch,' said Thracian. 'When they harvest a world they often leave sentry organisms behind. We surmise this is to inform the hive mind of the return of life. Oftentimes, genestealers roost in some number near sites of settlements, lying in wait to infect those who come to offer aid or to investigate what has happened,' Thracian said angrily. 'They are a perfidious race.'

'Then we are twenty-four Adeptus Astartes, with the warriors of the archmagos to call upon,' said Felix. 'Worlds have fallen to less.'

'And larger forces have been lost without trace.' Thracian pointed at the great disc of the world, picking out a lonely mountain by a dry sea, its feet cloaked by a dead city. 'If we overcome the horrors the Kraken will have left behind, the archmagos wishes to disturb the Pharos. No good can come of that, so yes, "risk" is the word.' Thracian exhaled heavily. The planet continued on its journey over the breach, half of it past the broken walls by now, and its light dimming. The colour crept back into Thracian's armour. 'I offer you the chance to turn back. The ten steeds of Sotha will ride on for the Emperor. We owe Cawl a great debt for our Chapter's resurrection, and so I grant his wish willingly. If he wants to dice with fate, so be it. But as Space Marine to Space Marine, I urge you to go now, Decimus Felix. The heritage of the Scythes of the Emperor is secure.' He smiled grimly. 'Who will carry on your legacy if you perish here? Do not enter the mountain.'

Felix's eyes narrowed at the warning. 'I live to serve, I do not care for legacies. I have fought daemons and fallen primarchs at the Lord Guilliman's side,' said Felix. The passing planet relinquished the command deck to lumen light. 'Nothing daunts me. Nothing can.'

Thracian smiled again ruefully, the sort of expression an uncle gives an overly confident nephew. He looked down, and when he looked up again, he was suffused with a Chapter Master's authority, and when he spoke his voice rang. Even Felix, who had stood at the right hand of Roboute Guilliman himself, felt the hairs on his neck prickle.

'They shall be my finest warriors,' Thracian quoted the Emperor, 'these men

who give of themselves to me. Like clay I shall mould them, and in the furnace of war forge them. They will be of iron will and steely muscle. In great armour shall I clad them and with the mightiest guns will they be armed. They will be untouched by plague or disease, no sickness will blight them.' His voice rose. 'They will have tactics, strategies and machines so that no foe can best them in battle. They are my bulwark against the Terror. They are the Defenders of Humanity. They are my Space Marines and they shall know no fear.' When he finished the quote, all were silent. Thracian's voice dropped. 'Fine words, but I know they are not true. I know there are beings a Space Marine cannot best. I am not ashamed to say to you that I have known fear.'

CHAPTER THREE

A DEBT REPAID

Circa 10,000 years ago

‘Belisarius Cawl! I am Belisarius Cawl!’ Cawl released the vox button. ‘Cog and tooth!’ he swore. ‘It’s not working!’

Energy flare burned around the small oculus of the *Silencia*, hiding space in a mix of oily void shield discharge and licks of flame. The ship yawed hard, punched down by kinetic overspill.

Friedisch Adum Silip Qvo launched himself out of his own seat and staggered over the heaving deck to Cawl’s station.

‘What are you doing, Friedisch?’ said Cawl. ‘You’ll do yourself an injury! Sit down.’

‘You are positing a choice between a bump on the head and imminent atomic dissolution. I know which I prefer.’ He slapped Cawl’s hands away from the vox controls. ‘Let me try.’

‘Get off!’ shouted Cawl.

‘Let me try!’ Friedisch snapped back, fussing hopelessly over the buttons, stabbing them until the console’s inbuilt hololithic display indicated an open vox-channel.

‘I just tried that!’ Cawl snarled. ‘I’m getting their ident beacon but nothing else.’

‘You don’t know as much about inter-ship vox systems as I do.’

‘Since when did you know more than me about anything?’

‘Since now,’ said Friedisch. He pulled a data tether from a socket in his wrist and plugged it into the console. Cawl had to admit he was mildly impressed by Friedisch’s ability to remain upright while the ship bounced under fire.

‘Will you please, please, please stop firing on us,’ said Friedisch.

‘I don’t think pleading is going to work, Friedisch,’ said Cawl. ‘They’re not responding!’

‘But the channel’s open,’ said Friedisch.

Another hit had the *Silencia* drop alarmingly.

Tez-Lar, the bridge’s third occupant, stood maglocked to the deck, unmoved by the danger they were in. His cyborg brain, expertly reconstructed by Cawl, was incapable of emotion. His slack face showed nothing but idiot disinterest.

The same could not be said of the tech-priests. They shouted in panic as a hard hit slammed at the ship. The tortured shriek of void generators resounded up the corridors. Friedisch grabbed at Cawl to stop himself falling down, prompting an undignified flurry of robed limbs as Cawl shoved him off.

‘One more impact like that and the shields will be down, and then we’ll be dead,’ said Cawl.

‘But this is Ryza. Ryza is on our side still, isn’t it?’ said Friedisch plaintively.

A loud shrieking warble screamed up the ship from the generatorium.

‘Have you got the vox working?’ shouted Cawl.

‘What?’

‘The vox! The vox! The all-knowing, blessed Machine-God’s voxmitter!’ yelled Cawl. ‘Does it work? You’re plugged into the thrice-malfunctioning thing!’

‘Yes, no, I don’t know!’ said Friedisch, his augmetic eye flashing with rapid data inload. ‘The machine-spirits say we lost our comms mast when we fled Septa Station. That’s why they’re not responding.’

‘Brilliant,’ growled Cawl. ‘My turn! I’ll try redirecting the signal through the mag deflector. We’re at close enough range if I modulate them properly.’ Via the hardlines linking him to the ship’s dying manifold, Cawl activated the vox’s deck speakers, adding a roar of angry static to the clamour of alarms and whoops of pained machinery. ‘Right. That’s got something. Mechanicum monitor–’ Cawl cursed under his breath, and began again. ‘Adeptus Mechanicus monitor *Archaeus*, cease fire. We are refugees from the Trisolian extraction facility Momus, designation Phi-9120, Segmentum Solar. We are fleeing the forces of the Warmaster. We are loyal members of the Machine Cult, pledged to Mars and Terra. We request mercy!’

The tone of the vox changed, and a blip broke the sound, leading them to believe, just for a moment, that an answer was forthcoming, but then the blip turned to a rising warble of high-energy interference.

‘Their induction coils are powering to fire!’ shouted Friedisch.

‘I can tell!’ Cawl snapped. ‘I can hear it!’

The ship was engulfed in a wash of plasma as blue-white as the brightest star. The oculus shield slammed shut in response, but the screen and tri-d displays conveyed enough of the glare to make the adepts wince before they gave out in showers of sparks and crackling bangs. Metal groaned. Cawl blinked painful afterimages away. He was unable to see which bits of the *Silencia* had stopped working as a result of the hit. Nothing but nonsense data poured into his memcore from the vessel’s frazzled cogitators. Sparks burst in a spectacular fan from Cawl’s console.

‘I don’t like it!’ Friedisch threw up his hands to protect himself, banging his wrist hard on the substandard augmetic embedded in his face, and staggering about the bucking bridge. ‘Ow!’ he wailed as his data tether yanked loose.

‘I hate to rebuke you, dear Friedisch, but there are very few people in this galaxy who do enjoy being fired at!’

‘We’re going to die!’ said Friedisch. The backs of his knees connected with a chair and he folded into it heavily. He clasped his hands together in prayer. ‘Oh, Omnissiah, prepare me to enter the annals of the Great Work. Prepare my knowledge… my knowledge to…’ his eyes flew open. ‘Oh no! My records. My work… It was all on station! My life’s work, it’s gone!’

‘What life’s work? You never did anything and I’ve barely begun!’ Cawl responded incredulously.

‘I had,’ bawled Friedisch, ‘some startling insights!’

‘Relax, it’ll all be fine!’ snapped Cawl so sharply it was clear to them both that he did not believe a word he said. He forced the oculus back open.

‘It won’t! It won’t!’ Friedisch looked out of the oculus. ‘Look!’ The ship’s sole void shield was going out. A final hit felled it with a flash of purple light. A feeble buzz on the vox accompanied its collapse.

‘It’s over,’ said Friedisch. ‘We’re dead.’

‘There is always a way out!’ said Cawl fiercely, a tenet he had lived his life by, only this time he was not so sure. Red lights flashed over the *Silencia*’s bridge in such profusion they dazzled him. Three sharp whoops informed them the Navigator had boarded his salvator pod and ejected. To add to the insult, the pod overflew the dying ship, engines burning, as it fled unmolested to a safe distance, a broadcast of Navigatorial cant and protestations of neutrality keeping it safe from attack.

‘That’s charming,’ said Cawl. ‘Utterly charming.’

‘This is your fault!’

‘You came along with me.’

‘I had no choice!’

‘Yes, you did!’

‘I didn’t! Be aware, Belisarius Cawl, that although you are my dearest friend, I have always hated you,’ spat Friedisch.

Something hit the hull, almost gently after the shield-killing storm of plasma. A whole host of new alarms added fresh layers to the orchestra of disaster playing around the bridge. The biggest, loudest alarm warned of a plasma leak.

Friedisch cringed. ‘The reactor is breached! This is it! Goodbye!’

‘I don’t think so,’ said Cawl. He peered at a display, and added with rising excitement, ‘I don’t think so at all!’

The force of the leak bursting from the side of the small vessel sent the *Silencia* into a lazy corkscrew. ‘That was a pinpoint strike,’ he said. ‘A disabling hit! They don’t want us dead!’ The ship suddenly juddered to a halt. ‘As I thought! Now they have us in a grapple beam,’ he said with relief. ‘We’re going to be boarded.’

‘That’s good?’ shrieked Friedisch. ‘How by the three-in-one’s most holy emissions can that be good?!’

The ship wobbled under the gravity wake of the larger vessel. A shadow fell over them. Several booming clangs rang the hull, loud as a gong.

‘Well, it is better than atomisation, I’d say?’ said Cawl. ‘Yes? Come, come, Friedisch! Better, yes?’ His spirits were rising again. He was sure they’d be saved.

‘How I detest you, Belisarius!’ wailed Friedisch.

The ship’s erratic progress was arrested. Further clangs boomed from the hull. The ship lurched to a stop. The alarms ceased their clamouring.

Silence fell. Sparks pattered upon the floor.

‘What now?’ breathed Friedisch. ‘We’re going to die.’

‘They’ll be here in a moment,’ said Cawl. ‘Through that door.’

‘Yes,’ said Friedisch, calming a little. ‘Yes.’ He looked down at his dishevelled garments. ‘By the Omnissiah! They can’t see me like this!’

The tech-priests stood. Cawl withdrew his input dendrites from the console ports while Friedisch fussed over his clothes. A collection of disconcerting noises came from the other side of the bridge door.

‘Now, they’ll only be low-grade Navatoi crew,’ said Cawl. ‘If we present ourselves as the adepts that we are – well,’ he paused, ‘that I am, then we should

be fine. They're only Basilikon Astra menials.'

'Oh shut up, Cawl!' said Friedisch. 'What experience do you have with the Navatoi?'

'I'd say…'

'None! None! That's what! Let me handle this for once!' Friedisch smoothed his robes down a final time, thrust his hands deep into the sleeves, and stood tall.

A bang made them flinch. A small gap opened up in the middle of the bridge doors. A pair of right-angled pry bars rattled into the smoking hole, jerking about until they had a firm grip on the metal and locked tight. High-powered pressure pistons wheezed, wrenching the doorway open.

Three Adeptus Mechanicus cyborgs outfitted for void-warfare and clad in the blood orange of Forge World Ryza marched into the command deck. All three bore low-yield plasma carbines which could be discharged more or less safely aboard a starship. The navatos-alpha, his status clear from his unit markings and lateral crest, had his gun shouldered, and instead carried in his steel hand a small device with a wide funnel.

Past the warriors, Cawl glimpsed the grievous damage done to their stolen vessel, and felt sorrow, for the *Silencia* had been a very fine ship.

'Get on with it then, Friedisch,' whispered Cawl. 'You wanted to talk to them.'

Friedisch drew in a deep breath.

'Greeting, Navatoi of the Adeptus Mechanicus,' he intoned. 'I am Tech Acolytum Friedisch Adum Silip Qvo of…'

<Targets acquired,> blurted the navatos-alpha in rapid binharic.

A cone of pale blue energy burst from the device in his hand. It struck both tech-priests simultaneously. Friedisch let out a girlish shriek, and tapped out the dance of an electrocuted man, before falling down hard onto the deck, his body stiff as a rod. Curls of smoke wisped from his augmetic. He let out a pained groan.

<Target one subdued,> said the navatos-alpha.

The Navatoi turned questioning gazes of ruby armourglass upon Cawl.

'Hello,' Cawl said.

The leader depressed the trigger on his funnel device again. Blue light hit Cawl a second time.

Nothing happened.

Cawl looked down at himself, then up at them. He smiled apologetically.

'I'm afraid your override won't work on me, you see–'

<Non-standard memcore detected. Illegal modification. Dark Mechanicum

technology. Blasphemy,> the navatos-alpha code-blurted.

'No, no, no! It's all perfectly within the lore,' said Cawl, holding up his hands.

A scanning beam flicked up and down Cawl. <Single weapon detected. Sidearm. Threat negligible.> The alpha took three clanking steps forwards, holstering the device as he came.

'This weapon is a volkite, I'll have you know!' said Cawl, offended on behalf of his weapon's spirit. 'Stand back! I am not afraid to use it.'

<This unit refers to the bearer, not the weapon,> canted the alpha.

'My friend, please. If you would just let me explain–' said Cawl.

'Negatory,' said the alpha, aloud this time, in a voice like the churning of a rockcrete mixer. 'Target memcore non-responsive to obedience protocols. Physical neutralisation required.' With that he drove the butt of his carbine hard into Cawl's face.

Cawl's nose broke with a crunch, and he went down like a sack full of bolts.

The actuary-judicium was not much to look at, but held Cawl's fate in its various mechanical pseudo-hands. It was a brain in a cylinder of faintly luminous fluid that rose up from the desk when activated, and slid back inside when its business was concluded. Nothing that possessed charisma, even in the odd reality of the Cult. Cawl had no idea if it lived in the office permanently, wedded to its job, or if it had access to some sort of chassis that could carry it about on other business. He had no idea, either, what sex it had once possessed. Such beings were so far past gender it hardly mattered, but he found himself fascinated by the question. During every session the actuary had with Cawl, Cawl speculated on the matter to stave off the worst of his boredom. There wasn't much else he could do. They chained him to the chair in the interview room. He couldn't even pace about. It didn't take much to restrain him; he was mostly human, and only a couple of manacles were required to hold him in place.

Eight socket ports ringed the actuary's upper assembly, where, under a smooth ring of metal that matched the desk top, various life-supporting machineries were concentrated. From seven of the ports long, banded, metal data tethers connected the actuary to a flock of servo-skulls that whooped and buzzed and darted about, staring at Cawl with cold, glass eyes and taking it in turns to probe at him on every wavelength. The eighth port was sealed over with a riveted cap that loudly proclaimed it inactive. This had been done for entirely obvious reasons – eight was an unpopular number after the Great Heresy War, it being held sacred by the apostates of the Dark Mechanicum. Any whiff of treachery

was to be avoided.

And that was precisely why Cawl was in so much trouble.

The actuary's nerves hung from the stubby remains of its spinal column in rootlike profusion, each delicately linked to a golden wire. Disturbingly, despite its headlong desire to purge itself of all flesh, the actuary had opted to retain its startlingly green eyes, which floated in the suspension liquid, moored to the foreparts of the brain by carefully preserved optic nerves. Tiny ducted propellers had been attached to the bloodshot whites to enable the eyes to keep station and look about. It was an unsuccessful augmentation, for the eyes floated in the fluid not quite level with one another. Cawl found them completely repulsive to look at, but he did his best to keep his nerve and hold the actuary's necessarily unblinking stare.

'Subject 3199876,' the actuary blared. A servo-skull fitted with a voxmitter spoke for it. The language processor was harsh and the speaker poorly modulated. Cawl's cell was a silent space of white noise and EM waves intended to block every kind of data projection from the human voice to laser pulse. He would have found the actuary's voice grating under normal circumstances, but after his lengthy, enforced meditations, it was unbearable. 'Data has come to light regarding your claim of innocence.'

'It is not a claim,' said Cawl irritably. 'It is a fact.' He tried hard to keep his eyes on the floating orbs in the tank, but their unevenness made it a task that bred headaches.

'Do you recognise this individual?'

A servo-skull opened chromium-plated jaws. A compact hololithic projector emerged with a click, and sketched a poor quality light sculpt of a heavily augmented adept into the space between them.

Cawl peered at it.

'You do not recognise this individual?' barked the actuary again. 'He is a member of the Cult Destructor of the Myrmidonae.'

Cawl peered some more.

'You do not recognise it.' The actuary seemed almost disappointed. 'Your case is suspended.'

'Wait! Give me a moment,' said Cawl. 'He looks familiar, but it's hard to tell, because your projection matrix is very badly aligned if I'm completely honest, and the resolution is, quite frankly, as one adept to another, very low.'

The actuary squalled in irritation. 'Do you recognise him or not?'

'Yes,' said Cawl, and sat back. The manacles binding his wrists to either side of

the chair clinked. ‘I do. I fought alongside him and his myrmidon clade on Trisolian A-4, in the agrifields, before Hester Aspertia Sigma-Sigma turned traitor and handed over control to the Warmaster. They saved me from the Night Lords. I repaired one of his followers.’

‘Did you do so from gratitude, or was it a cloak for treachery?’

‘I was doing my duty!’ Cawl’s jaw clenched so tightly it hurt. ‘We were fighting the traitors!’

The actuary emitted a pleased bleep. ‘Do you know his designation?’

‘I…’ said Cawl. ‘No, I don’t. I’m sure he canted it to me, but I’ve had a few data purges since then, most of them at the hands of your careless staff.’

‘They are investigatory exloads, not purges.’

‘You should try telling that to your adepts,’ said Cawl. ‘My augment *hurts.* I didn’t even know that was possible.’

‘Your memcore is non-standard. There have been difficulties.’

‘Yes, well, but it *did* work. Now it does *not*.’

‘Then you do not recall him.’

‘Not digitally, no, but I remember him in the organic sense. Why? Is he a traitor too? Is this more evidence to damn me in the Adeptus Mechanicus’ eyes? I’ve told you before. I didn’t even know the war was over when we got here. I’m telling you the truth.’

‘We took this image from your own memcore.’

‘So why are you asking if I remembered him?’ Cawl said tetchily. All his meetings with the actuary tended to follow the same, maddeningly circuitous logic.

‘As part of the judicial processes against apostate members of the Cult Mechanicus, all data is being harvested and will be kept for all time. By the will of the Omnissiah, Motive Force and Machine-God, let it be. This individual was investigated. This individual was contacted regarding your supposed innocence.’

‘And?’ said Cawl wearily, who wanted to get it all over with.

‘His name is Theodulus Pallisar. He is of Cult-Hierophant rank within the destructor brotherhoods.’

‘That is his current rank?’ asked Cawl.

‘Yes,’ said the actuary smugly.

‘That is quite a high rank?’ hazarded Cawl.

‘Yes,’ said the actuary.

‘And… he is not a traitor?’ said Cawl.

A servo-skull floated down close to Cawl’s face and looked him straight in the

eye.

‘Far from it. He is, Belisarius Cawl, a war hero,’ it said. The skull’s innards flashed in time with its words.

The servo-skull floated back up. A bank of machines behind the desk made a noisy clattering.

‘He vouched for you. Your story has been subjected to the ninth degree of inquisition. It holds up.’ The actuary took a pompous pause. ‘By the power vested in me by the ruling synod of Ryza, who in turn draw their authority from the most holy auspices of the Machine-God Himself, you are free to go.’

The manacles fell open and dropped to the floor with a clatter. Cawl rubbed his wrists. The manacles had caught on his wrist port, and the skin around the implant was sore.

‘Where do I go?’

‘That is not my concern. My concern is your guilt. You have been judged innocent. You are no longer my responsibility.’

The door swung open on silent hinges.

‘Please depart.’

‘But I’ve never been to Ryza before.’

‘Not my concern.’

‘Give me something, please! I can’t just walk out of here into a world I know nothing about.’

‘Not my concern. You will depart, now.’ The actuary-judicium’s servo-skulls detached with seven metallic rasps. Trailing cables, they flew off to their charging roosts while the brain jar spiralled down slowly back into the desk.

‘Wait!’

‘Goodbye, Belisarius Cawl,’ said the actuary. Its vox-skull settled into its charging roost and spoke no more.

The jar slid home with a pop of air. A heavily armed servitor stepped into the doorway and pointed a radium carbine at Cawl’s head.

‘I get the message.’ Cawl stared at the desk. A look of dawning realisation spread over his face. ‘What about Friedisch?’

Cawl felt incredibly guilty when he saw where they’d been keeping his friend. As acolytum, and not an ordained adept, Friedisch had been confined to an overcrowded common cell block with all manner of Mechanicus dregs. The room stank of unwashed bodies, decaying organic components and old oil so rank it made Cawl cough. He was led past steel cages full of malfunctioning

servitors and renegade tech thralls who had, somehow, wormed their way out from under the control of their overseer programming. Badly maintained stasis tanks holding more dangerous beings buzzed noisily. People shouted and blurted obscene streams of anti-logic at him as he walked past. The same contra-communications technologies that had hemmed in his cell made an inviolable wall around this block too, but amplified to block dozens of minds from the Ryzan noosphere, it was crippling. Oppressive magnetic waves slowed his mind, disrupting the interface between augmetic and the human body. He felt sick, sleepy, irritable and madly gleeful all at once.

'What an awful place,' he muttered to himself.

The skitarii alpha who led him to Friedisch's cell was specially modified to be unaffected by the data wall. He stopped and gestured into another cage. Within, a circle of low rankers sat on the floor around a chalked circuitry diagram, and were arguing loudly with each other about its design.

Friedisch was among them. He had his back to the door.

'Friedisch,' Cawl said gently.

'Cawl?' Friedisch turned to look at him. He had lost weight, and the irritation around his ocular augmetic was worse than ever.

'We're free, you and I.' Cawl gave him a tight smile. 'Let's get out of here.'

Friedisch smiled back.

Now

'Interesting,' said Belisarius Cawl. His augmetic eye flared as he came awake. 'Very interesting indeed.'

His huge, augmented body hauled itself out of the maintenance dock. Cables disconnected themselves and whipped back into the armoured housing. As he moved forwards, he uncurled, extending himself to his full magnificent height. Cawl emerged from the dock unclothed, showing the array of mechanisms he had appended to his body over the millennia. His torso was the most human part of him remaining, and even then only the uppermost part of that remained flesh. Exposed bone meshed with adamantium, his withered skin puckered around the augmetics. His flesh was as necessary to him as an overcoat, nothing more than that. He kept it mainly for sentimental reasons. In his mummified chest cavity blue light shone from active organs, each one superior in every way to the original. His ribs were bonded directly to armour plates protecting the main interface between lower assembly and torso, which sat proudly on a long

underbody – and that was completely mechanical and entirely non-humanoid. Numerous legs moved him. Fringes of data cables followed along behind him like a bridal train of madly tapping metal tentacles. He was a centauroid arthropod topped by a man's face wrinkled by a life more than ten millennia long. Tufts of white hair stuck up from his scalp. Scar tissue shone around interface ports. He swayed about, wafting the scent of old skin and counterseptic gels around him. It was a stale and astringent morgue smell.

By any definition of human, Cawl was a monstrosity.

'What is interesting, master?'

A lone Primaris Space Marine stood guard over Cawl's instrument dock. Though it was the Space Marine's duty to wake the archmagos, no action taken on his part had brought the ancient Cawl back to life. The archmagos required no help. Other people were, at most, witnesses to his existence. An audience. It was always he who acted. The Space Marine's function in the process was largely ceremonial.

'Visions,' said Cawl. At odds with his body, his voice retained its humanity and his old enthusiasm. 'Memories, to be more precise. Recollections I thought lost. Indeed, were lost.'

Cawl clattered past the Space Marine, who followed him with soulful, sad eyes. The warrior was heavily scarred, appearing cut up and stuck back together in haste. His armour bore no heraldry but was the pale, unpainted gunmetal grey of raw ceramite.

'What does it mean, master?' The Space Marine fell in behind Cawl as the archmagos passed through a maze of machinery. Not all Cawl's laboratories were this untidy, far from it, but when the archmagos required inspiration and adopted a more chaotic persona, he preferred this workspace over his others.

'Mean? Mean? It's a little early to ask about *meaning*, Alpha Primus,' said Cawl. Servo-skulls swooped down from the forest of machines covering the high ceiling and took up guard around Cawl. Long cables whipped about under them, hanging from the places their spinal columns should have been, eager to plug into his body. They were premature, and Cawl waved them away. He paused at an armoire, reached for and pulled on magos' robes. They draped over him, hiding the greater part of his machinery. Then he took a cloak to cover what was left of his organic body, hiding his head beneath its deep hood. Mechanical limbs mounted on podiums bent at awkward angles to fiddle with the robes, seating them properly around his input ports. The sacred red of Mars in place, Cawl paused below a winch and waited with impatient, tapping claws for his upper

assembly to be lowered from above. Armour plates clasped his shoulders, their link spikes mating with the ports running down his back. The spinal sensor vane locked into place with a loud clunk. Then his power unit slotted itself carefully into place, the long arm that bore it retreating silently. Cawl was away again before the core had locked itself firm. Indicator lumens blinked as the reactor spooled up and filled his augmetics with fresh might.

Busy feet clacked on the deck. His lower assembly rippled with their motion but, like the furious paddling of the mythical swan of Old Earth, down below was all activity, while his upper portion glided on serenely. As he passed through the workshop, more parts of him were reattached. Extra limbs, field generators, diagnostic tools, everything he thought he might need for the expedition to Sotha. To his jaw, he attached one of his augmitter arrays, this one mounting an atmospheric shield generator. Powerful magnets caught as he slipped it in place. He held out an arm and his great Omnissian axe came blurring across the room, ringing on his metal palm. Clusters of armour plates floated down, layering themselves over the robes of his lower assembly, clamping onto the hips of his many legs.

'You were not expecting any such visions?' asked Alpha Primus.

Cawl laughed. 'My dear boy, do not play the ignoramus with me! I made you far too intelligent to flatter me for the sake of it. You already know what is happening. We discussed this! Use that transhuman mind of yours to its fullest extent.' He turned back and grinned over his mouthpiece. 'I am far more impressed by the brilliance of my own creations than I am by toadying, you know that.' His voice distorted as his augmitter went through functionality checks, voicing the magos' words in numerous languages and a grating squeal of binharic.

Alpha Primus looked up to the ceiling, an expression that could easily have turned into an eye roll.

'It is the mountain. It is speaking to you already,' said Alpha Primus.

'Exactly!' said Cawl, pointing at his servant with an assortment of fingers. He rattled up to a stasis tube. From inside, a tall metal mechanoid being stared out with a single glass eye. The being was shut down as well as suspended in time, but it gave off an air of awareness even so. Cawl put his face up close to the glass. 'Thanks to what I learned from our friend here, my new implants function perfectly. First contact with the machines of the ancients, Primus! It is deeply fascinating. I had accounted for the possibility of trans-warp capabilities of the device, but even so…' He shook his head in admiration. 'Such art. I have

successfully achieved long-range preliminary interface. In return, the mountain is bringing the past back to life.'

He turned away from his guest and clattered on. 'If you consider, most of my memories are hidden from me, lost for all time. But the past exists still in absolute terms. Time is a river. The mouth and source are there even if you cannot see them. Incredible that the quantum empathy of the device should be able to effortlessly tune my energetic state to be able to receive past emanations of my wave form, all without recourse to the empyrean.' He held up a finger tipped with a three-pronged data robe. 'We have so much to learn from them. Such pure science! Such mastery of the material! This is only the beginning, Alpha Primus, only the beginning!'

'If you say so, master.'

'Ah, such mordancy,' Cawl said. 'You are pleasingly sarcastic.'

'I was not attempting wit, master,' Alpha Primus said. 'I simply do not comprehend you.'

Cawl chuckled. He had reached the armoury space of the laboratorium. He held up his primary and secondary arm sets, exposing the interface sockets for his tertiary limbs.

'Now, now – guns, guns, guns. What shall I take? Something ranged, something for close-in work on this expedition. Something deadly. What do you think?'

'Whatever you deem fit. Perhaps your favoured choice, master? The ones you always take.'

'Even I'm allowed to have favourites, Alpha Primus. Bring them down!'

Primus threw a giant switch. Cawl beamed as his arc scourge and solar atomiser were lowered down and pushed into place. They spun about and fired up, making numerous clicks and purrs as they self-tested. The reactor's hum climbed a note.

With his weapons in place, Belisarius Cawl was done. He held aloft all his arms, probes, weapons and mechadendrites.

'How do I look?'

'Fearsome, master,' said Alpha Primus.

'That's the right answer.' Cawl hunched down.

'Master?'

'Yes, Alpha Primus?'

'What did you remember? What did the mountain show you?'

Cawl became subdued. 'Something that happened a very long time ago, Alpha.

It showed me my friend.'

Neither of them spoke. The buzz of Cawl's cybernetics filled the space.

'We must be on our guard,' Cawl said eventually. 'The device is more powerful than I thought. I let myself open up to it, and I am glad that the interface functions.' He tapped his skull. 'But I must be careful I am not too open. I have shut down most of my sub-minds so that I may concentrate.' He pulled a face. 'I am beginning to wonder if I did not choose the wrong persona for this mission after all.'

'Which one did you select for your primary consciousness?' asked Primus. 'Out of curiosity, master.'

'Can you not tell?'

'My facility for reading human personalities is somewhat blunted,' said Primus.

'Oh,' said Cawl, sounding almost disappointed. 'Well, I shall tell you – optimistic, avuncular and sharp. Three defining characteristics are enough for today, I think.'

'Another of your favourite combinations.'

'Absolutely,' said Cawl. 'We are going to see young Decimus, after all.'

CHAPTER FOUR

ZAR QUAESITOR

Circa 7,000 years ago

Felix was strapped to a wheeled bier being pushed down freezing corridors. The ship knew no end. He imagined it going on for ever and ever, a vast, deadly place of ice and pain. Silence lay on everything, thick as the methalon fogs swirling across the deck. Cold gripped his limbs and his organs, penetrating his body to an extent that he knew, instinctively, should have killed him.

He could not see the stretcher bearers who pushed him. They were men-machines of great strength, but though terrible, they would not hurt him.

They left that to the monster.

Once, he had escaped from an examination room and roamed the ship. His brief hours of freedom ended when he had spoken with the creature. It had been kind then. The torments it inflicted in the years afterwards made Felix hate it. The monster promised that, one day, the pain would be over, and every time they spoke it reiterated its promise that he, Decimus Androdinus Felix, would rise to be a great servant of the Emperor.

Every time he woke he hoped the promise would be fulfilled. Each period of sleep gave way to more lies, more torment. He would never be done. He would be trapped for all time.

And yet, there was nothing he could do. If he moved overly much, he would be drugged. He preferred to remain awake so he remained still. The periods between the procedures were eternities of cold where time crept by like a thief, stealing away his existence in tiny, agonising morsels that were yet centuries in size. He wanted to see all he could before hibernation was forced on him again.

He came awake quickly. That was commented on and, he thought, commended

by the monster as a sign of strength. He was perfectly conscious long before they left the great suspension holds. Every time he was awoken he watched the stasis caskets roll by him in near infinite number. The hold was an oblate sphere, every surface covered by the caskets. They were clear, blue and luminous, the boys inside embedded in gels so thick only their silhouettes were visible against the machinery's glow, no features discernible but the aspect of their rest, some contorted in fear, others slumbering peacefully, each one of them plugged into the life-support devices by a thick umbilicus that plunged into their guts.

Lanes radiated out from central points on ceiling and floor. Floor and ceiling were purely relative terms. False gravity enabled efficient use of space aboard the giant ship. Biers the same as Felix's were being pushed along above him – not many, each isolated from the others by many hundreds of ranks of the pods. Their passengers were the same as he, more boys going to more rooms for more pain.

He knew where he was going, he knew it would hurt, but he was not afraid, not even then.

He counted the pods as he always did. His position never changed. He was 9,863 rows in. There was something comforting about that.

If his situation never differed, physically he was changing. Every time he came out of the pod he was bigger. He felt great strength in his limbs. His mind ran quicker. The drugs wore off faster.

The monster chuckled at all this indulgently, pleased with his progress, before hurting him again.

'I am making you strong. I am making you a fitting servant for the Omnissiah. One day you will thank me for this, Decimus,' the monster always said. 'Not now, I know, and I am sorry, but you will, and perhaps one day, you and I might be friends.'

The monster's apologies didn't stop it from inflicting pain.

The last rows of glass capsules were passing by. At the edges of the hold the tips of the caskets on the ceiling and floor were only a few yards apart. He stared at the shadows of the sleeping boys. From the hold it was a ninety-seven second journey to the examination rooms, where the pain began.

There the monster would be waiting for him with a smile and hand made of agony.

Its name was Belisarius Cawl.

Now

Felix came awake with a pained groan. He rarely bothered with full sleep – there was simply too much to do – but once his inspection of the Aegida had been concluded, the wait for the arrival of the archmagos dominus stretched on, and he found himself indulging in human habits he usually neglected. Catalepsian sleep was supposed to be a stopgap replacement, after all, and not a substitute for natural slumber entirely.

It had been even longer since he had dreamed.

'Nightmare,' he corrected himself. 'No more sleep,' he said grimly.

He swung his legs over the edge of the cot and leaned heavily on the edge. Massive transhuman hands gripped metal. The sides of the bed were an inch thick, but he could bend it easily.

Cawl had not lied to him about making him strong.

He was not sure if he was thankful for that or not.

He put the dream down to a combination of unusual factors. The waiting, the emotional effect of the dead world, Thracian's melancholy, the pressures of his role. He was a Space Marine, but he was still a man, as he told himself often.

With a grunt he shoved himself upright, padded over the freezing deckplates and poured himself a glass of water. The chamber had been some sort of stateroom before the fall of Sotha, and though large it made for an uncomfortable berth. It was too big, too ornate. His bed had to be huge to accommodate him and there was no space where it fit neatly. There were precious few operational chambers aboard the Aegida. Far more comfortable quarters were available on the *Lord of Vespator*, but Felix insisted on staying on the orbital. He wished to keep an eye on the Scythes of the Emperor. Cadmus' misgivings seemed justified. There was something not right about them. Even so, they were of secondary concern as of the moment, for it was Cawl's servants he deemed more needful of watching.

He gulped the water down. It was so cold it stung his throat, and it tasted of harsh chemicals.

Guilliman had commanded him personally to follow Cawl. The archmagos dominus had been infuriatingly elusive these last years. Guilliman's calls that Cawl return to his side had been rebuffed or ignored. Now a meeting with Felix's old tormentor was at hand. Guilliman wanted answers, and Felix had been charged with getting them.

Felix was not sure how he felt about that either.

His wargear was held in a makeshift armoury Daelus had set up at one side of the room. He left his armour on its stand and dressed himself in a loose tunic and

trousers, pulled on his boots, and belted his bolt pistol around his waist. It was freezing in the station, but he didn't feel it, and besides, nowhere was as cold as those millennia on board Cawl's vessel. It was good to be out of his armour for a while. He had a loathing of confinement.

Cawl's servants had begun their work at the centre of the station and so all the functioning parts of the Aegida were around the hub, between the command centre and the middle ring corridor. For the moment, the outer areas remained open to the void, but work proceeded at surprising pace. He passed numerous machines and servitors as he walked the middle ring. Plasma torches burned brightly as glassy-eyed dead men welded plates into place – temporary repairs, but each crude replacement further extended the portion of the station that could hold an atmosphere. Semi-autonomous drones wriggled in and out of crawl spaces under the deck. Felix grimaced as a disgusting example scurried past his feet. In form it resembled a many-legged arachnid, but it was human, for on its back in a scratched armourglass tank a brain bobbed in nutrient medium.

Mechanicus technology repulsed him. His own wargear, and indeed his own enhanced physique, were aesthetically pleasing – examples of the best of human artistry – and yet the devices the Adeptus Mechanicus made for their own use were uniformly ugly, without adornment or often even casings to hide their inner mechanisms. He supposed this preference came from their desire to see their machines at work. Perhaps that should have made him trust them more. There was an honesty to naked cogs and wires. But he could not. He was a child of the old Imperium, born thousands of years ago as the Emperor's own dreams began their slow descent into nightmare, and the stranglehold the Martian Cult held over technology now disturbed him.

Despite their bizarre ways, the priests were effective. A fortnight had passed since his arrival at the Aegida. Where before he had been obliged to walk in void-sealed battle armour, now he could go simply clad. He turned right onto the command deck axial way, into a construction zone of even greater activity. There, the technological prowess on display was undeniable.

The principal doors to the command deck were free of the temporary airlock, a new one having been installed at the far end of the corridor. This would also be removed later, but for now it enabled proper repairs to be made to the approach. Makeshift fixes were being swapped out for permanent replacements. The old blast doors had been removed and had already been replaced with freshly cast adamantium portals. Heavy bolters swivelled meaningfully in new gimbal turrets. All along the corridor dozens of servitors were at work in clanking

unison, directed by Qvo-87's tech-priests. Felix's genhanced senses were forced to compensate for the glare of sparks and piercing whine of power tools.

Entry to the command deck was quick and smooth. A new machine voice welcomed him from a shrine panel to the left. The doors opened soundlessly. It was a glimpse of how the station should be, but it was gone as soon as the doors rolled away, for the command deck was still a mess. Even so, the activity within was intense as Qvo-87 pushed his minions to return the Aegida to life.

Felix wasn't surprised to see Troncus and Daelus at work in the chamber. They were as bored as the rest of his Chosen and had skills Qvo-87 was pleased to exploit. The presence of an armoured Thracian was, however, unexpected. He was deep in discussion with Qvo-87. He seemed to have shed some of his sombre mood and was enthusiastically describing how he saw the strategic instrumentation of the deck laid out.

Felix stepped around a juddering, wheeled servitor and joined the Chapter Master and the tech-priest.

'I was ready to condemn this platform, magos,' said Felix. 'I did not think it could be made good for use.'

'All things may be repaired, my lord tetrarch,' said Qvo somewhat smugly. 'One should be cautious before abandoning resources.'

'Noted. I will remember,' said Felix.

'In the same way as the battered Imperium can and will be returned to glory, this station shall rise from decrepitude,' Qvo-87 said. 'All praise He who is three-in-one.'

'I would not have believed it myself,' said Thracian wonderingly.

'It is good that it pleases you,' said Felix. 'Your Chapter has suffered.'

Thracian nodded. 'We would maintain a watch here if we could. Sotha will likely never be whole enough to dwell upon, but it was our charge for millennia. I do not wish to abandon the duty of ages.'

Likely never, thought Felix. A strange of choice words to use for a dead world. 'Likely never' betokened uncertainty about its situation. Uncertainty suggested Thracian had hope. Theoretical, he postulated. Does Thracian believe Sotha can be reborn?

For his practical, Felix's mind went instantly to Cawl. It puzzled him a little how eagerly the Scythes of the Emperor had allowed Cawl access to Sotha. Granted, he thought, the Scythes hold the archmagos in high esteem for returning their Chapter to full strength, but the speed, the lack of ceremony, the desperation in Thracian's manner…

He could only wonder: what had the archmagos dominus promised Thracian?

'You appear distracted, tetrarch. Is all well with you?' Thracian asked.

Felix realised he was staring at the other Space Marine. He shook his concerns off with a smile. 'I dreamed. Its meaning eludes me.'

'You are human. All humans dream. Few humans can find meaning in them.'

'I do not sleep frequently and when I do I rarely dream,' said Felix. 'When I do dream, it is generally related to the events of the day.'

'But not now?'

'Today I dreamed of long ago,' he said, and left it at that. 'I desire a report on the reconstruction of the orbital,' he said to Qvo-87.

'I will provide an oral submission,' Qvo-87 said, and his voice took on the droning delivery of a non-sentient device. 'I have stabilised the secondary power cores. Repairs to the primary are almost complete, and once a suitable supply of initiator fuel is available, I will commence resanctification prior to reignition. I have concentrated my efforts on the hub of the station. It is the oldest part, holier than the periphery, with machine-spirits of rare sorts. Power and life support are now available in all ten sections of the hub. Soon I will commence with the installation of new instrumentation on the command deck. Thereafter, I shall shift my servants' attentions to–'

Qvo-87 stopped speaking. His head cocked on his banded augmetic neck. 'Report interrupt. Forgive me. Wait…' he said. His voice took on a more human tone.

From the partially restored desks of machinery, an alarm set up.

Daelus sauntered over to a console and glanced at a display. 'Etheric monitor. Something's coming in, something big.' He looked more closely. 'Throne of Terra, something extremely big!'

Micro tremors shook the station. A spanner crawled across a work bench. It skittered across the surface and dropped with a clang to the floor.

Felix stared at the rattling tool. His face betrayed his irritation.

'Stand ready,' said Felix. He grasped a railing and set his feet wide.

'He's not going to do it, is he?' Daelus asked Troncus.

Troncus shrugged.

'Lord Felix?' Daelus said.

'He will do it,' said Felix.

'Honoured tetrarch, would you expect anything less from the archmagos dominus?' said Qvo-87.

'Rash as always,' said Felix. 'Cawl may style himself the saviour of the

Imperium, but his grandstanding puts us all at risk.'

'The archmagos dominus?' said Thracian. 'He is coming?'

All over the command deck loose items bounced across the metal.

'Brace yourselves, all of you,' ordered Felix.

'What is happening?' Thracian demanded.

'The archmagos approaches,' said Qvo-87 with an apologetic smile.

'Cawl is attempting an in-system real space translation,' said Felix. 'Here. By the station.'

'That's insane,' said Thracian.

'Many and glorious are the technologies of the Archmagos Dominus Belisarius Cawl. All will be well, you shall see,' said Qvo-87 with a zealot's fervour.

The alarms shrieked. Servitors all around the bridge went into emergency shutdown. Purple sparks leapt over the exposed metal deck, and a throbbing roar built throughout the station's fabric.

'Throne!' shouted Thracian. 'He is coming in right by us!'

'All will be well!' repeated Qvo-87.

Gravity ceased to obey natural law. Tools floated upwards. Through the field-sealed rent in the hull, Felix watched the sky fill with the curdled oil colours of imminent warp breach.

The void tore. Wicked lights scorched his eyes. He tasted bitterness, exultation and the distillation of regret. A torrent of pleading voices flooded his mind.

With a great, flat flash of lightning, a gargantuan ship appeared by the Aegida. Black fire flickered around its outline. Corposant streamed off its every angle. Then the warp breach collapsed in on itself. Tools clattered down. The hideous babbling ceased. All returned to normal. A lone alarm pinged over and over again. Felix relaxed his white-knuckle grip.

Qvo's augmetics flashed, setting the servitors back into motion. The men-machines continued exactly where they had left off, as if nothing had happened.

A vast red craft occupied the space between the Aegidan platform and the surface of ravaged Sotha. It was a vessel like no other, one of the rare Ark Mechanicus explorator vessels, and even among those behemoths it was reckoned large for its kind, a vast city in space, bristling with weapons, and containing manufacturing and research laboratoria beneath its adamantium skin to rival a forge world.

Felix knew it only too well, having spent the best part of ten millennia imprisoned inside its holds.

A legend emblazoned in lingua-technis hierofont proudly proclaimed its name.

Zar Quaesitor.
The ship, home and research facility of Belisarius Cawl.

CHAPTER FIVE

THE THREE URSINE HYPOTHESIS

Felix stood by the forward left access ramp of the Overlord. The hangar was cramped with Space Marines, servitors and tech-priests all attempting to get their equipment aboard his ship. Felix insisted on a low-key initial insertion, not wishing to awaken tyranid rearguard organisms or trip the fortress-monastery's auto-defences, should any remain operational. The Overlord was a large drop ship, more than capable of taking Qvo's cadre of tech-priests and Thracian's men. Getting them aboard in an orderly manner was taxing his Chosen.

He watched the *Zar Quaesitor* through the small portion of the hangar aperture visible past the Overlord. Cawl's acolytes were still streaming across from the ark in lines of shuttlecraft. They flooded the Aegidan orbital, greatly adding to those already working under Qvo-87. The derelict orbital rang to the sounds of industry from all quarters. On the other side of the partition dividing the hangar, the Adeptus Mechanicus were hard at work, and vibrations from their efforts shook the deckplates. Past the Overlord's stubby wings, Felix saw a hull section prefabricated in the holds of the *Zar Quaesitor* emerging from foundry gates. Bathed in the glaring light of the ark's forge decks, the section drifted forwards unpowered until small fleets of servitor craft fell in around it, snared it with cabling, and commenced dragging it towards the platform.

'My lord,' Thracian interrupted him. 'We have nearly finished loading our equipment.'

Four of the veteran Scythes of the Emperor were escorting a methalon casket up the right hand access ramp. Tech-priests loading their own materials stopped and offered prayers to the device. Heavy vapours streamed down from exhaust

vents, curling in strangely regular patterns in the suspensor fields holding the casket above the ground. The casket was of a different sort to those aboard Cawl's ship, but close enough that its presence chilled Felix's hearts.

'Genovaults,' said Felix. 'You are bringing your geneseed with us.'

'That of the older Space Marines. Once, the lifeblood of my Chapter,' Thracian looked pained, 'now a relic I must lay to rest. It is useless now it has been superseded, but it is worthy of our respect still. I wish to take it to the Vault of Heroes and see it properly interred along with the remains of my fallen brothers.'

It was clear that this was not the whole truth. Before Felix could press Thracian further, the heavy tread of a Primaris Space Marine approached from behind. His signum broadcast indicated he was an ally. He was not, however, one of Felix's own.

'Alpha Primus,' said Felix, and turned around to face Cawl's giant.

'I will see to the final loading of my warriors,' Thracian said, excusing himself.

Primus watched the other leave with sad eyes. 'You called for me, tetrarch,' he said dourly, when Thracian was gone.

Alpha Primus was like no other Space Marine Felix had seen. He was huge, even by Primaris standards, and a strange-looking individual in many other ways. There was a coppery sheen to his pale, horribly scarred skin. His eyes were black with just a hint of white around huge pupils. His habitually shaved head and chin were dark with fast growing stubble. There was an air of great potency around him that set Felix on guard whenever they met.

Primus' embassy in Cawl's stead was irritating, and insulting. Felix had never liked the man, and his presence provoked painful memories. Cawl had yet to show his face in person. Felix wanted more than anything to get that meeting over with.

He was therefore short-tempered.

'Where is the archmagos?' said Felix. 'When will he inform us what he intends?'

Primus stared down at him lugubriously. 'You ask me again, my lord. I can only say he will meet you on the surface as I have already relayed.'

His lips were plump and purplish, always downturned, giving him a saturnine expression. It suited his soul, thought Felix.

'The archmagos dominus has many preparations to make before we descend.'

Felix looked out to the *Zar Quaesitor* and its fleet of attendant ships. The void was alive around it.

'Tell him again that the Primarch Roboute Guilliman has given me express

orders that he is to report to me immediately. The archmagos has been out of direct contact for years. In the absence of regular communications, the lord regent expects a full report from me on Cawl and his activities soon.'

'It will all become clear, I am sure,' said Primus unenthusiastically. 'I am powerless to compel him to attend you.'

A vox-chime announced word from the command deck, where Daelus had assumed charge while Thracian's men prepared for the return to Sotha.

'Tetrarch. There's something about to happen on Cawl's ship.'

'Details,' Felix demanded.

'I'd give them if I had them. I'm reading an immense power surge from the Zar Quaesitor*'s reactors. The most likely theoretical is that he is about to open fire on Sotha. But there's something more behind it. I'll run further scans to see if I can find out, but the vessel has every augur baffle known to man.'*

Felix rounded on Primus. 'I told you to tell him that this mission was to be undertaken cautiously.'

Primus stared back at him sadly.

Daelus voxed again.

'My lord, it's not just weapons. Can you see the front of the ark?' said the Techmarine.

'Not from this position.'

'I would take a look outside if I were you. I don't think you'll like what Cawl's doing.'

Felix made a noise of annoyance and ducked under the Overlord's drooping prows. In a half crouch to allow him to pass under the central fuselage, he made his way to the hangar entrance, where he stood tall again under the Overlord's thruster arrays just inside the atmospheric field.

'By the Throne,' swore Felix.

The *Zar Quaesitor* was coming apart. Its blunt, aggressive bow was detaching, revealing itself as a self-contained subsidiary vessel. It was but a part of the ark, but large in its own right, big enough to land lances of knights, thought Felix. Clamps came free and puffs of gas burst all round it to push it from its housing. It slid along and then off a connecting arm, pipes and cables popping free and reeling themselves in to the larger part of the ark.

Alpha Primus emerged with difficulty from underneath the Overlord.

'Do you care to explain what your master is doing?' said Felix.

'I do not know what he is doing. I can only apologise,' said Alpha Primus. 'What more can I do? Belisarius Cawl is as Belisarius Cawl does. He is the

Prime Conduit of the Omnissiah, a law unto himself.'

Hundreds of servitor escort craft streamed out of the ark's hangars and flew after the giant lander. Unhindered by atmosphere, the flotilla proceeded at a steady pace towards the surface.

'If there is anything down there, it is now aware we are coming,' said Felix. 'And if any part of the fortress-monastery's defence matrix remains active, he risks triggering it.'

'I am sure my master has taken that into account,' said Alpha Primus.

'Lord Felix, the Zar Quaesitor*'s weapons are charged and are about to open fire.'*

Huge energy cannons pushed themselves out of gunports all along the ventral line of the ship. They fired as one, sectioning a large area around Mount Pharos with a square of brilliant white light.

'I see,' said Alpha Primus. 'Neutron beamers. Anything around the landing zone will have been instantly killed,' he said. 'I would not worry. My master has an answer for everything.'

'Yes,' said Felix, annoyed by his reaction to Cawl's behaviour. 'So, it appears, do you.'

'It was the way he made me,' said Primus.

Felix pushed past the bigger Space Marine and returned to the confusion around the front of the Overlord, where he waited to be away after Cawl.

By the time the Overlord was loaded with Qvo-87's equipment, Cawl had already been on the ground for two hours. Felix's temper strained to the point that he was set on challenging Qvo about the delay, and accusing him of keeping them back purposefully, but just as he resolved to do so, Qvo-87 came to him with many apologies and assurances that all was done, citing the gathering-up, reprogramming and loading of rare marques of servitor that could not be left behind as the reason for his tardiness.

So it was that finally, Daelus eased the Overlord out of its cramped nest and set it on the way to the surface. Felix and Thracian rode in the cockpit, despite Cominus' habitual misgivings about the risk.

'He would keep me in a box, if he could,' Felix confessed to Thracian.

The Overlord ventured once more into the void. From outside they saw that the repairs to the main hangar on the station underside were close to completion. That was a far greater space, and much better suited to a gunship of the Overlord's size class, than the smaller, subsidiary dock.

‘It will be easier getting back into the station,’ said the Techmarine. ‘Qvo-87 works fast.’

‘It is a marvel, and a gift, that the Adeptus Mechanicus provide us,’ said Thracian.

Felix felt little of the gratitude Thracian did. Cawl could grant him every technological favour in the galaxy and it would never be enough to make up for the years Felix spent as his test subject. Until Felix had got his meeting with Cawl out of the way, he would find no peace. It was always that way, whenever they encountered one another.

With great impatience, he watched Sotha approach.

All trace of atmosphere had been ripped away by the hive fleet. Although the system’s other worlds had been touched, they had been but lightly, with minor harvesting of the two gas giants and cometary cloud. Living worlds always suffered the most, for the tyranids ever sought genetic material over baser forms of sustenance.

Nothing remained alive on the surface of Sotha. From high orbit it looked like a barren garden patch, with a few handfuls of dry stalks poking from the dust. As the Overlord descended these resolved themselves into the lacy remains of feeding towers. The fleshy parts had been stripped from them, leaving behind the mineral structure that held them aloft. This was durable, keeping a portion of the feeding towers upright even without their musculature and flesh tethers, and evidently problematic enough for the hive fleet to reabsorb that it was left behind.

Other than these alien additions, the world was bizarrely pristine. Once more Felix was reminded of a model created to show planetary geology. The details of the world’s topography were exposed. Never had he seen a continental shelf or oceanic plain so clearly displayed other than on a geologian’s orb. The Overlord roared over the flatness of the empty seas towards Sothopolis, the world’s capital and only city of significant size, above whose airless streets Mount Pharos reared high. Pict files flicking through Felix’s retinal displays showed Sotha to be verdant. All that was gone, devoured.

‘They left only stone,’ Thracian said grimly. The Chapter Master was shaken in a way one would not expect of the Adeptus Astartes. This was his homeworld and its protection had been his Chapter’s prime duty. Rarely would a Space Marine be confronted with a failure this complete, and seeing Sotha so denuded, Felix shared some of his shock.

They came in obliquely towards Sothopolis. Felix’s wargear cogitator used the

picts to superimpose emerald oceans over the cracked stone, and he saw the world simultaneously as it was and as it had been. Plains of dry seas rose from depths to shallows, and finally to the shore, where wealthy districts once enjoyed far reaching ocean views and now-blind windows gazed at empty immensities. Felix had seen a few worlds ravaged by the tyranids – they were lamentably common in the east of Greater Ultramar – but somehow Sotha was particularly awful. Everywhere were signs that this had been a thriving, life-rich world. Ships lay like discarded toys in ocean dust sucked free of all organic matter. Piers extended over bare rock from the dockside. The Overlord flew over the shoreline, and Felix found himself looking down at a city in an eerie state. In places the battle for the world had levelled blocks. Damage from large-scale bioweapons carved gouges into the suburbs, but impact sites were the exception. The tyranids' favoured mode of attack was ground invasion. Imperial scholars theorised that it was the most economical means of offence and risked the least damage to their food source. Where cities were concerned, tyranid methods left untouched infrastructure isolated in a world of dust. Sothopolis was a small city, but there were whole, pristine districts where glass still glinted in roofs and ground vehicles waited for passengers that would never come.

Mount Pharos dominated the landscape. In life a green king, in death a slumbering gyptian faro. Atop its peak the fortress-monastery of the Scythes of the Emperor stood. The Blackrock Mountains to the east, of which Mount Pharos was a distant outlier, toothed the horizon, and with the fang of the fallen monastery close to the ship, the landscape gave Felix the impression of open jaws about to snap shut.

The state of Sotha sank him into a black mood. There was so much to be done. The ravages of Kraken were the least of the sector's concerns. Mortarion's forces still attacked Ultramar, and large tracts of the jewelled realm were poisoned beyond repair. What could be set right would take decades, if not centuries. What could he, one man, do?

The crackling of spiking rad-sensors broke his ruminations. They were passing over the area cleansed by Cawl's eradication beamers. The instrument noise rose to a crackling crescendo and held there.

'We're approaching the fortress-monastery exclusion zone, my lords,' said Daelus. 'No sign of activity from the defence matrix. Shields are down. I have minimal power readings from the monastery generatoria.'

'Our orbital guns failed,' said Thracian quietly. 'Our anti-air defences did not last long after that. Kraken has evolved to perfect the art of aerial assault. When

we left, nothing remained functional.'

'Nevertheless, we should be careful,' said Felix. 'Brother Techmarine, take us closer to the mountain,' he ordered. 'Close enough to trigger close-range defensive responses. If there is no response, we shall see if we can land directly at the fortress-monastery. That will save us much time and effort.' The growl of the rad-sensor climbed abruptly as they crossed some deadly, invisible line. 'Curse Cawl's arrogance. This radiation will make our mission all the more difficult.'

'It is within survivable parameters, my lord,' said Daelus. He banked the Overlord round. Shore and mountain squeezed the coastal plain and it was quickly crossed. Mount Pharos opposed them, its soaring cliffs barring their way. Daelus put the ship into a slow spiralling ascent. Felix observed the world through his retinal display while looking through the window. The Overlord machine-spirit's augur input pulsed directly to his autosenses. Although it would be overwhelming for all but the most highly trained mortal, such a profusion of data was simple enough for a Space Marine to assimilate.

An outlying castellum watching over the capital lay toppled at the mountain's feet. A switchback access road crawled upwards from the site of the ruins past hundreds of rounded cavern mouths covering the slopes from foot to crown.

'Incredible,' said Thracian. 'So many caves. I don't think we knew how many. With the quicktrees gone only now are they visible.'

'They were not mapped?'

'Some, yes,' said Thracian. 'All cartographical data had to be gathered first hand. The mountain had its secrets. It was resistant to scans. Our people say the caves moved, and there are legends from millennia ago. I did not believe most, but–'

An alarm peeped over the crackle of the rad counter.

'Our presence is getting a response,' said Daelus. 'I have signals. Weapons augurs attempting to secure a lock.'

'Hold at this distance,' ordered Felix. 'What has us in sight?'

'Short to mid-range weapons batteries. It looks like all the major orbital weapons are down. But I am seeing las, plasma and missile tracking us. Hang on, no. There's one defence laser active. Possibly two.'

'How can that be?' said Felix. 'You said the guns failed.'

'I have no answer,' said Thracian. 'But I do not lie.'

'No communications… That's odd.' Daelus took his hand off the flight stick and peered at a screen. 'Troncus, take the helm.'

Daelus' co-pilot, wordless as ever, switched control to his station.

'What is it?' Felix said.

Daelus slid his chair along rails to a sensorium suite next to the pilot's chair. The mortal manning it moved his own seat aside so Daelus could access it. 'It could be interference from Cawl's eradication beams, but these energy readings are a little peculiar,' said Daelus.

'Peculiar how?' Felix demanded.

'Non-Imperial peculiar,' said Daelus. He worked quickly at the console. 'I am attempting to shut the defence grid down, but the system is not responding. It should recognise us as friendly. It is ignoring our identification signum chain. That should override everything.'

'It is an older system,' said Thracian. 'Sotha fell before the primarch rose again. Our noosphere and cogitator infrastructure was not initiated into the mysteries of the neo-tetrarchy. It does not know you. What about the Scythes' codes?'

'I've tried them. They are also non-effective,' said Daelus distractedly.

The vox squawked a rush of static. From out of the sleety hiss of radioactive emanations, a stentorian machine voice emerged.

'You are entering restricted airspace. Remove yourselves or face destruction by order of the Scythes of the Emperor. You are entering restricted airspace. Remove yourselves or face destruction by order of the Scythes of the Emperor.'

'A generous warding beacon,' said Daelus.

'Our fortress was close to the civilian population centre, as you can see,' said Thracian. 'The main starport is not far to the north.'

'What's left seems feeble, my lord,' said Daelus, sitting back. 'The Overlord can take it if you wish to put down. I do not think we are in any danger.'

'What state are the fortress-monastery's hangars in?'

'Blocked, my lord. Doors shut over three main flight bays, no power to any of them. A couple of the upper landing pads are viable. The rest are collapsed,' said Daelus. 'I could try this hangar.' He tapped at a screen. 'I could shoot our way in. Or this landing pad at the northern end.'

'If there are enemies inside the Emperor's Watch, we could be walking into an ambush. The ways into the citadel from the landing ports were made to be held by a few men on their own,' said Thracian. 'Most means of entrance were blocked.'

'Then I could attempt landing in the outer bailey, outside the main gate. It's the only place that isn't a sheer drop. It'll be tight, but no tighter than the Aegidan hangar was.'

‘You would be doing it under fire. Hold position,’ said Felix. ‘I will not take any unnecessary risks. Thracian, do you have deeper level access protocols you can provide?’

‘I gave all I had to your brother Techmarine,’ said Thracian. ‘But I will attempt shutdown myself, perhaps my voiceprint will help.’ Felix’s armour vox popped as Thracian shifted channel. ‘Emperor’s Watch command nexus confirm databridge.’

An angry screech of static filled the flight deck. The automated warning resumed.

‘You are entering restricted airspace. Remove yourselves or face destruction…’

‘No response,’ said Daelus. ‘I read increasing power output through weapons systems.’

‘Chapter Master Mansirius Thracian communicates with you, venerable machine systems of my Chapter. Confirm databridge and prepare to commence security net shutdown on my command after exchange of cyphers.’

A green flash emanated from the summit. A stripe of laser light sliced past the Overlord, clean of dispersion blur in the voided sky.

‘Troncus, you have taken us too far in!’ said Daelus.

The co-pilot shook his head and adjusted their course.

‘You are entering restricted airspace. Remove yourselves or face destruction by order of the Scythes of the Emperor. You are entering restricted airspace. Remove yourselves or face destruction by order of the Scythes of the Emperor.’

‘It will not heed me,’ said Thracian.

‘What are your orders, lord tetrarch?’ said Daelus. ‘Throne!’ he shouted before Felix could respond. Troncus jerked the stick of the ship so that it slewed dangerously to the side.

A ruby beam of light speared through the space where the ship had been.

‘Now that was a defence laser. I recommend withdrawal,’ said Daelus.

‘Do it.’ Felix stared out of the armourglass cockpit blister. The mountain loured at him as it receded.

‘My lords, a vox message from Archmagos Dominus Belisarius Cawl,’ one of the mortal crew informed them ‘He is requesting the tetrarch’s presence and advising ground approach.’

‘There is a surprise,’ said Daelus sharply. ‘He is at the landing fields of Odessa Port. I could set down in the city instead.’

‘Join him,’ said Felix after a moment’s consideration. ‘Order our transports to put down the armour there also. The sooner we get this over with, the better.’

He didn't know if he was referring to the mission or meeting again with his tormentor.

Odessa Port was in a worse state than the city. The tyranids had gone so far as to demolish many of its receptuculae and grind them up for their mineral content. Broad pits full of half-digested metal and rockcrete residue leached of calcium dotted the emptied ground. The landing fields themselves remained useable, and it was upon their broad plascrete expanse that Cawl's craft squatted, huge and red.

'It looks like the archmagos has already made himself at home,' said Daelus, directing the Overlord to overfly the site.

Hundreds of fat cables snaked away from the underbelly of Cawl's ship. In crude, mechanical aping of the tyranid consumption process, excavators dug sheer pits around the ship and were depositing the rubble excavated from them into machines. The machines spun grinding teeth to macerate the stone, swallowing the material deep into their guts where alchemical processes ripped it apart. From other mechanisms, attached by piping to the grinders, huge funnels periodically geysered clouds of gas harvested from the rock. Eight large-scale field projectors – four bolted to the rockcrete, four hovering under contra-gravity high overhead – screened off a perfect cube of space around the landing craft with a shimmering field. A sole Mechanicus Knight in the colours of House Taranis stalked the perimeter of the camp, while all around the ship, tech-priests in void gear guided remote sensing machines out onto the landing fields beyond the energy cube.

'There is an atmosphere around Cawl's lander,' said Thracian.

'Cawl is ambitious,' said Felix. 'He does nothing the simple way.'

'Shall I put down within the field?' Daelus asked.

Felix nodded. 'As close as you can to the lander. Let's not give the archmagos dominus the opportunity of avoiding me again.'

Cawl was waiting for Felix when the ramps of the Overlord dropped down and the Space Marines trooped out.

The space was freezing cold, and the atmospheric mix poor. Carbon dioxide predominated, with a heavy oxygen content and few of the other gases present on Terran analogue worlds. Felix's transhuman system went into action to compensate. The high carbon dioxide component made him sluggish, but he eschewed the full measure of his wargear's environmental protections and left his helm locked to his belt. He was acutely aware that everything he was and all

the equipment he carried was due to Cawl. Looking through eyes that, although altered by Cawl's technologies, he had at least been born with was preferable to peering out through helmet lenses designed and manufactured by the magos while yet more of Cawl's inventions scribed data onto his retinas.

Cawl stood by the side of his lander, his followers bustling about him as if he were some immense vermiform queen and they his slave workers. The magos was more monstrous than Felix recalled, having enhanced himself further since their last meeting. But the smile half-hidden behind his face-piece, part mockery and all challenge, had not changed.

Felix suppressed a shudder as he approached. Somewhere deep inside him a small boy cried out. Everyone, he reflected, is afraid of something.

'Archmagos Dominus Belisarius Cawl, I am Tetrarch Decimus Androdinus Felix of the Realm of Ultramar, ruler of the Eastern Marches. I thank you for–'

Cawl held up a single metal finger, silencing Felix.

The magos clattered forwards. Breath whooshing from auxiliary breathing apparatus hidden under his robes turned to ice crystals on the air.

'Primaris 10-079-983. I never forget a number,' he said.

'My name is–'

'Decimus Felix, yes, I recall, of Laphis. Primaris warrior, then captain, then equerry. Hero of the Imperium, now lord of a shattered county.' The magos' torso sunk lower, so that his face was level with Felix's own. Between patches of bluish flesh, tiny gears and pistons whirred. 'I recall perfectly our more recent interactions. But I regard our original meetings most fondly. Our conversations were pleasant, and alleviated the ennui of my millennia-long labour. Thank you for that. You were such a spirited boy. I am glad that you have done so well. I knew you would go far.'

Felix frowned. 'Thank you,' he said reluctantly.

'Not at all!' said Cawl, cheerfully ignoring Felix's discomfort. 'It is a reward all its own when one sees one's creations succeed.'

Felix's annoyance increased. Cawl did not notice, but was peering past him at the Chosen of Vespator.

'Now, who do we have here?' he said, scanning each of them with wide-band auguries. '09-372-8872, 09-372-7643…' he said, rattling off the numbers of Felix's bodyguard.

'My lord!' Felix declaimed loudly, thinking now was his turn to interrupt. 'May I introduce the Chosen of Vespator, my guardians and aides.' He swept out his hand towards his Primaris Marines. 'Veteran Sergeant Cominus, of the Sons of

Orar, Techmarine Daelus of the Ultramarines, Techmarine Troncus of the Praetors of Ultramar, Veteran Brother Cadmus of the Scythes of the Emperor, Veteran Brother Tullio of the Novamarines, Veteran Brother Austen of the Doom Eagles, Veteran Brother Ixen of the Aquiloan Brotherhood, Veteran Brother Diamedes of the Silver Skulls, Apothecary Yansar of the Reborn, Epistolary Gathein of the Avenging Sons.' He turned hard eyes upon the magos. 'You will see that each of these warriors is a hero. Every one has distinguished himself in battle and upheld the highest precepts of the Codex Astartes in exemplary fashion. They are far more than numbers, Archmagos Dominus Cawl. They have *names*.'

Cawl chuckled good-humouredly. 'Quite right, quite right. Of course they have names! Everything has a name. So good to see you all. I am proud of you, every one.' Cawl rubbed various hands together and looked back to Felix. 'Guilliman is quite the politician, isn't he? These warriors are drawn from across the Ultramarines' successors, and not all of them from the ten warden Chapters.' Cawl clicked his tongue. The noise came out sharp as gunfire through his voxmitter array.

'A deliberate choice, my lord,' said Felix. 'To foster cooperation among my lord Guilliman's sons.'

'Naturally,' said Cawl. He clattered forwards, passing along the line of Primaris Marines and peering at them. His attendant servo-skulls swooped and bobbed around them, bleeping and chiming excitedly. 'Good service records. Excellent function. They turned out rather well, don't you think?'

'These are among the greatest warriors in–'

Again Cawl interrupted him. 'I don't mean just these men, though they are exemplars of the type. I mean the Primaris Marines. They came out rather well.'

'Yes, my lord.'

Cawl turned around like a serpent coiling. 'Oh, Decimus,' said Cawl admonishingly. 'Let's be civil. I realise that you bear me some ill will. The taking away of childhood. The sleep of methalon hyper-freeze, the pain of the procedures of apotheosis and, I admit,' said Cawl, raising several limbs and his voice to forestall Felix's objections, 'that I was a very poor substitute father, although I did try my best. All of you are my children,' he said to the others. 'But come now, look at what we have achieved together, you and I.' He punched his wizened organic left hand into the palm of his metallic right in time with his words and advanced on Felix. 'The stabilisation of the Imperium. The return of the primarch. The creation of a whole new breed of Space Marine.' He stopped

at Felix's side and looked away to the mountain. 'And we have so much more to achieve here, today.'

'If it is civility you expect, offer some in return. Tell me what exactly it is that you seek beneath Mount Pharos,' said Felix.

'Perhaps Chapter Master Thracian can answer that,' said Cawl brightly, pointing at Thracian, who was by now approaching.

'My lord archmagos dominus,' Thracian said. He got down on bended knee and bowed his head. 'Forgive my interruption, tetrarch, but I must give my thanks. Without the archmagos' genius, my Chapter would be dead, our legacy lost. There is nothing I can do that will ever repay you.'

Cawl winked at Felix then peered down at his motivator unit. 'Come, come,' he said. 'Get up, Chapter Master. If I were to be thanked for everything I've done it would take an embarrassing amount of time. Consider it my gift.'

'I…' Thracian began, thrown off by Cawl's flippancy.

'That's right, get up,' said Cawl. 'It is to you that I owe thanks. This world is your demesne. I appreciate your allowing me to operate here. You should never kneel upon it.'

'Yes,' said Thracian. He paused. 'Your offer…' he began disbelievingly. 'It was genuine?'

'Yes, yes.' Cawl opened up all three of his left arms to gesture at the landscape, his feet clattering on the rockcrete. 'The healing of your world will be undertaken as soon as I have what I need. We wouldn't wish to disturb the mountain's spirit through clumsy efforts at restoration.'

'Wait,' said Felix. 'You mean you intend to restore Sotha?'

'I do,' said Cawl.

'That's impossible,' said Daelus.

'You disappoint me, fellow acolyte of the Machine-God. Sotha is the middle ursine! It will be simple.'

Felix looked at Daelus. Daelus shrugged.

'I repair tanks and make guns,' he said. 'I have no idea what he is talking about with his middle ursine.'

'You are aware of Gul Du Lac's Three Ursine Hypothesis, surely?' Cawl addressed them all. 'No? Someone? Really?' he said in surprise at Felix's blank look. 'All right. Some education is required. Gul Du Lac was a scientist of ancient Earth,' he said. 'She was one of the thirteen Appollians who led mankind away from Terra tens of thousands of years ago, landing first on Luna. She was instrumental in determining the suitability of alien worlds for mankind's

habitation. Her greatest theorem posited that certain worlds occupy positions that enable life to flourish, the so-called Zonality Gul Du Lac. Position is the most important. This is familiar now, yes?'

'No, my lord archmagos,' Felix said.

'Really? Then imagine if you will, as Gul Du Lac did all those centuries ago, three ursines.'

'Three ursines?' said Daelus.

'Three ursines,' repeated Cawl. 'Each has gruel for his breakfast. The first ursine has gruel that is too hot, and goes hungry. The third ursine has gruel that is too cold, and rejects his repast. But the middle ursine!' Cawl flourished an array of bionic limbs. 'His gruel is just right. Gul Du Lac used this analogy to classify worlds. We see around us devastation, and assume all is lost. Indeed, it looks grim on the face of it. The tyranids take everything, life, gases, liquids, certain minerals, but all this is gone from the surface only.'

'They do not mine, that is certain,' said Daelus. 'They do not delve. An Imperial settlement would take millennia to exhaust a world like this, even now.'

'Exactly!' exclaimed Cawl, as if Daelus was the star pupil in his class. 'The tyranids are surface eaters, they strip a planet's surface and move on. Sotha is an active world. As much water is locked up in the rocks of a world such as this as can be found in its oceans. Now, can anyone tell me where atmosphere comes from?'

Silence.

'Come come now!' said Cawl. 'How can you learn if you do not think? You, Cominus, show your warriors why you wear a sergeant's marks and they do not.'

'Atmosphere is apportioned to a world during planetary formation,' said Cominus.

Cawl made an equivocal noise. 'To an extent. Atmosphere also comes from here.' He stamped his foot on the ground. 'It can be liberated from minerals as we are doing with the limestone bedrock of this area.' He pointed at the machines belching out gas. 'Alchemy gives an acceptable admixture of oxygen, although I lack sufficient nitrogen to make this air entirely healthy. Given a few hundred thousand years, Sotha's vulcanism would cloak this world again with gases. Recall, if you will, the days of pre-terraformation Venus, whose own extreme volcanic activities gave it a crushing pressure and runaway heat inimical to all life.'

Again Daelus shrugged at Felix.

'Speaking of life,' Cawl went on, 'this world looks dead, but it cannot be.

Again, we must look beneath our feet. As I said, tyranids are surface feeders. In the stone of any living world is microbial life aplenty – although all higher forms are gone, and many of the bacteria down there could not survive up here on the surface, the uniqueness of Sotha's genome is not entirely lost. So you see, not hopeless at all, even if we left things as they are – which I do not intend to, for what use is a world of rock, potential atmosphere and germs to the mighty Adeptus Astartes? None!' he said, adding a flourish of mechanical arms to his speech. 'If we add additional water and gases taken from the rest of the Sothan system, and reintroduce flora and fauna cloned from vault samples held in the Library of Ptolemy on Macragge, then I should think we could have a hydrological cycle within fifty years, a rudimentary ecosystem within a century, while something approaching full life could be restored within the course of three hundred and fifty years, give or take a century. No time at all!'

'But it's impossible,' said Cominus. 'Imperial policy is to abandon worlds devoured by the tyranids.'

'And when did Imperial policy amount to anything?' Cawl said dismissively. 'Do you not listen? This world occupies the position of the middle ursine. The world is bare, yes?'

'I agree, archmagos, but with all due respect–' said Daelus.

'But the position of this world has not *changed*,' Cawl said, slapping the back of one metal hand into the palm of another. 'The solar input remains the *same*. Solar input is the key factor in allowing life to arise, or successful terraforming of a dead world. Everything else will follow. Don't you worry, Commander Thracian, all will be well.'

'If this was that simple then why has it not been done before?' said Felix.

'Felix, Felix!' said Cawl. 'Nobody said it was *simple.* It is *possible*. But just because things are hard does not mean that they should not be attempted. Ask your genefather. The primarch knows that if a man has a will to do something, then nothing shall stop him. I am Belisarius Cawl! If I say a thing can be done, then it can be done, though it take me ten thousand years – and with all due respect to you, oh Son of Orar, compared to continuing the Emperor's work and unravelling the secrets of blackstone, returning a benignly positioned rock such as this back to life is child's play.'

Cawl began to walk towards the edge of the atmospheric field to get a better view of the mountain. He moved surprisingly quickly.

'Does that mean you could return other worlds to life?' Felix said, as he jogged to catch up.

‘Hmm? Here? Yes, yes, if that’s what you want. I am a little pressed for time, however. Although the technology I will share, if your tech-priests can comprehend it.’ His dismissiveness changed to humour as he smiled at Felix. ‘You should be able to grasp the science yourself. I tried to make you all as intelligent as I could.’

‘What will you receive in exchange for this labour?’

‘I’m not doing it for reward, Decimus,’ said Cawl. He halted right at the very edge of the field, close enough to extend various sensor limbs through the shimmering blue play of energy. A couple of his servo-skulls shot past him and out into the airless day. The ground shook as the Knight of Taranis continued its patrol. ‘I’m doing it because I can, and because it is the right thing to do. Whatever your feelings towards me, and I know that the primarch too is irritated with me, I am on your side. I want the Imperium to survive. I want it to *flourish*.’ Cawl fixed his eyes and numerous other sensing devices on the mountain. ‘It is for that reason I have come here. In the dark beneath Mount Pharos is, quite possibly, information that will allow me to save us all.’

He stared at the mountain, until his body became as still as the rock, and his mechadendrites moved on his back as the trees on Mount Pharos had once swayed in the wind.

‘We leave tomorrow. Prepare your men, Decimus.’ Cawl gave the tetrarch an earnest look. ‘This will be a difficult mission.’

CHAPTER SIX

WHAT CAWL DID NEXT

Circa 10,000 years ago

Bang. Metal flexed in the mountain breeze, twitching towards a boulder as if teasing it, then slamming hard when the wind picked up. *Bang*.

There were not many places in the Emperor's laboratories where one could rest. There were fewer places to access the outside world, and fewer still that were safe. Cawl, as director of the sub-dermal interface division, had the privileges to venture beyond the walls and the endless security checks. When he could, he liked to go into the thin atmosphere of the Himalazian Plateau, to feel the heat on his back from the weary sun, to smell air that had not been forced through filtration units a hundred thousand times.

The Emperor's principal laboratory was high on the massif, but there were others, connected by deep transit lines that spread as secret webs under Terra's skin. Cawl's base was at the edge of Himalazia, in the borderlands of the burned out kingdom of Miamar. From the mountains he could see down into the lost city of Putoo, and the shell of its abandoned hive. He was old enough to remember the place when it lived. With each successive era of mankind, civilisation built ever-larger monuments, while pillaging what remained of the natural world. Each cycle brought greater edifices to rot in the dust that followed. Cawl believed that one day there would only be dust, and no more edifices would rise.

The Emperor offered an end to the cycle. That was why Cawl served him.

His favourite spot was a bridge over a dry ravine where once a small river flowed. The bridge was primitive, made of stone. It had survived the millennia when other things of more advanced materials had not, like the machine the metal had come from. Clay, stone, piles of earth, these are the things that last for

aeons. Shaped metal rusted. Hydrocarbons frittered away. Organics perished. Glass returned to sand.

Bang.

Dry mountain cliffs rose over the bridge. Pebbles rounded by vanished water clustered the ravine floor. Trash from a dozen epochs poked out from between the stones: plasteks, metal, bone, carved stone, lumps of aggregated technology masquerading as natural debris, all components of obscure purpose and origin. Cawl stared at the sheet of metal banging in the wind against the boulder. An ancient flood must have lodged it in place, not long before the river dried up forever and Earth's hydrological cycle atrophied, otherwise the metal would have rusted to nothing.

Instead it persisted in the desiccated Himalazian air. One thousand, two thousand, three thousand years. Who knew? Cawl himself was old by then, very old. The metal was older.

Bang.

The metal had hit the rock so many times it had performed its own minor erosions on the stone, pocking the watered smoothness with ugly holes.

Bang.

Ever since the last flood, thought Cawl, that metal has been there, caught in a vice of stone, unable to get free. He examined it from his lofty position over the riverbed, as he had many times before. He knew the metal intimately, though he had never been closer to it than the bridge. He was a dispassionate observer, like a god. A god of metal! He smiled at the idea; it was a preposterous notion worthy of Mars. He despised tech-priests. Mumbling shamans who worshipped the things that they made. It infuriated him that the Emperor dealt with them when they should have been conquered, and their sciences returned to more enlightened minds.

Bang.

Large dents covered the steel, not quite obliterating the lines the metal had once possessed. Cawl reconstructed it mentally, seeing again the sleek curves and indented embellishment. Their form suggested the sheet had been part of a shell. Cawl often reconstructed a machine in his mind to fit the metal. Today, he imagined a fast ground car, powerful, fusing science with a sculptor's art. A fine machine of a kind rare in those days, a public display of wealth not fit for the new world the Emperor was building. He wondered what prince of what era had owned the machine the steel had covered, and if he had ever thought what would happen to it when he was gone, or whether he preferred never to dwell on its

end, in case he considered his own death.

'You are lost in thought.'

The voice made him start. He turned too swiftly.

Unbearable light smote his eyes.

Cawl woke from one memory to another.

Circa 10,000 years ago

Ryza heaved with refugees from all corners of the Imperium. As a forge world, it existed forever on the cusp of starvation. All the high technologies it guarded would not save it if the flow of food and water from elsewhere ever stopped. The acolytes of the Machine-God prided themselves on their knowledge. They all knew the never-mentioned truth that forge worlds were hostages to fortune.

Friedisch and Cawl pushed their way through the crowds. Tez-Lar's bulky presence helped most times, but the occasions when it did not were occurring more often. The districts they were assigned to assess were under the protein reclamation facilities of the Gamma-Kappa spill, the worst in the sector. People pushed at them, so tired and dehydrated they could do little other than wail. Their words were lost in the babble. Incomprehensible accents hindered understanding, but the message was clear: water, water, give us water.

'There is no more water!' Cawl cried out over the pleas of the crowd. 'You have had your allotment for the day! Please, stand aside. We are here to conduct our census so you can be properly provisioned. That is why we are here. We are here to help you!'

'We are not the watermen! Stand back!' shouted Friedisch. 'Stand back! Can't you see we're trying to help?'

The people did not come any closer, but they did not retreat either. The road ahead was a crooked way between pipes plunging into the bowels of the plant. It was blocked.

Dozens of vacant, desperate people stared at them.

'I don't like this,' said Friedisch. His fingers danced around the holster of his laspistol.

'Leave it alone, for the sake of the three-in-one!' hissed Cawl. 'Do you want to start a riot?'

'But they're not moving,' whispered Friedisch.

'They're not bludgeoning us to death yet either,' said Cawl.

Tez-Lar stood in front them, his cyborg bulk intimidating those who might dare

to harm the tech-priests. Yet every day they came closer. Every day the threat of unrest rose. It was certain. Cawl saw the situation as a numerical set, proceeding by predictable steps to a simple conclusion.

'Give us your water. Give us all of it.'

The crowd's noise dropped off immediately and the people drew back in fear, not of Cawl, Friedisch and Tez-Lar, but of the score of men who encircled the three. They were filthy as all the rest, but significantly better fed, and not exhibiting the signs of water-fever that touched the faces of all the others.

A space opened around Cawl's group as the crowd withdrew, leaving the men behind like beach rocks revealed by the tide.

'Oh no,' whispered Friedisch. He drew his laspistol, the rasp of metal on poly-leather loud in the quiet. Cawl already had his volkite up and charging.

Their leader stepped forwards. He wore the battered uniform of an extinct Imperial Army regiment. The cloth was grimy, as if dragged through oil. On his lapel service medals glinted. They were the only clean thing about him. His hair was a filthy fuzz around his head, his beard matted. Eyes bright as his medals glared from the hair and dirt, their gaze sharpened by deprivation. He carried a makeshift bludgeon torn from a machine, and a battered autopistol. Eight of the others carried similar ranged weapons. All of them had clubs.

<We don't stand a chance,> Friedisch canted to Cawl's implants. <I've summoned help.>

'We are on the business of the Technarchy of Ryza and the Holy Synod,' said Cawl. 'Stand aside, or nobody will get their rations tomorrow.'

'I said,' said the man, 'hand over your water.'

'We do not have any,' said Cawl. 'We are conducting a census to ensure that all refugees in this sector are adequately provisioned.' He raised his voice to speak to the crowd. 'If you do not aid us, there will be no water!'

'They won't help you,' said the man. 'They're scared of us.' He stepped forwards, and pointed at Cawl with his maul. 'That's your fault. I didn't want to be a criminal. You've made us like this. We are robbers only to survive. I fought in the war to protect people like this! I fought to protect the Imperium!' he said. 'Now look at me, worse than Horus himself, stealing water from babies, because you cog worshipping bastards care nothing for men. I've had enough. Give us water. Give us food.'

'We are here to help,' said Cawl sympathetically. 'I understand. I do.'

'I doubt that, all you cogs are the same,' said the man. He stared with undisguised hatred at Cawl's input ports, at Friedisch's electric eye, at Tez-Lar

and the red robes they all wore. ‘You don’t care about us because we’re people and not machines. This is your last chance,’ said the man.

‘Please,’ said Cawl. ‘Stand aside. We have nothing to give you.’

‘And I’ve got nothing to lose,’ said the man.

The numbers that govern the smooth working of the Machine-God’s Magnum Opus finished their whirring progress. The universe rolled onto a new track. Violence was the proof of the equation.

‘Kill them!’ the man shouted.

Before the words had died on the air, the veteran was dead, speared by a searing thermal beam from Cawl’s pistol that burned out his organs from the inside. Friedisch killed another. Tez-Lar stepped in front of a third man and crushed his throat in an industrial claw.

The tech-priests’ show of force did no good whatsoever.

The crowd let out a collective moan. Their individuality was subsumed by herd instinct. Cawl could feel conscious thought slipping from them. It was like watching a man die.

The crowd surged forwards. Cawl got off a couple more shots, a death on the end of each, but he was no longer firing at individuals, but a beast of many parts, and it did not care for the loss of such tiny limbs.

A flurry of stinking bodies filled his senses. The crowd pulled him down, part-divesting him of his robes. Starvation’s frailty had them all, and their blows were feather light. Dirty fingernails scraped at his memcore plug, scratching his scalp.

They’ll kill me simply by weight, he thought, crushing the air from my lungs until I suffocate.

Friedisch screamed. Tez-Lar let out a terminal burble from his voxmitter as he died his second death.

This was it then, the end of Belisarius Cawl.

Something shifted in his head. Things got mixed up.

There was a bridge over a dry stream where a sheet of metal banged in the wind. A river of light ran arrow straight all the way to a horizon crowded with gargantuan machines, and a voice asked:

‘What is the final warning of the Sixteen Universal Laws?’

A kindly face that was never the same with sad brown eyes that always were. Then the primarch, poor Roboute Guilliman, stood over him, ten thousand years ago and not so long ago, always serious, always worried, no joy in his life of duty.

‘Are you sure this is the only way?’ Roboute Guilliman said in despair. ‘Are

you sure?'

The whooping snap of energy weapons crashed over the shouts of the crowd. A machine blared out an alarm. The weight fell off him. A cybernetic hand reached in and pulled him free from a pile of bodies. Each corpse had a precision wound smoking in its back.

A visibly shaking Friedisch was bracketed by heavily augmented warriors. Dozens of dead refugees lay around the pipes. A fire burned away to the right. People were running in all directions.

'They came, Belisarius! They came!' said Friedisch. 'Thanks be to the prime architect!'

Cawl took in the troops' garb. They looked like Cult Mechanicus skitarii, but he was certain they were not. If they were, they hailed from some other place than Ryza, for their armour was a soft, pearly white, and their cloaks grey and black.

'Are you Belisarius Cawl?' A female voice addressed him from beneath one of the helms. An unaugmented hand reached up to detach it, revealing an unaugmented face.

'Who wishes to know?' he said. The scratches on his scalp stung.

'Belisarius Cawl, adept grade, multiple disciplines, borderline heretic by the reckoning of Mars?'

'That's very flattering, but you haven't answered my question.'

'You answer mine or I'll leave you here,' she said. She wasn't very friendly. 'Once we're gone, the probability of you leaving this place alive will be significantly less.'

He couldn't argue with that.

'I am Belisarius Cawl,' he confirmed.

She nodded; she had known all along. 'Then come with me.'

The ground shook. Neither the woman nor any of her henchmen nor Friedisch seemed to notice, though Cawl was so unbalanced his arms wheeled.

'Cawl,' Friedisch's voice said, though Friedisch did not speak. 'My lord Cawl. It is happening again.'

Now

'My lord.'

Cawl's visual sensors came back on with a flicker of green light. Data streamed across the inner spaces of his consciousness.

Transit. Tank. Prime seven class energy cage transport. Destination Mount

Pharos. Temporary mental disassociation detected. Cause unknown. Speed five miles an hour. Exterior temperature 97 grades. Angulation of travel nine degrees from horizontal. Direction, fourteen degrees north, relative to planetary magnetic pole.

'My lord? Are you in good function?' said not-Friedisch.

Cawl peered out into the outside world.

'Friedisch?' He realised it was not Friedisch but someone furnished with a facsimile of Friedisch's voice, a copy, and therefore imperfect.

'Negative. I am designated Qvo-87, my lord,' said Qvo-87.

Cawl moved a little out of his transit cradle. Something disconnected from his torso and bleeped urgently. He looked through to the driver's compartment, where Alpha Primus doggedly piloted the machine up the low hills of the mountain's skirt. Mount Pharos' foothills were brief indeed, three undulations, then came soaring sides of bare grey rock. Four other tanks moved in their convoy: two Repulsors of the Adeptus Astartes, and last an ancient Land Raider and a Razorback of the Scythes of the Emperor.

Cawl had known Arkhan Land. Land was never happy with the name given his tank.

A fragment of memory from a distant time popped into his head.

'*Land's* Raider!' Arkhan Land said angrily, that strange simian he'd cooked up in a jar jigging about on his shoulder. '*Land's* Raider!'

Felix insisted his men go first. The first tank in the column had already passed the castellum and headed on to the fortress-monastery approach. Felix's Repulsor, its cobalt blue livery liberally smirched with Sotha's grave dust, was in the process of rounding the side of the ruined fort and disappearing out of view.

'Report,' said Cawl.

The castellum overlooked the city and guarded the road to the summit. Its walls were shattered. Craters in the rockcrete showed the effects of acid attack, widened by later digestion processes. Other damage was kinetic, but as always when the tyranids attacked, the projectiles had been reabsorbed during the digestion process. He wondered why the xenos did not take more inert minerals when they stripped a world. Many of them had sophisticated metallic structures in their bodies, and myriad base elements went into their breeding, yet the ferrocrete portions of the castellum, with their loads of refined ironides, were barely nibbled.

He thought this quickly, faster than the time it took Qvo-87 to answer. He thought many other things at the same time. Cawl was always thinking.

‘We have had a further tremor event,’ said Qvo-87.

‘When?’ Cawl forced himself to focus, pushing his musings on tyranid absorption priorities onto a subsidiary consciousness.

‘Concluded three seconds ago, when I woke you. Four point seven seconds in duration. The longest since we arrived.’

Cawl checked his internal chronometer.

‘Simultaneous commencement and the exact duration of the time I was influenced, as before,’ said Cawl. ‘Interesting. Subjective duration of vision does not match the seismic event, yet the two are objectively matched.’

The tank jolted to the side. A wide fan of rubble that used to be the castellum’s northern tower blocked the road. Alpha Primus took it slowly. Rockcrete fragments scraped along the hull.

‘Logging incident. Third tremor since arrival. Third fugue event,’ said Qvo-87. A data-slate emerged from a slot in his side. An autoquill extended from the forefinger of a lesser limb, and he set the nib to the slate. ‘Thermal residue patterns and recent crystalline fracturing in the rock suggest crustal stressing concurrent with your first vision upon the *Zar Quaesitor* also.’

With eyes of every conceivable kind, Cawl looked past the castellum to the dead, grey mass of Mount Sotha.

‘Most troubling. Most troubling indeed. I had not expected this level of activity so soon.’

‘Hypothesis, archmagos dominus?’ asked Qvo-87. ‘For the record.’

‘The mechanism is waking, that much is evident,’ said Cawl. ‘The period of dormancy is over.’

‘I concur,’ said Qvo-87, though Cawl had no need for his servant’s agreement. Cawl was a genius a hundred times over, Qvo was a… He could barely voice it, even to himself.

Qvo was a very sophisticated *thing*.

‘I have been thinking of Friedisch a lot recently,’ he said abruptly.

Qvo-87 turned his head slowly to look at Cawl. He really was incredibly intelligent, but limited. There was no understanding of the emotional content of what Cawl was trying to say.

‘I thought you should know,’ said Cawl.

Qvo-87 gave him a patient look. ‘Hypothesis as to xenos machine-spirit reactivation. For the record.’ The quill nib scratched over the screen.

‘The Rift must have something to do with it, as observed elsewhere in similar installations,’ said Cawl, businesslike again. ‘Critical mass of reawakening was

reached some time ago in other dynastic territories, so I suspect destruction of Imperial presence on Sotha to be the catalyst here. Hypothesis – this device has been biding its time.'

'Initial actions of xenos machine-spirit,' said Qvo-87. 'For the record.'

'Hypothesis only.'

'Dictate away,' said Qvo-87.

'Self-repair,' said Cawl. 'Reestablishment of function. Reconstitution of machinery. Its ultimate goal is the reopening of the beacon and reestablishment of super-luminal network in Ultima Segmentum.'

'Hypothesis regarding visions experienced by Belisarius Cawl?'

Cawl drummed metal fingers on the inside of the hull.

'Either the Pharos is trying to communicate with me, or it is attempting an attack. Both options are disquieting. Neither are self-exclusionary. End hypothesis.'

Qvo-87 nodded, because Cawl had built him to emulate human behaviours, before stowing away his data-slate.

Alpha Primus yanked his driving sticks. The tank negotiated the rubble, and moved on up the road to the Emperor's Watch.

CHAPTER SEVEN

THOSE LEFT BEHIND

Contra-grav pulsed with headachey strength, the backwash too weak to tremble the metal but strong enough to ripple the humours of the human body. Felix felt the throb of the engine in his eyes, in his teeth, and in his bowels. The Repulsor carried several banks of heavy anti-gravitic engines. Being huge and massively armoured it required far more than most other levitating vehicles, and its displaced mass ironed flat whatever it travelled over. Light craft held aloft on such fields skimmed gracefully. They almost flew. A Repulsor tank was neither light nor graceful, and it growled with the machine-spirit's ill temper as it laboured up the road to the fortress-monastery of the Scythes of the Emperor.

The rear thruster array roared loudly. The amount of power required to move such heft forwards was sufficient to propel a void fighter, yet the tank moved slowly and the engines were running hot. Cooling systems thrummed at the rear of the seating area. Heat beat at the occupants of the transit bay: Felix and half of his bodyguard.

'This way is almost too steep for the tank,' said Daelus. As was his role as technological liaison in the Chosen, he piloted Felix's transport like he piloted the Overlord. Troncus drove the lead tank, where Cominus rode ahead with the others, insisting that Felix ride in the second vehicle in the column. On the numerous screens of the tank, Felix watched the progress of the group. Veteran Brother Austen manned the turret of Cominus' Repulsor. His helmet flashed in the sun as he panned the guns back and forth across the road.

Felix ran multiple scans on their surroundings. The mountain resisted all attempts to penetrate its stone deeply. The exact scannable distance varied from a

dozen to over fifty yards, but whatever the distance, in each case the scans suddenly stopped, leaving a sinister blankness on the screens. The kind of scan did not matter. Every sort of pass resulted in the same. Sonar was as affected as neutron pulses. The other three Primaris Marines watched Felix work, offering help where they could, except Cadmus, who stared fixedly at the exterior view, and became more pensive the closer they came to the monastery gates.

'There is nothing beyond this point,' said Felix, pointing at the screen. 'I cannot see within the mountain.'

'That's impossible,' said Yansar, his gravelly voice distinctive even through the voxmitter.

'A phrase we're hearing too often,' said Diamedes.

'What do you sense, brother?' Felix asked Gathein.

The Epistolary's fingers flexed around his force stave. 'Nothing,' he said. 'I see the same as the machines.'

'A material that is impervious to all scans, material and immaterial,' said Felix. 'I have encountered this before.'

'Blackstone,' said Gathein. 'Nothing else has these properties. Cawl speaks of awakening structures.'

'Necrons then,' said Diamedes. He was of the Silver Skulls, and the jewels set into his armour twinkled in the tank's dim interior light. He kicked the bench plinth opposite him. 'Necrons hide beneath every damn rock we look under these days.'

'Halt,' Cominus voxed from the lead tank. *'Obstruction ahead.'*

The Chosen readied themselves for a fight. Helms were replaced and weapons retrieved from their racks. They moved with a choreography honed by long practice, and despite the close confines they were ready in moments.

The tank coasted to a stop. The road was broad enough to allow the Repulsors to sit side by side, though only just; doing so left no space for the passenger compartment doors to open, so Daelus brought the tank to a halt offset from and behind the lead vehicle, so both their turrets could cover the road.

Felix looked to the forward vid screen. Past the solid block of Cominus' transport, the way was closed by rubble. The remains of a gatehouse clung to the mountain rock face. Straight lines of masonry welded to the stone described lost rooms. The walls had been yards thick. It was not sufficient to stop the Kraken. The rest of the gatehouse was heaped on the road it had guarded.

'Gathein, Cadmus, Yansar, with me. Diamedes, into the turret. Daelus, hold position,' Felix said.

Weapons systems hummed as power was diverted from the reactor. Ready lights blinked on control banks. The machine-spirits awoke hungry for combat. Diamedes clambered upwards, his backpack automatically plucked from his back by robotic arms and power feeds snaking out from below the turret ring to plug him directly into the tank.

Alarms whooped to warn of atmospheric purge. The air in the compartment was sucked up and packed away into pressurised cylinders. Doors to the left and right clanged down, forming ramps that gave slightly as the Space Marines disembarked. The landscape outside was noiseless, cold and drear, a worn pict of a real place. Waves of contra-grav buffeted Felix's legs from the idling tank. His rad sensors crackled under a rain of displaced subatomic particles.

The Primaris Marines spread out, weapons up.

'Damn fine place for an ambush,' Diamedes voxed. He angled his onslaught gatling cannon up on the pintle, and commanded the machine-spirit to rotate the turret slowly towards the mountain face. The road had been cut into the mountain at sharp angles. Thousands of years of erosion had worn at the basalt facing, but the cliff remained sheer.

Cawl's odd transport was coming to a halt behind, Thracian's tanks close after.

The gatehouse had come down in massive cubes bristling with hyper-dense carbon rebar. Felix took a few steps forwards.

Cominus was already out, the warriors with him covering the blockage as Tullio knelt at the base of the rubble, the auspex built into his right forearm playing a fan of light over the lumps of rockcrete.

Felix came to a halt beside the veteran sergeant. 'We can't go over it.'

'No,' said Cominus. 'It's a collection of tank traps an enginseer would be proud of.'

'I have something. Voids in the mass. Organic matter.' Tullio pointed. 'Over there.'

Ixen moved to the place indicated, his transhuman physiology enabling him to heave aside a huge chunk of rockcrete as if it were packing material. He poked at the ground with his foot.

'Tyranid,' he said, aiming his bolter into the hole.

A monstrous head lolled out of the rubble. A symbiotic sub-form was clamped around its shoulders and face. Both its skin and that of its host creature were raw with rad burns.

'Dead,' said Ixen.

'That one is,' said Tullio. He flipped his auspex panel closed and aimed his bolt

rifle up. Fragments of rockcrete were slipping down the rubble heap, grains, gravel, rocks then boulders bouncing by in avalanche. ‘That one isn’t.’

The Space Marines opened fire at the beast as it heaved its way from the pile. Felix didn’t recognise the type, though he’d studied the xenoforms threatening his domain with his usual diligence. It was hexapedal, like all tyranids, and resembled their common heavy assault beasts, though it was smaller and slighter. Its four arms all ended in bonded melee symbiotes, no ranged weapons, while its spore chimneys were vestigial with no visible openings. This one also sported a symbiote. The sub-creature consisted mostly of sacs that inflated and deflated in sequence, with thick gristly tubes leading into the host’s breathing spiracles.

It emerged into a storm of bolt rifle fire. The tanks opened up, piercing its body with coherent light and a hail of bullets. Diamedes played gatling fire over the symbiotic creature breathing for the attack beast, shredding the delicate body. Yet the creature did not fall, but came on, clawed hooves pushing fans of broken tower before it. Its own weight hindered it in the loose material, and it sank up to its hocks.

The tanks bristled with armament, the pair of them outfitted with differing payloads that granted a mixed anti-armour and anti-infantry capability. Their crew and their machine-spirits made liberal use of both types, hammering the beast with bullet and blast.

A double lascannon shot drilled the creature through the head. It fell with a scream vented silently into the void.

‘Not so fearsome,’ said Ixen. He advanced on it, gun up. He put a bolt-round through its eye to be sure.

‘Are there any more in the rubble?’ Cominus asked.

‘Negative,’ said Tullio, consulting his auspex again. ‘All clear.’

‘Epistolary?’

‘I can sense nothing,’ said Gathein.

Felix paced forwards to the beast. Its body was covered in sores.

‘Cawl’s beams did their work,’ he said, deliberately refraining from glancing back at the archmagos’ chariot.

Yansar played a medical scanner over the corpse. ‘Heavily irradiated,’ he acknowledged. ‘But it was alive. If there are any more buried deeper, then they will give us trouble.’

‘Get me a scan, see if there are any more further up,’ ordered Felix.

‘We can count on these things being scattered across the planet,’ said Thracian, only now joining them. ‘I have seen these rearguard organisms before. There

will be more of them, laid up in a hunting net around the world, though I do not think we are in enough numbers to trigger a summoning call.'

'The tyranids return?' asked Yansar.

'If sufficient biomass is present, they will,' said Thracian. 'These organisms are not the only risk. We must be wariest when we go within.' He pointed up the mountain.

'You are speaking of genestealers. They will almost certainly be present in the monastery,' said Felix.

'That is their standard behaviour post-predation,' said Thracian. 'You see this addition here?' Thracian bent low and lifted a leathery flap of skin, burst open now, on the breathing symbiote. 'It is an atmosphere recycler. Genestealers do not need air. They can survive for weeks without taking a breath when active, and for centuries in hibernation.'

'There is no trick that is beneath them. All xenos are worthy of our hatred,' said Ixen. 'But I am growing to hate these tyranids more than most.'

'Then you have an idea of how we feel,' said Thracian.

'Get digging. If we level the top off, we can get the tanks over,' said Felix. He voxed Daelus. 'Any more sign of active Chapter defences?'

'No, my lord,' said Daelus. *'We are out of the fire arc for orbital and anti-air weapons. I have no readings from the wall guns.'*

Felix nodded. 'Be on your guard. Regular scans. Regular attempts at datalink with Chapter assets. I would prefer not to arrive under fire.'

'This rubble pile is definitely clear, my lord,' said Tullio, and stood back. 'There's nothing alive within a mile of our position.'

'Then clear it,' said Felix. 'We delay too long.'

The Space Marines began hurling boulders over the edge of the sheer-sided mountain road.

'My lord,' Diamedes voxed. *'Company. Cawl's creature.'*

Alpha Primus emerged from Cawl's transport and strode towards the others. The uncoloured ceramite of his plain armour was as grey as the landscape. His helm, though perfectly maintained, somehow conveyed the ugliness of his butchered face.

'Stand aside,' he said. 'The archmagos has commanded that I deal with this obstruction.'

'On your own?' said Tullio in disbelief. 'Let us help you dig, brother.'

'I have no brothers,' said Alpha Primus. 'I am unique, the first of our kind, and I do not need to dig. Stand aside.'

The warriors on the pile paused and looked to their tetrarch.

'Move back,' said Felix. 'Let him.'

'Aye, and the quicker he fails the quicker we can dig our way through,' voxed Diamedes. He did nothing to blunt his disdain for Cawl's servant. The rest felt the same way, Felix was sure. Primus made his skin crawl.

Alpha Primus set himself before the rubble, and placed his feet apart. 'Back,' he said. 'Further. I have no wish to harm you.'

With shared looks the Primaris Marines retreated to their vehicles. Thracian's men followed. Gathein glanced back. As Alpha Primus raised his hand, fingers spread, his force-stave flared with counter-sorcery.

'Emperor's bones,' said the Epistolary. 'He's a–'

Psionic power burst from Primus, buffeting them all, and making the hover tanks bob about. The ground cracked around his feet with webs of purple light. From his hand emanated a lash of fire the same colour, and where it touched the rockcrete it exploded upwards and outwards, spun about in the air and whirled away over the precipice. The great bulk of the blockage heaved, as if a flat board had been placed underneath and lifted. A glowing bubble through which the way ahead was clearly visible pushed the rubble up and sideways. Primus clenched his fist; the bubble exploded outwards, and the rubble tumbled off the road and down the side of the mountain.

His job done, Primus turned back to the group, his eye lenses shining with dying power, and walked towards Cawl's transport.

Gathein voxed him as he passed. 'Why didn't I sense your power?' he said.

Primus kept his gaze ahead and his stride unbroken.

'The Emperor gave the Space Marines many gifts,' said Alpha Primus leadenly. 'I was given more than most.'

The taskforce returned to their vehicles, and continued their ascent.

They passed upwards with no further challenge. Several more gatehouses straddled the road, but all were intact, silent, only their gates destroyed or withdrawn. Twice the column was obliged to stop where wrecked armour blocked the way, but each time Thracian gave his consent for the tanks to be pushed off the mountain to speed their progress. Felix made note of this haste. To Space Marines all wargear was sacred, and hard to replace.

'Surely Cawl's gift to his Chapter was not so great that Thracian can afford to abandon his relics?' he asked Daelus via a private channel.

'He is in a hurry to get to his monastery,' said Daelus. 'That is for sure. There

must be objects of greater worth there. They were forced to leave in haste.'

'Perhaps,' said Felix. He was not convinced. Cadmus' words returned to him.

'They are hiding something.'

He watched a Predator fall from the lip of the road and fly into pieces on the rocks below.

Near the summit the road passed through a tunnel bored through the mountain stone. The outer wall had been carved with fine windows looking out over Sothopolis far below. All the armourglass was broken, and many of the pillars between. Acid burns etched mutilating lines across the faces of statues. On the other side of the road a row of sentry guns dangled slackly in their mounts. But it was the inner surface of the tunnel, to the right of the column and beneath the guns, that drew Felix's attention.

Through the basalt that clothed the mountain a second kind of rock emerged. A thread-fine fault to begin with, it soon grew wider, showing stone that was a green so deep it appeared black in the shadows, and only revealed a hint of its true colour where the sun hit it. It was this substance that the scans would not penetrate.

'Blackstone,' said Felix.

The Repulsor thumped past a cluster of entrances into the mountain. The tallest was an oval sixty feet tall, surrounded by dozens of others of much smaller scale, all of them blocked by age-worn ferrocrete. After these the amount of black rock visible increased in proportion to the basalt, until it walled off the whole of the tunnel side.

The tank's sensorium went dead.

Felix adjusted his instruments. An insistent, pulsed crackling dogged the vox.

'Thracian? Thracian?' Felix voxed. Getting no reply he shouted through to Daelus. 'Vox problems – diagnose, Techmarine.' His voice was unsteady. The suit voxmitter, too, was malfunctioning.

'All of them are out, tetrarch. Outside interference.'

'Cawl's radiation?'

'Negative,' Daelus said back.

'It is coming from the mountain,' said Gathein.

The tank emerged out of the tunnel and into the open. The blackstone pushed its way back under the mountain's skin. The sensorium's instruments flickered and came back on line.

'Chapter Master Thracian, respond,' Felix tried again.

Thracian's response was immediate and clear. *'Tetrarch.'*

‘I experienced a loss of communications. Is this a usual occurrence here?’

Thracian did not respond immediately.

‘No,’ he said finally.

The tanks rounded the final corner on the road. Ahead, protected by an outlying bailey, were the great gates of the fortress-monastery. Though the outer walls and gate blocked some of the view, the main gates were one hundred and fifty feet high, and visible from the road. They tapered gracefully to a gothic arch, the surround carved in the likeness of spreading foliage. It seemed the gates had borne a relief of peasant work, men and women cutting back vegetation with scythes, but more than that was impossible to see. Though cast from high grade adamantium, the gates were smashed, one bent almost in two by an inconceivable blow, the other buckled. Still there were no corpses, no dead, only inorganic materials left behind.

‘Slow down,’ said Felix. The eeriness of the mountain put him on guard. ‘Approach at three quarters speed. Weapons ready.’

The sun was heading off to the west, and falling behind the fortress-monastery’s lower reaches. The uppermost tower atop the mountain bathed in golden light as it had every evening since the time the Emperor had walked and breathed. The defences cast long, black shadows that crept out to meet the convoy. The outer gatehouse’s drum towers embraced them in cool dark. These lesser gates were twisted scraps, and the gateway had been blocked with barricades. It appeared they had been held for a while after the first breach. With no dead, judging the course of the battle was difficult. How very strange to see a battlefield like that, still appearing fresh, preserved by the vacuum, scattered with debris and shell casings, but devoid of combatants. It was a model landscape before the principal actors had been added.

Cominus’ tank shunted aside the remnants of the barricades. These had been overrun and torn down at some point, and presented little obstacle to the hover tanks. What was left was pounded flat by their gravity fields as they floated through.

‘Halt!’ voxed Cominus.

The tank’s square body blocked Felix’s view into the bailey. ‘There are no threat indicators.’

‘No enemy,’ said Cominus, sending a pict-feed of what lay ahead to Felix. *‘We are entering the presence of the honoured dead.’*

‘You are right to call halt. Go forwards. Slowly, Daelus,’ ordered Felix.

‘I have a higher regard for technology than Thracian,’ Daelus said, for once

without levity. ‘I will be careful.’

Wargear was all that was left. Empty suits of power armour lay around the bailey, most concentrated before the main gate. The bodies inside had been taken by the Kraken, and though some suits had been disarticulated during consumption, others lay as they had fallen, empty gauntlets wrapped around gun grips and swords, their sagging bodygloves holding battleplate together in semblance of life.

‘Honour the battle gear of the dead,’ intoned Daelus. ‘Honour the memory of those left behind.’

‘Bring us to a halt, Daelus,’ said Felix. ‘Disturb nothing. We must allow Thracian to retrieve the gear of the fallen, if he so wishes.’

Daelus manoeuvred the tank to a gentle stop, and though the pulsed waves of the grav generators rocked a few of the abandoned war suits, not one piece was damaged.

‘Column halt,’ Felix voxed the others. ‘Chapter Master, I offer my regret and respect.’ To his own men he said, ‘I am venturing outside. Ixen and Yansar, follow me.’

‘There are no detected threat, my lord,’ said Daelus.

‘You know what to do should any emerge,’ said Felix. ‘Rear ramp.’

He stood as the ramp descended. Before he set out, Cominus voxed him.

‘Stay within. Earthquake. A big one.’

The tank’s contra-gravity field cushioned it from the effects of the tremor, but outside the empty armour suits jiggled where they lay, and loose material fell from damaged buildings.

‘The mountain is unstable,’ said Daelus. ‘We should consider putting our aerial assets on alert for evacuation as soon as we have disabled the defence matrix.’

Felix wasn’t listening. He couldn’t hear. By the time the tremor hit its peak, he was somewhere else entirely.

CHAPTER EIGHT

AN IRREFUSABLE OFFER

Circa 6,500 years ago

Strange music played an intricate mathematical progression of mellow strings.

Felix screamed as his body was cut open. There was little pain. Cawl was no sadist, but certain of the procedures demanded that his subjects remain conscious, and the smell of Felix's own burning flesh as the las-scalpels sliced it terrified him. The lack of human company made it worse. He was on his own, surrounded by unfeeling machines that moved around him on their predetermined paths of torment, incapable of hearing his terror or of feeling mercy. Mechanical spider limbs bearing blades and laser cutters and little pots of quivering organic jellies blurred past. Today, they were cutting into his skull. His head was pinned into place and he could not move. He felt the rubber tips of ruthless fingers peel back his scalp, heard the whining screech of blade biting bone, felt the soft cup suck onto his cranium and remove the top of his skull as if it were the lid to a jar.

Other machines put things in there. They poked his brain. Strange colours bled across his vision. Phantom smells teased him. He burst into song through his tears as the seat of his soul was prodded, tugged and tested. And it went on, and on and on. There were hundreds of other youths undergoing the same procedures. He could hear them outside his sealed, sterile tube. Hundreds of other boys who were not really boys any more, but hormone bulked warrior-things halfway to maturity. Many of them screamed and cried. Felix need not have been ashamed of his fear.

'Integration of stage five at ninety-seven per cent. Primaris subject 10-079-983 operating within optimal parameters.'

A cool counterseptic mist squirted over his exposed brain.

'Please, please let me go,' he pleaded.

Bang.

A soft bump as his skullcap kissed his lower cranium. The whining busyness of a bone welder moved around his head. Hot bone smell made him want to sneeze. The thought of that panicked him. He envisioned his brain shaken loose.

'Please,' he whimpered, as his shaved scalp was tucked back into place and another arm bearing spools of thread and a jabbing needle stitched it tight.

A cold nozzle pressed into the crook of his clamped-down arm and hissed.

'Please,' he said. He was falling asleep.

'Be brave, my little warriors,' said the monster's voice over the music. *'I offer you something no other shall have. Power to serve humanity as no others have served. In service to mankind there is glory.'*

'But I don't…' Felix slurred. 'But I don't want power…'

Bang!

'And that is why you shall have it,' said the monster, close by his ear.

Blackness, then:

'Where are we going?' said a voice that was the monster's, but not. 'Can you not at least tell me that?'

'No,' said another voice, a woman. 'Patience, please.'

Bang!

'But I don't…'

Circa 10,000 years ago

'…see why you can't explain just a little to us.'

The woman came to a standstill so suddenly her boots squeaked on the black marble floor, bringing Cawl and Friedisch to an ungraceful halt. Her soldiers stopped flawlessly. 'My information was correct. You are irritatingly garrulous.'

They were far away from the miserable districts housing the refugees, high up in Ryza's upper levels, where glorious ways clad in precious stone and chased with symbolic, golden circuitry lifted high ceilings on fine columns, and the priests of the Cult Mechanicus went about in dignified debate, guarded by cyborgs with burnished augmetics. Cawl took it all in his stride, behaving as if he belonged there. Friedisch cowered, so overawed by the high and mighty cult lords around him he shrank away when they so much as glanced at him.

Cawl smiled ingratiatingly.

‘Speech is the first mode of informational exchange. My entire life, my entire culture is concerned with the acquisition of information. You must forgive me a few questions,’ said Cawl.

The woman gave him a hard look. ‘The Cult Mechanicus,’ she shook her head. ‘The Emperor should never have thrown in His lot with your kind. You are anathema to the Imperial Truth. Gods. Worship of knowledge. Insanity.’

She resumed walking.

‘Without our knowledge none of your warriors’ enhancements would be possible!’ said Cawl. He waved his hand at the woman’s guards. ‘Our veneration of the Machine-God’s truths has preserved His gifts.’

She stopped again.

‘Science made my warriors,’ she said. ‘Not superstition. Not praying to a non-existent god. Not singing to anything. I am a scientist. You are a witch doctor.’

She began walking again, faster this time, so that Cawl and Friedisch were forced into a trot to keep up with her.

‘Then we are of one mind, surely,’ said Cawl. ‘You and I are both questers for the truth.’

‘We are not,’ she said. ‘I pursue the truth. You follow a religion. There is no gulf wider than that between our opinions in all the universe.’

‘I think you are wrong,’ said Cawl, who was never one to let a good debate die. ‘Faith in rationalism is still faith.’

‘I think you’re a threat to the Imperium,’ she said. ‘There has never been and never will be a true religion, except that followed by the Great Enemy, and that is not only evil to the root, it is predicated on a billion lies.’ She didn’t address them, but shouted forwards, as if she couldn’t even bring herself to look at the tech-priests. ‘Yet we rationalists dwindle, while your kind prospers. The inclusion of the Adeptus Mechanicus on the Council of Terra is the death knell for reason. So you enjoy your moral superiority all you want in the coming years,’ she said. ‘I want you to remember my words, because my opinion will trouble you for all time.’

She turned down a side corridor, smaller than the major way they had been following, and ablaze with the light of knowledge conveyed down optic datapipes embedded in the walls.

‘Why?’ said Cawl.

‘Because I believe you know that it is true.’

They arrived at a golden door twice the height of a man, guarded by cyborg warriors almost as tall.

‘Why have you brought us here to the uppermost sky levels, if you hate us so much?’

‘I have been ordered to,’ she said. ‘I am doing my job.’

She stood still while scans from the heavy combat servitors ran down her body from top to toe.

‘It’s not me that wants you,’ she said. ‘If it were my decision, we would never have come here. The Lord Geneticist, Director Ezekiel Sedayne, wishes to meet you.’

Cawl was surprised. ‘I know that name!’ he said. ‘Ezekiel Sedayne. Is he here on Ryza?’

‘You may enter, Altrix Herminia,’ the servitors boomed in unison.

‘He is not,’ said the Altrix. The doors opened onto a hangar housing a small, sleek ground-to-orbit transfer shuttle. An atmospheric shield shone over the entrance. They were so high up in the Ryzan cityscape that the smoggy brown of the atmosphere turned to black at the top of the view, and the steel-skinned planet curved away below into petrochemical obscurity. ‘He is on Terra, and he wishes to see you there.’

‘Terra?’ said Friedisch. ‘We’re going to Terra?’

‘Not you, just him,’ said the Altrix. ‘You’re staying here.’

Something in the hangar made a hollow bang.

‘Hang on just one moment,’ said Cawl, holding up a finger. He gave the Altrix his most winning smile. ‘I’m not going anywhere without Friedisch. If this Director Sedayne wants to see me, Friedisch comes too.’

Bang.

‘What is that noise?’ said Friedisch.

Altrix Herminia sighed in annoyance. ‘Very well. But I warn you that you have very little room to bargain. Do not use up my good graces at once. When we arrive at Terra you may wish to save all the favours you can for your negotiations with Director Sedayne.’

‘Bargain?’ said Friedisch. ‘Negotiations? What is that banging?’ He peered round the door.

Bang.

‘Do stop that, Friedisch,’ said Cawl. ‘All that simpering. What bargain?’

‘The Lord Sedayne has an offer for you.’ She smiled unpleasantly. ‘I sincerely advise you not to reject it.’

Bang!

‘One of your servitors is malfunctioning,’ said Friedisch, pointing out a cyborg

repeatedly walking into the wall. ‘I can fix it.’

Bang! The metal body case thumped into the metal.

‘What if we elect to stay here?’ said Cawl, also ignoring Friedisch.

‘It’s a little too late for that.’ Her warriors spread out behind the priests, guns raised. ‘You’re coming with me, like it or not.’

BANG!

Circa 10,000 years ago

The metal hammered the boulder twice in succession.

Bang! Bang!

The cliffs reached up for slate grey heavens. The world was of dust and sand. There were signs everywhere that it was not always so. Erosive water patterns carved the stone into smooth undulations, so very different to the shapes cut by wind. Organic traces clung on, though long dead, dried-out roots and preserved rhizomes excavated by the careful archaeology of the breeze.

Bang. Bang. The wind was getting into its stride, lifting up the dust of a thousand dead civilisations, casting handfuls of grave gravel against stone, chipping it away grain by grain to the beat of the metallic drum, uncovering and recovering the mess of forty thousand years of human civilisation.

‘Did I disturb you?’ the man’s voice said.

The natural reaction was to turn and look. Cawl began the process, but he could not turn. The act should have been simplicity itself. All he had to do was move; a cascade of synaptic impulses racing from the brain, decided subconsciously before conscious decision, the id tricking the ego, that deception that enables all humans to be without being, activating the limbs, setting the body in motion, all without choice but with the illusion of choice.

Turn.

Simple.

But he did not turn.

Bang.

Bang. Bang.

Cawl bowed his head and dropped to his knee, facing away from the man. He did not like to kneel, he never had, being so tall it made him look ridiculous, but the being demanded it. Not the man Himself. He disliked bowing and scraping, but the essence of Him, His soul, was so potent you could feel the heat of it on your skin. That screamed out for respect.

He had no name, at least not one that He shared, but He called Himself the Emperor of Mankind. The gall to call oneself so seemed immense, until you met Him. Anyone who had ever met Him knew the title was no hollow conceit. It was not born of arrogance. It was simply apt.

'You may rise,' said the Emperor. 'You have no need to kneel. Knowledge should not kneel to power.' He smiled. His humour washed over Cawl in a warm, uplifting wave. 'It should be the other way around. Alas it is not always so, but we should try our best to treat each other with respect and make it true.'

'I could not have said it better myself,' said Cawl. He got to his feet. Still he did not look, but kept his eyes downcast. He had a fleeting sight of a brown-skinned hand. He looked away from it.

Bang. The metal cared nothing for the doings of men, no matter how mighty. It cared only for its feud with the rock. *Bang!*

Circa 100 years ago

Bang! Bang! Bang!

'Fall back! The outer gate is taken! Fall back to the walls!'

Thracian stood on the bastion walk abutting the main gatehouse, looking down into a courtyard where death reigned unopposed. An Icarus quad cannon chattered violently off to his right in front of the outermost tower of the main gate. Walls behind him rose to the sky, walls that should have been strong enough to hold back any enemy.

The men that built them had not accounted for the hive fleets.

A carnifex reared up in fury and took its death wound from a lascannon fired at point-blank range. The beast flung its club fists wide, and it flopped down with a crack of chitin on rockcrete. But its work was done. The barricades across the gateway were smashed aside, leaving the bailey unprotected. Two more carnifexes lumbered through the gate over their fallen broodmate. Massive talons stabbed at men. One of the beasts carried a biocannon whose ammunition sacs pulsed with its eagerness to fire. Its embedded eye roved over the banquet of targets. The carnifex raised the weapon, the sacs constricted, and a rush of hyper-acidic bile engulfed two Space Marines. The agony they endured as it ate through their soft seals and into their bodies was enough to make the Emperor's chosen scream.

All along the bailey wall, Thracian's warriors were embattled. Creatures bounded up the dead piled at the foot of the fortifications, using them as ramps

to launch themselves at the defenders. They did not care for their own survival. Most were blown apart, but for every hundred that cast themselves to certain death, one got through, and the horde numbered in the millions.

There were hundreds of thousands of winged tyranids, too many to count, so many they filled the sky with an endless blur of crimson and cream. They shrieked as they flew, as if they were in pain, a harsh chorus that blended into one unending wail so overpowering it seemed it would outlast the universe. A constant barrage from the fortress' guns punched holes in the swarm, creating a rain of blood and flesh. The void shield flickered, pulsing sheets of purple light when bombardment cysts impacted it. Some thousands of the beasts were caught by displacement after-effects and ripped apart. Others flew so fast they tripped the shields themselves, but each hole torn into the living clouds closed instantly, swallowed as swiftly as stones in a lake.

A gargoyle dived at Thracian, vomiting bioplasma from its mouth while the weapon thing bonded to its forelimbs squirmed and spasmed, ejaculating a stream of acidic slime and frenzied beetles. The insects splattered harmlessly off Thracian's battleplate. The plasma nearly took off his head.

Thracian loosed a single bolt as he dived aside. His unerring aim hit the gargoyle square in the chest. The bolt exploded deep inside, obliterating the torso. The flock sped around the explosion. Detached leathery wings spiralled down and came apart like quicktree seeds in the autumn.

All along the battlement yellow-and-black-armoured Space Marines fired upwards, boltguns on full automatic shaking their arms. They crossed their fire with perfect discipline, covering each other when they had to reload. The rain of fluid and shattered flesh splattered men, fortifications and machines so all was slick with alien vitae. Bowed serfs ran along the ramparts, handing precious clips of bolt-rounds to their masters from the ammunition sleds they dragged. The sleds were getting lighter. The Chapter was running out of ammunition. At the start of the invasion, the armoury had brimmed with a brassy treasure of bullets. They had spent it quickly. If Thracian had had time to check the ammo counts for his men, he would have seen a bank of angry red digits blinking down to zero, but he had fewer seconds to spare than he had bolts.

Mortis runes clamoured for his attention. His eyes darted across the walls to seek their sources. Brother Bastable carried down by three gaunts. Brother Genuous obliterated by a plasma blast. Brother Frodan thrashing under a flock of winged rippers. Everywhere he turned to watch, another warrior died on the wall. His Apothecaries dashed from place to place, trying to salvage precious

geneseed. One was plucked off his feet and borne skywards. Another was forced back by the tide of the enemy from his brothers, whose writhing bodies were buried by swarms of tiny, toothed organisms.

The Scythes of the Emperor were dying quickly. ‘Get back to the main wall! Abandon the outer defences!’ he roared from his voxmitter, simultaneously sending the message by company-wide vox-link. He pulsed urgent runes of retreat and consolidation to his men. The fortress-monastery’s curtain wall soared above them, seemingly indomitable.

But it was not enough. It could never be enough.

The carnifexes at the gates came forwards under heavy fire. Their footsteps shook the ground. Like a bullet easing from a wound in a surgeon’s tweezers, the first entered the courtyard, then the second, and a flood of death came behind them, red as blood.

‘Back to the main walls!’

Doorways led into the main gatehouse towers from the bailey wall walk, offering a chance of continuing the fight, at least for a while. But his men were beleagured, and promised reinforcements from Sothopolis were slow in arriving.

‘Retreat!’ shouted Thracian.

Those Scythes on the left wall walk, that part built into the cliff-face of Mount Pharos’ peak, were cutting their way through the flocks of gargoyles and making for the armoured portal. Thracian covered his men, waving them through, counting off each one safely inside the walls with paternal relief as they passed him.

‘Move move move!’ he yelled, slapping his warriors on their pauldrons, firing at the beasts trying to end them. A million monsters came for them, landing on the walls. Though the aerial tyranids were helpless on the ground, they were driven by their overlords to hurl themselves onto the battlements, where they flopped and screeched and bit. Boots smashed crested heads. Guns ended hundreds of xenos lives. Under Thracian’s guidance, the left wall emptied of Space Marines.

On the right, the situation was hopeless. The walls there rose atop the cliffs, and looked down a sheer drop of thousands of feet onto the distant roofs of Sothopolis. The cliff was no protection. The enemy swarmed over the walls. The Scythes of the Emperor there were isolated from one another and split into twos or threes. Things with bony blades for limbs scrambled up the sheer face of the mountain and leapt over the crenellations. The warriors on the main wall were too preoccupied with the endless swarms to provide covering fire. Those on the

left were intent on their own escape. Out there on the right, Thracian's men were dying, close enough to see, too far away to help.

The mortis alarms rang on. The fingernail pictograph display of his company pulsed with amber and red lights as his squads were annihilated.

Something shook the fortress. Something from inside. A small tremor, significant nonetheless.

The guns cut out.

Thracian stared at the sky.

The void shield flickered and died. The swarms poured down unhindered.

'Command, the defence batteries have ceased firing,' said Thracian. For the first time in a hundred years, he felt panic. 'The shields are down! Advise immediate evacuation. Command, please advise!'

He moved to the side to avoid a plummeting gargoyle. It smashed wetly on the wall walk where he had been standing. He shot down three more with his bolt pistol.

Vox-comms from the citadel bleeped for his attention. A line of text on the helmplate spelled out Captain Mercyria's name.

'Main guns are off line. Down to lesser turrets. Get back from the walls. We will hold them at bay until the others return. Await reinforcement from the Sotharan defence force.'

'We need to evacuate! There are no reinforcements!' Thracian shouted. The hissing and shrieking of the tyranids was deafening despite the best efforts of his autosenses to dampen it. 'Thorcyra would not want this! We will be destroyed. We must abandon Sotha!'

'Thorcyra is not here. We must fall back. Hold the citadel until the rest of the Chapter responds to the recall.'

'This is suicide,' Thracian replied. 'Sotha is lost. Our defences are gone.'

'Our brothers are coming. The people of this world are coming. We cannot leave them to face this alone.'

'Our brothers are dead. The message went out too late. Sotharan ground forces have likely been annihilated. We condemn the Chapter to extinction if we remain. You are dooming us, brother.' Thracian shot four bolts one after the other, each one bringing a kill-sign clarion from his helm.

'I am in command,' Mercyria said. *'Retreat to the citadel.'*

Thracian swore. The sky swarm was thinning. He was too well versed in the tactics of the hive mind to see this as a reprieve.

The tyranids had seen the shields were gone.

‘Incoming spore drop!’ he bellowed. The last of his men that could were retreating through the tower portals. Seven were left isolated in a courtyard now crawling with xenos. He looked skywards. The gargoyles and shrikes were swirling around in a vortex that reached for the void, creating a clear space down to the ground. He saw the low bodies of huge hive ships in the sky, white and blue as a daytime moon in the sunlight. From them black shapes fell.

‘Anti-air wall guns, prioritise drop spores!’ he commanded. The last of his men was through the left door portal. It rotated shut, crushing a gargoyle scuttling after to paste. ‘Seal left wall gate!’ In the wall, mechanisms injected fast-setting ferrofoams into the door cavity. Thracian descended stairs into the courtyard, and ran towards the right portal to help the warriors retreating there. The huge reliefs of the main gates towered beside him. Two of his warriors ran to join him, taking it in turns to fire backwards and cover his advance. He raced to save another Scythe, only to see him transfixed on the sharp claws of a stooping shrike and carried off. Spores were hurtling towards the courtyard. The first was misjudged, slamming into the cliff, exploding fluids and dead gaunt strain attack beasts everywhere. The last of his men in the yard was sinking to his knees, moaning, his flesh melting under jets of hyper acid coming in from all sides.

Thracian took careful aim and put a bolt through his head.

Red outlines in his company schema chastened him. He had lost more than half his company.

More spores came down. They had no braking mechanisms, but hit the ground at full speed, bursting on impact. Tyranid warriors struggled free dripping in shock-gels, opening fire as soon as their guns were clear of the flaccid skins of the spores.

He ascended the right hand stairs to the door in the tower. He could see Sothopolis from there. Its streets were full of a churning mass of aliens.

A few Space Marine stragglers were limping through the door.

‘All squads, prepare to reform.’ Thracian looked up to the citadel that enwrapped the peak of Mount Sotha, and the ancient tower at the very centre. Black swarms of tyranids raged around it, swirling and diving in eerily synchronised murmurations. He paused a moment, caught on the knife blade of decision.

‘All company Thunderhawks, prepare for immediate evacuation. Company, retreat to main hangar. We are leaving. May the Emperor guard us all,’ he said.

He turned to go. Between him and the door, the Icarus quad cannon continued to shoot, its machine-spirit smoothly spinning the gun on its turntable to track

the creatures in the sky. It banged death in four-shot bursts.

Bang bang bang bang. Bang bang bang bang. Bang bang bang bang.

The sound thumped into Thracian's head. The battle's noise receded. He found he could not move. Slowly, he lowered his weapons. There was something behind him. Something vast and cold.

He turned slowly, and looked up into the dead black eyes of a shrike. It towered over him, the upper wing limbs furled, its biocannon throbbing with the expectation of release.

It did not fire; instead it leaned down, mouth hissing. Something looked out from behind its eyes that was immeasurably ancient and evil.

The thing there in the blackness of its soul touched his mind. It judged him. It pinned him in place. Thracian found he could not move, such was the potency of its regard.

A spray of yellow blood erupted from the thing's gut. Bolt explosions ripped it in half. The top fell away, the legs folded into themselves. The spell was broken.

Brother Scaedus of the third tactical squad marched forwards, the ammo feeds on his heavy bolter clunking as they drew fresh rounds from his backpack hopper, and grabbed Thracian's pauldron.

'My lord!' he said. 'Through the wall! Back behind the main defences!'

A warrior lacking his legs was dragged through the door by his brothers. Ceramite clanged from adamantium, blood leaked onto the ground.

'I…' said Thracian.

'You ordered us to retreat! Thracian!'

'I…'

Now

'Chapter Master,' said Felix.

Thracian blinked. He was on the wall. The quad cannon was silent at his back. Not then but now. The dead were gone. The tyranids absent. Cold stars burned in place of the stolen sky. The tetrarch stood in front of him with the Archmagos Dominus Cawl.

'What did you see?' Felix demanded urgently. 'What did you see?'

'I saw the end of the world,' said Thracian numbly.

'I saw the day I was made,' said Felix.

'I am not alone?'

'We all saw something,' said Felix. 'But you were entranced the longest. You

ran up here. None of us could stop you.'

'What about my warriors?'

'Safe, though all experienced visions.'

'There were stories,' Thracian began. 'Stories about the mountain…'

'Interesting,' said Cawl.

'You saw something? What did you see?' Thracian asked.

Belisarius Cawl smiled.

'Something almost as interesting as that.'

He pointed at the wall gun, and the bright silver threads connecting it to the black rock of the mountain.

CHAPTER NINE

BEACON

‘This metal here connects the gun to the xenos device in the mountain,’ said Cawl. His bionic fingers tapped all along the length of the connection while other limbs tasted it with sensing apparatus. The metal made an organic-looking ridge, peaked and forked like a tree root, that wrapped around the gun’s podium and penetrated it in several places. ‘You see here how the rock of the Pharos extrudes through the local basalt? Close enough to the surface to put out these tendrils to the wall gun.’ A small plasma torch emerged from an aperture on Cawl’s side and ignited with a soft hiss. The magos sectioned part of the silver metal. It bled green light, then flowed back together. ‘Fascinating,’ said Cawl.

‘You said there were stories,’ Felix said to Thracian.

The Chapter Master nodded. ‘Traditions. Myths. Talk of something under the mountain that our first Chapter Master, Oberdeii, was commanded to watch over. There are other stories, older still, of the mountain being alive. It was always assumed that they were fanciful, originating because of the strange properties of the rock. There were those who held it affected the human mind, and brought strange dreams. We thought nothing of it.’

‘There are many caves,’ said Felix. ‘Did your Chapter never investigate?’

‘The main apertures were filled with ferrocrete before the Chapter was founded. Inside the peak, only the uppermost tunnels are clear. They are where we interred our dead. It was our solemn duty to ensure no cave was ever opened, and to keep the people of Sotha from the mountain. These duties were part of our Chapter cult, never questioned, obediently upheld. But it went no further than that. This galaxy is full of wonders. What notice should we have paid to a

mountain of stoppered holes? It barred scans. What of it? I have seen many odder things during my service.'

'Have there been any visions noted in your records?'

'Nothing,' said Thracian. 'Not in nine thousand years.'

'Any tremors?'

'Nothing out of the ordinary. Sotha is tectonically active, we have earthquakes and occasional vulcanism, but nothing strange.'

Cawl was humming, peering closely at the metal link. Hair-fine probes drilled into it, and he fell silent a while.

Felix shook his head. He attempted readings from the mountain and the fortress. Static rattled his autosenses.

'This radiation is not helping,' said Felix.

Cawl straightened.

'It is not my doing. The mountain is waking. Your devices are blinded by the energies from within. It has linked to the wall guns. It is too weak to reactivate all of your weaponry. Indeed, much of it might well be incompatible with the xenos technology, but we can be sure that it will be attempting to bring the main orbital batteries online, as a first line of defence.' Cawl smiled behind the skin of energy holding in his air supply. 'I recommend we stop it.'

'How?' said Thracian. 'I am locked out. Can you get back into the Chapter noosphere? Perhaps we can deactivate the fortress weapons that way.'

'I will do what I can, but it might not be so simple.'

'You said first line of defence,' said Felix.

'I did. The mountain is waking, but has not yet woken. However, all activity of reanimated xenos facilities increases exponentially, especially where threat is involved. It will replace your guns with superior weaponry as soon as it can synthesise them.'

'You speak of xenos,' said Thracian. 'You say their ancient toys are more powerful than the full arsenal of an Adeptus Astartes Chapter? Is that not heresy against your religion?'

'Oh yes,' said Cawl cheerily. Multiple small limbs were performing sample gathering operations from the metal while he spoke to them, as if his own augmetics had lives and minds of their own. 'I've never been one to play by the rules. The builders of this mountain would find your guns extremely primitive. It may be heretical, but that does not stop it from being true.'

'Can we stop it?' said Felix. 'Sotha is dead, and that is a terrible shame, but worse than that is a wakening xenos world on the edge of Lord Guilliman's

domain.'

'Possibly,' said Cawl.

'Do you even want to stop it?' said Felix. 'It is my guess, archmagos, that you are here for more than a survey.'

'That is true,' said Cawl. 'I was not exaggerating when I said that this mountain could save us all, but in order for it to do so, I require it to wake up.'

'I cannot possibly allow–' said Felix, only to be interrupted again.

'Do you have any inkling what lies under our feet, Decimus?'

'Not much,' said Felix. 'But I am familiar with the work of the necrons. This metal, the green energy source. The blackstone. This is necron technology. A tomb world here would be a disaster. We must destroy it before it attains full reanimation.'

'There have never been any sign of necrons here!' said Thracian.

'The unlikeliest of places have turned out to be tomb worlds,' said Felix. 'This is my command, should this be the first signs of a tomb world awakening. We will return from the surface. We will destroy Mount Pharos.'

'Just a moment, Decimus,' said Cawl. 'Point the first, this is not a tomb world. Point the second, although this is a necron facility, ultimately it is the work of something older even than they,' said Cawl. 'Although the second point is me being merely pedantic, if I am completely honest.'

Felix lost his temper. 'You speak obtusely all the time, Cawl. You do it to demonstrate your superior intellect. In which case, I say bravo, we are all impressed, but I ask you to stop your games. Speak plainly. The fate of so much hangs on every passing minute.'

'Very well. Here is plain history, plainly delivered.' Cawl crossed some of his arms. His probes retreated back within his armoured torso. 'There was, long ago, a War in Heaven,' he said. 'So the aeldari call it, and though it happened long before mankind evolved, and before the aeldari dominated the stars, it remains prominent in their myths. From what I have pieced together from not-always-willing informants, the necrons won this war, but in doing so their power was broken. They went to sleep. As we are all painfully aware, they are now waking up. This mountain has stood here since their days of greatness. Consider its shape. Consider its coating of basalt. Over the aeons, it must have been submerged under water. It must have been part of the seabed, and covered by volcanic eruption. Throughout this world's geological history, it has moved, and shifted with the crawl of tectonic plates, yet it has always been adapting, always working.'

‘What is it?’ said Felix. ‘You should tell us that. Also plainly.’

‘It is a quantum empathic resonance beacon,’ said Cawl. ‘The necrons are masters of the physical realm. Their understanding of matter and the nature of the materium is so profound they can accomplish miracles that other races must rely upon the warp to achieve. I have come to believe that their ability to travel faster than light and communicate over interstellar distances must have been dependent on networks of beacons like Mount Pharos. Exactly how, I am not sure, but I suspect at the centre of every one is an entangled supermass of isolated particles perfectly in tune with others of their kind scattered across the galaxy. They are strange, these tangles, and powerful. Not only do they influence each other, allowing instant transmission of data, but they can also alter the sympathetic frequencies of other particles near to them, aligning them with other tangles, with targeted, predictable effects.’

‘Explain more clearly,’ said Felix.

‘This machine exploits the fundamental laws of physics to connect multiple parts of reality together, with no need of the warp. That is the simplest way I can express it,’ said Cawl.

‘I say again, we have seen nothing of this in nine thousand years,’ said Thracian.

‘You told Felix, just now, of the legends surrounding this mountain,’ said Cawl.

‘I did.’

‘You will admit that nine thousand years compared to sixty-five million years is nothing.’

‘Relatively, yes,’ said Thracian.

‘Do you know the stories of “mountain dreaming”?’ asked Cawl.

‘Legends. Myths. Old wives’ tales,’ said Thracian, though less surely.

‘Apparently not. You see, we have all just experienced it.’

‘The visions,’ said Felix. ‘They come from the mountain.’

‘They do. But they are not visions. They are direct interfaces with the past and, as you all no doubt experienced, with each other’s past. The realignment of one’s present physical state with its past state is exquisite genius at work, but this sharing of pasts astounds me.’ He laughed. ‘I, Belisarius Cawl, am astounded!’ He reached under his hood and pulled something from the back of his skull with a small click. Cawl displayed a small, black-green bead in his palm. ‘I fitted this before I arrived to allow me to communicate with the Pharos. Apparently you don’t need this to hear the mountain’s call. The machine is stronger than I thought. Perhaps it will help me interact more deeply with it.’ He replaced the

bead. ‘Maybe not.’

‘That’s dangerous,’ said Felix.

‘It is,’ said Cawl. ‘A lot of what I do is dangerous. I do have a reputation to uphold, Decimus, so forgive me.’

‘Has it been dormant all this time?’ said Felix.

‘Records in the Library of Ptolemy suggest much activity before an attack during the Great Heresy war by the Eighth Legion. Thereafter, its functionality was compromised.’

‘Was it ever restored?’

‘Far from it,’ said Cawl. ‘My brothers in those days gutted the mountain of all its machinery, so I thought.’ He paused. ‘It is conceivable I was among them.’

‘You are unsure,’ said Felix. ‘Archmagos, much of what you say is alarming. Not only the provenance of this beacon, but the cavalier way you approach it.’

‘I am not entirely reckless, I promise. If I was here before, I have no recollection. My memory is… patchy, to use the Ultramarian vernacular.’ He paused again. ‘That may change, if the mountain has its way.’

‘Explain further,’ demanded Felix.

‘This series of fugue events is characterised by the random accessing of memory fragments, or more precisely, realignment of our present consciousnesses with fragments of our past. In my case, all of these moments were lost to me. You might find it surprising, tetrarch, but there are many gaps in my memory. I have been mind-wiped by my enemies at least once, probably twice, and although I keep comprehensive data archives as backup to my internal memcores, and am indeed obliged to memory dump every five centuries owing to the limitations of storage within my physical frame, data corruption has taken its inevitable toll. Some of my stores are lost, some are destroyed, some have been stolen. Despite my best efforts to preserve my experiences, and my knowledge, I have failed. My existence is an incomplete book, even to me, its author.’ He took a modest bow.

‘My time aboard your ship is the only part of my life I do not clearly recall,’ said Felix. ‘I am seeing it again.’

‘No,’ said Cawl, ‘you are *living* it again. The machine is responsible.’

‘But why?’ said Thracian. ‘Why is it doing it?’

‘It could be a form of attack, exposing us to these lost parts of our lives.’ Cawl shrugged, which for him was a complicated motion involving multiple limbs. ‘*How* is more interesting to me. Some advanced form of field interaction, I suspect. As far as I am aware, the Pharos has no noosphere as my colleagues

would understand it, but they don't understand much. It is a machine and all machines can be accessed. The trick is knowing how.' He tapped the back of his head where the bead was seated, then gestured at the fortress-monastery gates. 'I know how to gain access. The knowledge was gained at cost, as much knowledge is, but the Pharos will find it is not the only one who can reach into the beings of others.'

'I do not like this,' said Felix. He stared at the silver web binding the wall gun to the alien device. 'I am unconvinced that we should be here.'

'Let me put my case. You must learn to understand how important this installation is. Although I surmise this beacon network to be crucial to the necrons' mastery of space, the number of nodes must have been relatively small, because I have found only one other similar to this in all my life.'

'That you can remember,' said Felix.

'Granted, although something that important, I make sure to record in multiple places,' said Cawl. 'The other one was destroyed utterly from the inside out. It was dead. This one is alive, and it is repairing itself. It may indeed have already repaired itself.' He looked up to the mountain peak. 'This is an opportunity of inestimable value.

'As miraculous as these beacons are, or were, the secrets of their technology is not my primary goal, though I stress any knowledge gathered would be most welcome. In each of these mountains must be a vast repository of wisdom. You are aware of blackstone, also known as noctolith.'

'This mountain is made of it,' said Felix.

'Indeed it is.'

'Then you want to quarry it?' said Thracian.

Cawl laughed. 'No no no, definitely not. I am not some backward data grubber from Metallica! I am the Prime Conduit of the Omnissiah!' He said this ironically, leaving the others unsure whether Cawl took the title bestowed upon him seriously. 'Noctolith is perhaps the greatest work of the necrons. During this war of theirs, the warp was used as a weapon by their enemies, the fathers of the aeldari. The necrons found a way to fight back against it.' Cawl swayed forwards. 'Since your father returned, Felix, the Adeptus Mechanicus has been waging its own war to gather and understand the substance, how to tune it to amplify the warp or shut it out altogether. Blackstone can save us. In this mountain I expect to find information as to exactly how, and detailed maps of the prior Necron Empire that will allow me to find more of it. Enough, perhaps, to stitch closed the Great Rift and banish Chaos from our galaxy forever. This is

what I will achieve. This is my great work. A new network of pylons like those lost on Cadia but far greater. I intend nothing less than the salvation of mankind.'

Thracian and Felix looked at one another.

'Tetrarch, do you intend to allow him to do this?' said Thracian. 'The use of alien technology is proscribed by the Adeptus Mechanicus.'

'By some of its sects only,' said Felix. 'Do not forget that alien technology saved our primarch, and that it was alien technology that held the Cadian Gate closed for so long. It is your world. Allow Cawl access or not, but I will destroy this mountain once he is done.'

'Not until our geneseed is laid to rest,' said Thracian. He leaned against the parapet and looked out over the bailey. His men were collecting the wargear of the fallen with great reverence. 'If the archmagos can restore Sotha and redeem my Chapter's honour, I will let him do what he likes. But if you deem it too dangerous, my lord whom the Lord Regent Guilliman appointed to safeguard the east, then I will defer to your judgement, and you may level this place entirely as soon as our rites are over. The choice must be yours. This is my world, but this is your domain.'

Felix nodded. 'I see the benefits. I see the risks.'

'What does your father's famed dialectic suggest?' asked Cawl pleasantly.

Felix looked up at the man that had made him.

'That we go in with all due caution.'

Cawl nodded in satisfaction. 'Most excellent and wise of you, young Decimus. Your part in this will be remembered for all time.'

'First we must secure control of the Chapter's defence matrix, or disable it if we cannot,' said Felix.

'Agreed. Forgemaster Sebastion!' Thracian voxed.

The Forgemaster came up from the courtyard to join them.

'Explain your plans to the tetrarch,' commanded Thracian.

'As you wish.' Sebastion flipped open a panel on his gauntlet, and conjured up a small cartolith of the fortress.

'I must reach the Defensor Strategium. It lies deep in the mountain, beneath the Emperor's Watch. The only access point is from the tower. The strategium is the sole central control nexus, and is our best chance of shutting down the weapons,' said Sebastion. 'Otherwise, we will have to visit each silo individually, and destroy them. That will take time.' The locations flashed on the map as he spoke.

'Once we have the fortress back under our control and have swept the environs for xenos threat, Cawl may begin his work, agreed?' said Felix.

Cawl inclined his head in thanks. Thracian nodded.

'I have a question for the archmagos,' Sebastion said.

'Ask, fellow acolyte,' said Cawl.

'If the device under Mount Pharos is xenos, how can you extract the information you need?' Sebastion asked. 'How can we be sure you will not be corrupted by its alien taint?'

'Quite simply, Forgemaster, I propose to ask it.' Cawl smiled again. 'Nicely.' Cawl tapped the back of his head. 'I have my ways, you have seen my means. I realise this looks like a threadbare plan, Decimus, but you must trust me. I know what I am doing.'

'Do we have any choice but to trust you?' asked Thracian.

'Truthfully, no,' said Cawl.

The shadows were drinking in the day and becoming darker with each ray of sun they sipped away.

'Time passes,' said Felix.

'Let us be circumspect,' Cawl said. 'I recommend we remain outside the main gates. If there are genestealers within the fortress as Lord Thracian thinks likely, we should wait until sunrise. That strain of xenos is known for being more active at night, and I for one would rather face one enemy than two. Lord Tetrarch?'

Felix watched the last of the sun passing up the side of the Emperor's Watch. Without atmospheric refraction, the sunset was harsh. A stark line between night and day sliced across the masonry, inky shadows on one side, fleeing light on the other.

'We rest,' said Felix. 'We enter the fortress-monastery in the morning.'

The Space Marines set about their tasks. All of them would rest in the safety of their tanks. None would sleep fully, but rely on the catalepsian half-slumber to refresh them. First, perimeters needed establishing, sentries posting on the walls, and the vicinity checked for hidden organisms. By the time they were done the stars shone steady in the hard vacuum sky.

Felix ordered them to rest and prepare.

There were further tremors in the night.

CHAPTER TEN

MOUNTAIN DREAMING

Circa 10,000 years ago

BANG!

A single shot.

Friedisch's hands gripped Cawl's wrists. Cawl's hands were pressed against the great crater wound in Friedisch's chest. Ruined organs shifted under his palms.

'You'll never… You'll never staunch the blood,' said Friedisch. 'I'm going, Belisarius. I'm going to join the Machina Opus, the Great Work of the Machine-God, to become pure data!' His human eye shone in wonder. His cheap augmetic stared away into vistas full of promise. Friedisch, always flighty in life, faced death without fear. 'Get out of here. Leave me. I am done.'

'Friedisch, please. Friedisch! Hold on, my friend, my only friend.'

'He is dying.' Sedayne got up from his chair, planting his cane on the carpet, deliberately pinning his words to the floor so that Cawl might better understand their gravity. 'But we can save him, together.'

The Altrix Herminia held her gun so that it pointed at the two tech-priests on the ground. Smoke still rose from its barrel, the final gasp of the killing shot. The gun had been fired at close range, and Friedisch's blood ran down her shiny clothes.

'You're wrong!' snarled Cawl. 'He can't die.' But it was obvious to them all that Friedisch was dying. Trying to plug a bolt wound was impossible. It was like dipping his hands into a bowl full of blood. Cawl bundled up more of Friedisch's robe and pushed it down. It soaked instantly to a deeper red. There was not enough robe, and far too much wound.

Friedisch smiled weakly. Blood ran from the corner of his mouth. 'He has

killed me.'

'I regret that this occurred,' said Sedayne. He walked around Cawl slowly, the cane thumping into the rug. Fastidiously, he avoided the spreading stain of Friedisch's blood. 'But it is your fault. Now you know I am serious.'

'What you can't take by asking, you'll take by force,' said Cawl. 'Such a fine way of persuasion you have.'

'Truly, this is the only way to save your friend.'

'Belisarius,' whispered Friedisch. 'Belisarius, don't do it. Please. Not for me. Save yourself.'

'Come with me to the processing room. Please,' said Sedayne. 'Neither you nor I have very much time.'

Sedayne held out a parchment-skinned hand. Cawl looked up into his face. The anti-gerontics were wearing off. From beneath a veneer of stolen youth, a skull looked out.

'Cawl,' said Friedisch. His grip was weakening. 'It hurts, Cawl. Oh, it hurts.'

His hands slipped from Cawl's wrists. His human eye fluttered closed.

'It is the only way,' said Sedayne. He extended his hand further.

Cawl stood.

Knowledge of the now intruded into the past.

<Tremor event underway. Magnitude seven point seven. West tower of fortress-monastery in danger of collapse. Fugue event occurring. Intrusive quantum synchronisation processes detected.>

Cawl fought to follow the machine voice of his inbuilt cogitators. It was like swimming against a current. Swimming against a tide. Swimming in a river of light.

Circa 100 years ago

Light of such strength smote Thracian's eyes it was a physical blow. His enhanced body responded instantly, but it was too little to blunt the pain. A mortal man would have been blinded. He regretted not donning his helmet.

'I told you it would hurt,' said Hadrios. 'I suggested you close your eyes.'

'I'll keep my eyes open,' said Thracian, shading his face against the glare with his left hand. 'I don't trust you.'

Hadrios nodded as if that was totally understandable.

'Wait,' said Thracian. With his right hand, he unlocked his helm from his belt and placed it over his head. As soon as the helm systems meshed with his

battleplate the lenses darkened, bringing the glare down to bearable levels. The room still shone like the brightest of days, but he could see clearly enough.

'Come and see the thing that doomed us,' said Hadrios, beckoning him inside.

Thracian entered the room. It was of middling size, a cavity deep in the ship.

Two Space Marines stood guard over a suspension casket. Through the viewing plate was darkness. Emperor alone knew how Hadrios had got it aboard.

'Do you want to see it?'

'No,' said Thracian. 'We should kill it.'

'Not yet. It will be useful,' said Hadrios. 'The light keeps it dormant. It is not a full-blood strain, but the hybrids share many characteristics with the parent creatures. Genestealers have an affinity with the shadows.'

'Why have you brought this aboard?' said Thracian. 'After what the tyranids did to Sotha, how could you?'

'I had to,' said Hadrios. 'We need it.'

'Do we?' said Thracian. The situation had him ready to fight. There was something wrong. The cleanness of Hadrios' armour had struck him when they first met a few hours ago. It did so again. Was he involved in the battle at all? Already Thracian was calculating how he could fight his way free. 'Why don't I know you, Hadrios?' He looked at the warrior carefully, wishing that he could remove Hadrios' faceplate and see the man beneath. 'There are less than one thousand of us. Only that many, and yet I don't know you. I don't know any of you.' He turned, taking in the Space Marines guarding the casket.

'Our identities were hidden intentionally, though I assure you I am a loyal servant of the Scythes of the Emperor. It is time to initiate you into the deeper mysteries of the Chapter.'

Thracian snorted. 'We are good sons of Ultramar. Guilliman's progeny. We don't have secrets.'

'All Chapters have secrets.' Hadrios rested his hand on the casket. 'Some of which have only become apparent to me recently.' He looked at Thracian. 'You didn't know Captain Argus very well.'

'He was my brother-captain,' said Thracian.

'But did you know him?' said Hadrios. 'Did you know him as a man or as a friend?'

Thracian's first instinct was to say yes, and accept for himself that that was the truth. He frowned. It was not the truth. He looked at the casket again. He was finding it hard to think. Some force emanated from it, clouding his mind. 'No,' he said. 'I don't think anyone knew him. He was private.'

Hadrios nodded again. So calm in the face of this awful knowledge. Thracian felt himself teeter on the brink of madness.

'This hybrid came from Sotha itself,' Hadrios said. 'Argus selected me to be part of his inner conclave, a position sanctified by the Chaplaincy and the Apothecarion, invested with great responsibility, great secrecy. We are the tool of the Chaplaincy, independent from the Chapter Master's control. There were five of us. We three remain.' He gestured to the other two Space Marines. 'Our task was to keep the Chapter's holdings pure.'

Thracian stared at the casket. 'Sotha was infected? That's impossible.'

'Evidence suggests otherwise.'

'We watched them for millennia. They were our families, our brothers in arms. I cannot believe it.' The sensation from the casket increased, as did his disbelief.

'And yet they turned on us.'

'That is not true!' said Thracian. 'They were devoured.'

'You were there. No one came to help you, did they?'

'And you are saying that both the Chaplaincy and the Apothecaries knew this?'

Hadrios nodded again, a slow, calm gesture.

'They knew it. They were trying to root out the rot, that is why we had to be so secretive. It only takes one, captain. One genestealer to corrupt a world, even a world that is home to the Adeptus Astartes.'

'Sotha.' Thracian felt a great agitation and began to pace. 'The uprising on Brakur Dominus. The other incidences of civil unrest before the fleet hit the league.'

'The whole of the Sotharan League was thick with genestealers. Our world was directly targeted, brother, to neutralise us. There was a cult on Sotha, right under our noses.'

'No. That cannot be true,' said Thracian. 'We would have known.'

'But you didn't know. Why do you think that is?' Hadrios continued with relentless logic. 'Were we negligent, or were we prevented from seeing? Did it not strike you how easily Sotha fell? The confusion? The lack of coordination in the defence? The failure of the void shields and orbital guns so early in the battle?'

'Then why are you operating outside of Thorcyra's authority?'

'As I told you, at the behest of the Chaplaincy. What do you think about Thorcyra's coming here, to Miral Prime, making a stand against all sense when we should flee and consolidate?'

'That is the Chapter Master's judgement,' said Thracian. 'We are honour bound

to obey him.'

'You think his judgement bad nonetheless. There are strong links between the Chapter and the Sothan government. The Chapter Master has always been advised by the elders of Sotha. He still is, by those that remain. Why do you think they managed to survive? Why do you think they suggested this place? Have you seen Thorcyra? I was hoping to bring this news to him. I feared what I might discover. Alas, my fears were borne out when he refused to see me. He is panicking. Such a defeat is enough to affect even us. He falls back on tradition when he should be decisive.'

'Careful what you insinuate, brother.'

'Isn't it obvious?' said Hadrios. 'The Scythes of the Emperor are compromised. The hive mind beat us, because it has us. It used our concern for our countrymen as a weapon. The infiltrators are still here, among the fleet, working against the Imperium. Thorcyra cannot see it.'

'Then we should execute the council of elders, every one of them.'

'It is not so easy,' said Hadrios. 'If we act, they will strike. There are too few of the Chapter left. Our serfs are dead. They were screened thoroughly, but who knows how many of the enemy hide among our void ship crews, or among the hundreds of thousands of refugees that follow our retreat? Besides,' said Hadrios, looking to the casket. 'Would you abandon our traditions, and indiscriminately massacre all we hold dear? We were made to protect humanity, not slaughter it. There are subtler ways. That is the purpose of my small brotherhood. Help me, brother captain, to continue my sacred task and purge the taint from our people.'

Even through his helm, Thracian could feel the other man's eyes locked onto his own.

'What do you propose we do?'

'I shall continue the work of Argus and the Inner Conclave. I will scour the refugee vessels coming to us here. I will vet those recruited to replenish our Chapter serfs. The geneseed brought to Miral must also be checked.'

'What are you suggesting?'

'It may have been tampered with in the confusion.'

'That's a ridiculous suggestion.'

'Is it? Listen to me, Thracian. We are the guarantors of our Chapter's future. Thorcyra leads us all to our deaths here. As soon as we can, under whatever pretext, we must leave, and we must not return.'

Thracian stared at Hadrios. He did not wish to agree. He refused to believe his

brothers and sisters of the common blood were tainted. The sense of foreboding from the casket pushed at him, and there was so much light…

Circa 10,000 years ago

…flowing in a channel of square angles. Magma pumped from the depths of the planet, sent via canals to Sarum's metallurgical plants whose devices sucked out every scrap of useful mineral they could before vomiting the cooling slag back down into the planet's heart.

Cawl was only dimly aware of this. Her passion was fighting. The lava canal was a wonder of the world, but for her it was part of the scenery, something to warm the fighting platform of the agoge where she trained under the multiple-eyed guidance of Warleader Soren every day.

'That's right, girl! Harder! Take his legs out from under him!' Soren buzzed overhead on shimmering anti-grav generators. His most striking feature was his four arms, all flesh, a cloned pair set back to back against his born pair. It was traditional among the students to try and guess which were the originals, though those more informed in the mysteries of the cult would also construct arguments as to why he kept them at all, because only Soren's arms were flesh. The rest of him was metal, cylindrical, blessed by the cunning of the Machine-God with ocular sensors and clever devices. He had no head, his brain being housed in the column that had taken the place of his body, so his four arms crowned his mostly mechanical being as a sort of strange, fleshy sculpture.

'Get him!' he shouted. 'Come on, Hester Aspertia! Hit him! *Hit him!*'

The acolyta fought with electro staves turned down to the lowest setting. Even so, a good blow could break an arm, and the shock they gave was painful. Cawl was smaller and younger than her opponent. Cadillain-8-Opir stood a head taller, and had taken his first combat augmetics at a markedly young age.

These advantages made him arrogant.

Cawl swung her stave with deadly accuracy. The generator pods clashed off each other with satisfying displays of sparks.

'You're fast, little girl,' said Cadillain-8-Opir. 'But speed is not enough.'

'Maybe not,' she said through gritted teeth. Her braids swung around her face, given added weight by the data cables plaited into the hair. She jabbed and slashed, the touch of their weapons birthing miniature lightning storms that earthed themselves all over the fighting platform. She shouted in anger, stabbing faster and faster, then whirled, leapt, spun a savage blow towards Cadillain-8-

Opir's head that made him chuckle.

'Nice try,' he said, ducking back.

She responded with a flurry of attacks that stopped him laughing there and then.

'That's right, Hester,' Soren shouted, drifting over the arena and buffeting his students with contra-grav backwash. 'That's right, feel the motive force in your weapon. Let your intuition entwine with it. He's bigger than you, so what? Bring him down! If the Omnissiah wills it, it will be so!'

On she came, fast and swift. Cadillain-8-Opir fell back into a defensive pattern. Cawl was angry, tired of losing to those bigger than her. She slammed her weapon against his, and he pushed her back. She cursed the feebleness of her muscles, wishing for sinews of steel and joints of brass that would never tire.

Suddenly, it was over. Cadillain-8-Opir spied a tiny opportunity and exploited it flawlessly. He was gentle. His weapon tapped her head. Nevertheless the burst of power that shocked her memcore and supplemental systems floored her.

The others watching from the tiered benches winced in sympathy. She heard their sucked in breaths through the crackle of discharge crawling round her implants, and it made her angry.

The motive force ceased its lesson and relinquished control of her body. She opened painful eyes and saw Cadillain-8-Opir standing over her, stave held at ease in the crook of his left arm, three-fingered metal right hand reaching comradely for her.

'Let me help you up,' he said.

She gritted her teeth, but took his hand.

'I'll beat you one day,' she said. 'I'll beat you all.'

<Tremor event repeat, danger. Magnitude six point four. Quantum manipulation underway.>

Cadillain-8-Opir smiled, showing metal teeth as he pulled her up. 'Maybe. Perhaps then we'll see…'

Circa 100 years ago

… a world of green. Brother Tyliphus blinked and stood taller on the wall. This was Sotha as he remembered it.

Home.

One moment he was looking upon dust and ruin, the next a night of warm winds. The scents of quicktrees in bloom were relayed by the armour's autosenses to his nose, filling him with melancholy for what was lost.

But it wasn't lost. It was right there in front of him.

Tyliphus walked along the walls. He had performed this duty a thousand times. Walking the walls was his favourite task. To see Sotha by night, the crests of waves dirty white on black in the dark, and the lights of Sothopolis shining by the sea, knowing that it was in his power to safeguard the people sleeping in their beds. Quicktrees creaked, putting on several feet a night, so fast it was said you could see them grow if you had the patience to watch. In the rustling forest a phantine bull bellowed its mating call. Not close, he thought. The cries carried for miles. The coast was strung with beads of light from other settlements, while Odessa Port shone out a haze of light pollution, but back away from the shore, on the other side of the mountain, Sotha was black as any primordial world. It was a special place.

He remembered a night like this, he thought, a night he took off his helm against all regulation to breathe in the soft, loamy scents of the forest, the sharp stone of the mountain, the comforting smells of the city by the sea.

Was this the memory, or was he living it now? Realities overlaid themselves, confusing him. He barely felt the gun lock to his thigh. His hands rose up to undo the helm seals, because that is what he had done, and was therefore fated to do.

A tiny hiss of escaping air was followed by the scent of a living world. He stood breathing it for long minutes. It was good to take pleasure in simple things.

Blackness took him.

Now

Alarms blared in the Repulsor, bringing Felix out of his catalepsian trance. He felt a twinge of discomfort as the dormant half of his brain shook off sleep and linked fully with the rest. With it came a sharpening of senses and intellect, and a certainty of what had occurred.

'We are under attack,' he said, wide-casting to the entire expedition.

He emerged with his warriors into the airless square of the barbican. The vox waves were alive with chatter from his own men, the Scythes and the archmagos' party. Pulse interference generated by multiple scans thrummed through the voices. Lights came on overhead as the Adeptus Mechanicus' servo-skulls lit up the night.

'There, up on the wall!' Cominus shouted.

The Chosen of Vespator ran towards the southern wall, to the right of the main

gatehouse if one was facing away from it. The dark shape of a Space Marine in Mark X battleplate bent over a smaller figure. Cadmus' ident flashed up in Felix's helm. Others crowded round.

'Cover the gates. Secure the perimeter,' Felix ordered. His armour was heavy, but equipped with high powered motive units, and he ran up the wall staircase easily.

'There's no need, my lord,' said Cadmus, looking up as Felix approached. 'There are no foes. He killed himself.'

Felix came closer. The Space Marine was dead on the ground, skin frosted, eyes cloudy with ice.

Thracian arrived with his Apothecary. Cadmus stepped aside to allow him access to the corpse.

'He died without violence. It looks like he removed his helmet,' said the Apothecary. His ident rune named him as Aratus.

'Hard vacuum should not be enough to kill a Space Marine,' said Felix. He looked down over the wall. The masonry gave way to cliff that plunged away. The land beneath was lifeless stone.

'I don't think he knew he was dying,' said Aratus. The whine of a redactor drill pressed into ceramite came over the vox with his voice. 'He didn't fill his multi-lung. He suffocated.'

'Passively? How?' said Cadmus.

'The mountain,' said Thracian. 'The mountain did it.'

'It didn't affect me this time,' said Felix. 'Anyone else?' He looked to his warriors, those that were not scouring the vicinity for enemies.

'There was a tremor fifteen minutes ago,' said Cominus.

'I experienced a vision,' said Thracian. 'An unwelcome one.'

Felix could feel the black bulk of the Pharos behind him. He fancied it was watching them. 'Theoretical, it is testing us, gauging our weaknesses one by one. Practical, warn the archmagos. He was right. We are under attack. I want everyone watched at all times. Pair off. No one is to be left alone from now on.'

CHAPTER ELEVEN

THE CROOKED STAIR

Day returned mercilessly as a sword blade of light slicing across the land. By dawn the expedition was ready. They had taken no more rest during the night. Although the earth had not shaken again, they remained on heightened alert.

Thracian stood side by side with Felix and Cawl. Behind them the remaining Scythes of the Emperor waited in a double line, the geneseed casket escorted between the four Terminators, and the body of Tyliphus carried by four other brothers upon a makeshift stretcher. Cominus headed eight of the Chosen of Vespator behind the Scythes of the Emperor. Diamedes and Austen were to remain with the tanks, whose machine-spirits had been elevated to maximum awareness. Qvo-87 and Alpha Primus brought up the rear.

They stood in silence, half-expecting the ground to shake and the mountain dreaming to come on them again, but no disturbance either of the earth or of their spirits was forthcoming. Felix had them wait before the battered main gates of the fortress-monastery until the sun rose over the peak of the mountain, and slanted its light down into the bailey. Light crept up and over their backs, then with a sudden rush, stabbed through the ruined main gates and into the inner courtyard.

'Expedition, move out,' said Felix.

'We go towards enlightenment,' said Cawl. His eyes gleamed with anticipation behind the shimmer of his atmospheric field. 'But best be careful just in case.' The massive weapons on his lowest arms rotated into readiness and powered themselves to fire.

Felix thumbed on his power sword and cycled up his boltstorm gauntlet. The

gun's machine-spirit danced reticles over every feature before him with such dizzying eagerness he was forced to rebuke it.

The Scythes of the Emperor began to sing a lament of fallen heroes, and the procession filed through the broken gates, down the long tunnel through the gatehouse, and into the fortress-monastery's middle defences.

A few more empty suits of armour lay on the paving in the courtyard, broken open like the husks of crustaceans. Space was limited so high upon the mountain, so the courtyard was small, triangular and looked down upon by high, roofed walls whose inner faces were pierced with loopholes. The apex of the triangle was not quite opposite the gate tunnel. To the right of the triangle's tip, a second, smaller gateway led through the wall towards the mountain summit. In the opposite wall was a wide, low vehicle door that led down to the Chapter armouries. The space was a killing zone, and slaughter had been done on both sides. No trace remained of the dead beyond the wargear, but evidence of the fight's ferocity was visible in marks on the walls: huge claw gouges, missile impacts, lasburns; every sort of damage from man-portable armaments imaginable, along with the chemical wounds of bioweaponry.

Thracian halted. 'The gatehouse and then the galleries were taken quickly once we fell back,' he said. 'We fired on our own fortifications here, from this side to that.' He traced a line across the gap between the opposite sides of the triangle with two fingers. One wall had more bioweapon damage, the other more from Imperial guns.

'How did they overrun this place so quickly?' asked Felix. 'Even with your guns down and your void shields failed, it is a formidable obstacle.'

'I have no good answer to that,' said Thracian. 'We were ready to stand here, then the gates failed, and we were forced to fall back. All was confusion.'

'The quickest way to take a fortress is from the inside,' said Felix.

'Are you suggesting we were betrayed?' said Thracian angrily. 'You impugn our honour, tetrarch.'

'Have you considered it?' asked Felix, refusing to let the matter drop. 'Have you considered that you were in fact betrayed?'

Thracian's eye lenses glinted in the hard sun.

'Yes,' he said. 'I have.'

Thracian made it clear that line of conversation was over by setting off again. 'Come,' he said. 'The major ways are sealed. There is but one way remaining to the tower. It is a hard climb. We shall ascend the Crooked Stair.'

The party followed on behind him.

They went through the smaller gate and headed upwards, climbing a huge stairway carved directly into the basalt face of the mountain and roofed over with a vaulting of patterned brick. Every inch of the stone was carved with statuary of awe-inspiring beauty. The stair took a circuitous path, switching back on itself unexpectedly. The width, too, was inconstant. There were stretches where it was wide enough for Space Marines to march ten abreast, then long runs far narrower. It varied in pitch from precipitous to shallow. The effect was neither aesthetically pleasing nor did it follow the optimal route, and did not seem to suit defensive purposes.

'Where the black rock extrudes through the basalt, our predecessors were forced to go around,' said the Scythes' Forgemaster, Sebastion. 'The black rock does not cut easily, it breaks when worked, and there were legends that it should not be disturbed if possible. It is because of the black rock that the way to the citadel bends about so. It is called the Crooked Stair for good reason.'

As if the mountain itself wished to provide proof of Sebastion's words, they rounded a sharp corner and found a pile of rubble where masonry had cracked off, revealing the blackstone beneath. Their boots crunched on broken reliefs of past heroes. The blackstone glowed with inner life, swift motes of green darting away out of sight when observed.

'The mountain is shedding its skin,' said Cominus.

'All my life I thought the builders of the monastery beholden to child's tales, and I thought of them with scorn,' said Sebastion. 'No longer.'

Shortly after they came to a pile of armour lying on a small landing, empty of every trace of flesh and blood. Damage from explosives and weapons fire had melted the rock and scorched many of the armour pieces black, but as elsewhere there were no corpses.

The stair began its final stretch.

Felix walked to the end of the landing in disbelief. What confronted him was more of a wall than a way up. He looked up the brick tunnel, which bent itself perpendicular to accommodate the change in angle as the stairway became a ladder. He reached up, and rested his hand on the steps by his head.

'The Angel's Ladder,' said Thracian. 'We are nearly at the citadel.'

'Epistolary Gathein,' Felix said.

The blue-clad psyker came forwards, and surveyed the empty wargear. The others remained silent as he performed his witch's work. A heaviness came over them, suddenly gone when Gathein ceased his scrying. He drew in a deep breath and stood back.

‘They fell alone,’ said Gathein. ‘They were trying to hold the invasion back from the citadel.’

‘This is the main access?’ asked Felix.

‘There are tunnels,’ Thracian said. ‘But none of those routes are direct, and all of them were collapsed before the attack. They are plugged by stone blocks of a thousand tonnes each. When Kraken came for us, this was the sole way remaining on the ground,’ said Thracian. ‘It is a ceremonial way. Most traffic came into the Emperor’s Watch by air. Our aspirants must tread the stair as part of their final initiation. There is no other way to the top.’

Felix looked up again.

‘Then this fortress should never have fallen,’ said Felix. He sheathed his sword, and began to climb.

The steps in the rock were barely wide enough to take the toes of the armoured Space Marines, and they slowed, even their might taxed by the difficulty of the climb. They did not tire, but they lacked nimbleness in their battleplate, while their reactor packs and wide chests made balance difficult, and they were forced to stow their weapons. Felix in particular struggled: his Gravis plate was almost too large and heavy to make the climb. The Scythes were prepared for the ascent, but their gene vault, Brother Tyliphus’ corpse and the Terminators needed winching up. Several of Thracian’s warriors went ahead and lowered cables for the purpose. Felix watched as the methanol vault crawled upwards. Its labouring suspensor unit nullified mass as best it could, but still it taxed the Scythes of the Emperor, who sang their laments through teeth gritted with the effort.

Cawl clambered up with the efficiency of a spider, his multiple legs rippling easily up the steps, arms grasping for hand holds, while his weaponised lower limbs swept both upper and lower reaches of the shaft for threats. His giant axe he held far back from his body in one rigid arm, the most humanlike of all his supplemental limbs, but the awkward weight did not inconvenience him, and he was soon out of sight of Felix.

Qvo-87 followed next, floating past the labouring Space Marines on a contra-grav engine with a small, metallic chuckle.

The Angel’s Ladder went a quarter of a mile straight up. Even the Space Marines were sweating within their power armour by the time they reached the top. The stair was at its steepest there, and had become plain in construction, with the carvings restricted to inspirational mottos, but as Felix hauled himself up over the lip, he found himself in a hall of great grandeur.

Polished marble, only slightly damaged by the planet’s fall, led along a straight

hallway to a pointed arch furnished with polished bronze doors that stood half-open. The way was lined by statues on podiums which rose over three hundred feet from dark trenches either side of the hall to stand level with the floor. The ceiling had been made of crystal, now all broken. Surprisingly, the statues were not all of Space Marines.

Several Scythes of the Emperor had already attained the top, and were securing their gene vault before rigging their cables to bring up their Terminator armoured brethren. Cawl stood at the far end of the hall with Qvo-87. Felix paused on his way to join him, looking up into the faces of the mortal humans and the Space Marines lining the walkway. Several were missing pieces. Not one was unmarked by battle damage.

Thracian joined him.

'This is the Walk of the First Scythes. These are the first of our order and the men and women of ancient days who fought at our sides in the Heresy,' said Thracian. 'Since then we have had special care for the humans of Sotha. They were heroes to us all, human and transhuman alike.' He stopped before a heroically posed human soldier. 'This one, Meriq, he was my favourite when I was a boy. They say he was such a great warrior he could fight with a Space Marine on his own terms.' He shook his head at the idea. 'Who knows if any of the legends from those times are true. The same stories say this hall was once a promontory of rock, and Roboute Guilliman himself rewarded the survivors of the war with our mark.' He tapped at the crossed scythes on his shoulder plate. 'I like to think the tales are true, but who can tell?'

'When you meet the primarch, Chapter Master, you can ask him yourself,' said Felix. 'Though I warn you to be straightforward and not too worshipful. It annoys him. But he can be coaxed to reveal the truth of ancient days. The stories he tells are often surprising.'

'You are from those times, so I heard,' said Thracian. 'What do you know of the days of legend?'

'Nothing. I was a boy when I was taken,' said Felix. 'And what do boys know?'

'Decimus! Decimus!' Cawl's voice intruded, bringing unwelcome recollections of Felix's apotheosis back to him.

'Archmagos,' said Felix.

'We are ready to proceed within. Join me.'

Felix looked down the corridor. While he had been examining the statues, Cawl had gone to the bronze doors leading into the lower reaches of the Scythes of the Emperor's citadel.

Cawl had spoken with Felix privately, so Felix now spoke to Thracian.

'The archmagos is up to something,' he said, as Cawl and Qvo passed the gate. 'Come with me.'

Thracian checked his warriors' progress. Forgemaster Sebastion was overseeing the winching of the Terminators up the Angel's Ladder into the Walk of the First Scythes.

'How long?' Felix heard Thracian ask his men. He was not privy to the reply. The Chapter Master then turned to Felix.

'It will take some time to bring the Terminators up the stair,' the Chapter Master said. 'Yet Cawl forces us to follow. I gave him full rein to do as he pleased here, but the Hall of the Founder is one of our most sacred sites. I will not let him loose alone in there. I wish he would have waited.'

Thracian and Felix passed through the bronze doors into a large chamber, the Chosen and a good portion of Thracian's men following. The Hall of the Founder was also faced with marble and played host to more statues, these all Space Marines in heavily decorated battleplate. An iron rondel set into the centre of the floor bore the crossed scythes of the Chapter, and was surrounded in turn by mosaics of cut stone depicting the ten stylised equines who represented the Chapter's companies. Two flights of stairs led off at the back of the room, one upwards and one downwards, both flights being more elegantly finished and less punishing to climb than the Crooked Stair.

Not enough daylight got in through the doors to light the room, and it was as dark as any natural cave. Nevertheless, it was apparent a terrible battle had taken place in the Hall of the Founder. It was badly damaged; much of the marble facing in the room was shattered, showing the black rock of the mountain beneath, and half the statues had been toppled. Blackstone shone behind the holes in the false ceiling. Over sixty suits of armour lay in pieces all over the ground, many atop webs of cracks in the paving that showed how hard they had fallen. The wargear was uniformly ruined, ripped open by immense claws, burned by chemical flames and pierced by spears of bone. Acid spatter dotted the wall facing and the paving, but – as it was everywhere upon Sotha – no trace of organic material remained. Each gobbet of flesh and splash of mucous had been gathered up by the harvester creatures of the hive fleet and taken away for reuse.

Cawl and Qvo-87 performed mysterious work at the centre of the room. They stood still for a while, then their artificial enhancements would go into a brief

burst of activity, then they would stand still again. There was a tension there.

The ground shook.

'Did you feel that?' Felix asked Thracian. 'Another tremor.'

'It is a pattern,' said Thracian. 'Regular.'

Soft, brief pulses of energy pushed through the stone. Unlike the earlier earthquakes, they came unaccompanied by visions, and were of short, regular duration and power.

'Cawl,' said Felix. 'Stop what you are doing.'

The archmagos ignored him. He performed further actions of esoteric technomancy, his hands moving through the air as if conducting an orchestra, while his servo-skulls swooped about his head in tight patterns.

The pattern of the tremors changed, becoming a repeating cycle of five brief vibrations followed by a sixth, stronger quake.

'Cawl!' Felix shouted over the vox. 'I know you can hear me. What are you doing?'

A large slab of marble slammed down from the ceiling.

'Cawl!'

Thracian looked up and pointed. 'There!'

Lights blinked on in the depths of the blackstone. It glowed with line-straight runs of pulsing dots that raced around one another in increasing density. The tremors picked up strength, until the mountain shuddered with each. Lesser beats joined the shaking, and it became a percussive beat.

The rest of the Chosen came running into the room with a number of Thracian's veterans. All of them had their guns up and ready. Ixen leapt sideways as a statue leaning forwards on its plinth broke off at the ankles and toppled to the floor.

'Tetrarch! What is happening?' shouted Cominus. The vox blurred, smearing his message to broken gibberish. Each tremor spiked interference in their vox-comms.

'Cawl, that's enough!' Felix said. He marched forwards, only to be intercepted by Alpha Primus halfway across the hall's floor, who blocked his way. Each step Felix made to bypass him he matched.

'The archmagos must not be disturbed,' said Alpha Primus. 'Wait.'

'Out of my way!' Felix said. 'He's going to bring the mountain down.'

'You will wait,' said Alpha Primus. Witchfire shone around his head.

Bolt rifles and bolters were trained on the giant. Alpha Primus swept his dull green eye lenses over the other Space Marines like they were nothing.

'Move!' Cominus shouted. 'Move or we open fire!'

‘Do not threaten me,’ said Alpha Primus. His hand settled on the hilt of his chainsword. Cold energies crawled across his head and shoulders.

‘Cawl!’ shouted Felix.

The tremors became a thrumming, then stabilised, so that the mountain vibrated constantly at a low, tooth-jarring frequency. A final panel of marble cracked and shifted to hang half off the wall.

‘I do apologise, Decimus, but this is an exciting development,’ Cawl shouted. ‘I intended only to attempt a preliminary linkage with the xenos machine, but its activity levels have enabled me to do far more than that.’ He gave a little bow. The light of his augmetic eyes dimmed as his vision turned inwards. ‘It is my great pleasure to present to you a little of the Pharos’ ability.’

CHAPTER TWELVE

THE HALL OF THE FOUNDER

Light flooded the hall, and then there were warriors everywhere; men of the Scythes of the Emperor, running down the stairs and up the stairs into the hall, firing behind them as they came.

The party reacted predictably, switching their weapons to bear upon the newcomers, but it took them only an instant to see them for what they were. Though solid seeming, they were not. Yansar gasped as one ran right through him. Tullio moved out of the path of another.

'Hold fire!' Felix commanded.

'They are phantoms. They're not real,' said Daelus. His voice broke up, and he had to repeat himself twice.

'Steady!' Felix said, seeing the unease taking the Scythes of the Emperor. 'This is an image capture.'

'This is xenos sorcery,' said Cominus, watching the silent rush of Space Marines.

'No,' said Thracian helplessly. 'Why must we bear witness to this? I could not save them. I could not help them.'

'I do not see you among them,' said Felix. It sounded more of an accusation than he had intended.

'I was not here,' Thracian said. 'I was not here to help them. I pulled my company out.' The vox stabilised, as if relishing Thracian's shame. 'I ignored my orders. We evacuated. We left them to die. This is the last stand of the Scythes of the Emperor.'

'Your Chapter lives, thanks to you,' said Felix.

‘My brothers died,’ said Thracian angrily.

The way the light shone on these Space Marines betrayed a different time of day and active lumens in the ceiling. Shadows from objects Felix and his men could not see passed over the room. The projection field encompassed nearly all of the Hall of the Founder, but it ended with sharp delineation between the then and the now before it hit the walls, and the company instinctively moved to the edge of the display. Once they were out of the display field it seemed to become more real and the present became unreal, no more solid than an uneasy premonition. Felix felt as if he were being pulled into the scene the machine replayed, and that if he only listened a little more attentively, he would hear the shouts of the warriors and the reports of their guns.

In silent play the warriors ran together, forming up in a circle around a pair of captains, a Chaplain and three company banner bearers who occupied the great iron rondel. Stray tyranid beasts exploded under gunfire as three warriors forced the bronze doors closed. Owing to the limitations of the projection, Felix could not see what was coming for them, but he knew, and his hearts quickened in sympathy. Many of the Scythes of the Emperor in the display were unhelmeted, and Felix saw their lips moving in song. The words were different to those he knew from his own Chapter, but he recognised a death hymn when he saw it.

Cawl watched Space Marines past and present with interest. Qvo-87 took notes.

The guns of the Scythes of the Emperor flashed. Bolt trails disappeared beyond the edge of the projection field. Short bursts became fully automatic fire.

In a tsunami of garish alien flesh the tyranids rushed into the chamber. Felix felt their ghostly presence as they passed through him, stirring his Emperor’s gifts to life and flooding his body with combat stimulants. The same was happening to them all. They tensed, ready to sell their lives as their brothers in the doomed Chapter died.

Running tyranids burst from the staircase leading down. Winged tyranids boiled from the staircase leading up in a rush of crimson and cream.

In seconds, the Scythes of the Emperor were overwhelmed. The desperation on their faces, the sorrow at the loss of their Chapter and the shame of defeat, all seemed so much stronger without the faintest whisper of sound.

Felix watched the standard of the Fifth Company fall to the ground, painted with arcs of arterial spray. He saw a desperate scout try and fail to take it up.

‘Enough,’ said Felix.

The Chaplain swung his crozius, obliterating the skull of a genestealer in a cloud of disruption lightning. Three more tore him to pieces. He fell near where

his broken armour still rested on the floor. Statues collapsed under the onrushing horde to lie where they lay in the present.

'Cawl! Turn it off!' Felix ordered.

More death, more blood. Loyal servants of the Emperor clawed down to make feedstock for tyranid bioforms. They could not save themselves. They could not be helped. All Felix could do was watch them be ripped apart and be consumed.

'This is an abomination,' growled Cominus.

The living Scythes were lost in grief, their weapons lowering as they saw their brothers slaughtered.

A Space Marine was hardier than a man, tougher than steel, immune to shock and doubt in all but the worst of circumstances, but if the mind of an Adeptus Astartes broke, it broke catastrophically. Such dishonour as presented to them now was enough to shatter any warrior's sanity.

'Alpha Primus, stand aside,' Felix said.

Primus looked down implacably.

'Out of the way! Cawl, shut down the machine!'

Cawl did not respond. He stood half hidden by the whirl of past combat, tyranid attack beasts leaping through him and stabbing down with bladed limbs to finish the last few Scythes of the Emperor, his hands moving in ecstatic gestures.

The mountain shook in response to Cawl's delving. A heavy pulsing emanated from deep beneath their feet, throbbing through the mountain with such force that Felix's vision blurred with each pounding thump, but the tableau of destruction remained clear as the airless Sothan day.

'Cawl! Shut it down!'

'He cannot hear you, tetrarch,' shouted Daelus. 'He is lost to machine rapture. The xenos engine has him.'

'Can you do anything?'

Daelus shook his head. 'There is nothing I can do, my lord. Do you not see, this is far beyond my abilities.'

'Watch your tone, brother,' Cominus voxed. His reprimand was shredded by violent, alien static.

'Let me through,' Felix said again. Bolt rifles pointed at Primus until he stood aside, allowing Felix to move towards the archmagos. He steeled himself to push his way through the phantoms fighting and dying in the light of that fateful day.

The mountain shook around the embattled Scythes. Further portions of the room collapsed, revealing more of the active blackstone beneath. The hall was losing its form, becoming a rubble-filled cave of dark rock full of racing lights.

Space Marines shouted out warnings as huge chunks fell from the ceiling. Their voices broke up completely and the vox filled with a roar.

'Cawl!'

In the middle of the past, Felix could not see the present, only another bulwark of the Imperium falling to alien hate. Men who had died in that room years before died again. Moving through the crowd of ghosts was physically taxing, and his armour protested. He leaned into invisible forces that tried with all the mountain's might to push him back until finally, he was forced to stop. He was poised an arm's length from Cawl, his face inches from a warrior bathed in battle sweat fighting for a few more seconds of life against a towering beast composed solely of chitinous plates, gristle and ravening hunger.

The machine was howling. Weird screeches and hooting boomed from the depths of the fortress-monastery over their vox network.

'Cawl! Shut it down! Shut it down!'

His words were heard only by himself. The mountain shook.

'Cawl!' He pushed against the storm.

A genestealer turned slit yellow eyes upon Felix, detached itself from the projection, and attacked.

Circa 10,000 years ago

Cawl was in some other place where a vast and poisonous mind regarded him. Yellow and black armour, red and cream chitin, the mad tumble of melee, all gone. Instead there was blackness of the most warm and intrusive sort. Someone, or something, was breathing down his neck. He was surprised to find himself sitting in a chair, a warm metal cylinder a foot long in his hands with a single green light burning steadily at the top. Besides the indicator lumen, it was featureless but for a micron-thin seam where the lid screwed into the vessel.

He was holding it in hands that were still all flesh. He twitched in surprise. This was not his body as he remembered. It was small, and lacking facility.

'Still human,' he breathed.

'What?' The presence behind him was Friedisch. Of course it was. The sense of the other, greater being was quickly forgotten.

Cawl blinked eyes that were also of flesh. Confusion faded.

'Stop breathing on me, Friedisch, you are putting me off.'

Friedisch moved away. Cawl became aware of the gentle hum of well-maintained systems, and reality slotted itself back together. They had escaped

from Horus' war fleet. They were in the warp. There were no xenos monsters. No Space Marines fighting. No burning ambition.

'Silence on the *Silencia*.'

Cawl looked up from the cylinder with a scowl. 'Are you making a joke, Friedisch?'

Friedisch gave a little grin. 'I am!'

Cawl turned back to his work with a shake of his head.

Friedisch gripped his friend's shoulder amicably. 'You always have to be the best at everything, Belisarius. The most intelligent, the most gifted, the quickest witted.'

'That is because I usually am.'

'You are modest too,' said Friedisch, who was in too good a mood to be infuriated by Cawl.

'I am modest!' Cawl wore a technologist's loop. Focusing motors whirred as he turned the cylinder over carefully in his hands, reading the machine marks on the metal with a seer's attention. Fragments of memories perturbed him yet. He saw a flash of a Space Marine in an unfamiliar armour type die to the claws of a xenos fiend.

He put the cylinder down hard, certainly harder than he meant. It clanked on the bench.

'Are you all right, Belisarius?'

Friedisch sat down in a chair behind Cawl. Though the *Silencia* was a luxurious barque as befitted its previous owner's status, Hester Aspertia Sigma-Sigma had been of the Mechanicum, and so it benefitted from a well-supplied workshop.

'I honestly don't know.' He glanced upwards, perhaps expecting to see an answer in the turmoil of energies surrounding their ship. Instead he saw a ceiling crowded with hanging tools and dormant mechanisms. 'Maybe it's the warp.'

'It's funny, I was going to mention that. Have you noticed how smooth our transit is?'

'I had not, actually.' Cawl glanced at the cylinder again. Too preoccupied with the clone-jar. Or…

Teeth and claws and dying men.

'But it is,' Cawl said, forcing the image away. 'Very smooth.'

'The last time I took a voyage through the immaterium, I thought I would die. Or worse,' said Friedisch. 'But this, well this…' He frowned. 'This is like it used to be. Before the war,' he said quietly. 'Why do you think that is?'

'I'm sure we'll find out when we emerge,' he said. 'There is no point

speculating on the unknown without sufficient data to reach a conclusion. If we allow ourselves to be drawn into the conversation, we will waste valuable time on unprovable hypotheses. We will find out in due course.'

'Never a wasted moment, eh, Belisarius?' Friedisch picked up a magnetic wrench, peered at it, and put it down. He had never shared Cawl's drive for work, but then, few did.

'I know you don't share my concern about wasting time, Friedisch, but you should. Of all things, time is the most precious. More precious than knowledge. Time is the only thing we cannot make more of. Time is the limitation on all other things. When a person is born, they are in servitude to time. We spend time stupidly, when we should hoard it like treasure. I do not like to waste time. There is never enough of it, and there are many thieves who covet it.'

He picked up the cylinder again, appalled with himself at how carelessly he had dropped it.

'We might die before we arrive,' said Friedisch. 'The warp is cruel.'

'If we do, we are dead. If we are not, and I do nothing, spending the hours in speculation, leisure or fear, they are wasted. Death comes for us all. What we do while it approaches is the only freedom we have. And I have this to think on.'

'Any progress?'

'So now you engage?'

'I am frightened, Belisarius,' said Friedisch, 'but I am also bored, and though you seem to forget it sometimes, I too am of the Cult.'

'Well then,' said Cawl. He tapped the cylinder. 'Within this is a half-formed clone copy of Hester Aspertia Sigma-Sigma, late and treacherous magos domina of Trisolian.'

'Indeed. A clever guarantee of immortality.'

'Not so clever,' said Cawl. 'A little desperate, even. She will not be coming back, for we have her last remaining clone seed. If this were to fall into the hands of our peers, it would almost certainly be destroyed, but that would be a terrible shame. Sigma-Sigma encoded all her knowledge into her clones. It's just waiting there to be picked up. Think, Friedisch. She was a shrewd tactician. We could become so ourselves.'

'But why? I never had you for a soldier.'

'I am not. But tactics and strategy are knowledge. All knowledge is valuable. All knowledge yearns to be known, and we as members of the Cult Mechanicus yearn to know it. Do you know that I was once a student of Diacomes of Gestus Decorum?'

‘I confess I have never heard of him, or of wherever Gestus Decorum is.’

‘You know I have served many masters.’

‘Yes, yes, as you are always telling me.’ Friedisch affected Cawl’s voice. ‘“Friedisch, while you were diligently working your way through the lower mysteries, I was travelling the galaxy! Buck up, my man! Learn! Learn! Learn all you can, from whom you can.” That’s about it, no?’ He toyed with another tool.

Cawl scowled at Friedisch’s mockery, but continued just the same. ‘Diacomes was a magos-ascetic. A hermit. He was also an incredibly skilled biologian.’ He smiled. ‘I think the path biologicus is my favourite discipline.’

‘Organic life is the Machine-God’s greatest accomplishment within the scope of the Great Work, all praise He who is three-in-one,’ agreed Friedisch. ‘By giving us life within an organic shell he presents us with the means and opportunity to improve upon physicality, as is his divine plan. He grants us complex weakness so we might learn metallic strength, and ascend to his level of machinic perfection.’ He scratched absentmindedly at the raw skin around his augmetic.

‘Such is life’s great test,’ said Cawl. ‘Now, the linkage of minds has been possible since the Age of Technology,’ said Cawl. ‘But there are a number of risks. Full linkage between living minds leads inevitably to psychosis as the personalities make war on each other for dominance. Hence the need for the moderation of the manifold in our Titan Legio. As such technologies demonstrate, it is impossible to achieve full blended consciousness between two living minds. Of course, it is possible to boost one’s own brainpower by linkage to a cloned or repurposed brain, thoroughly wiped, but the key there is that the brain be unformed, and patterning must be undertaken by the user. If one wishes to gain the full extent of knowledge within a deceased or living brain, it is impossible, for knowledge is indivisible from experience, and personality is the accumulation of experience. Ergo, personality must survive.’

‘Therefore, absorbing a person’s full knowledge risks conflict between personalities, which leads to psychosis,’ said Friedisch.

‘Which leads to death, and the loss of knowledge,’ said Cawl. ‘It is not a risk, it is a certainty. Diacomes, however, was certain this could be overcome. There are many interpersonal cybernetic networks, temporary and permanent, that enhance the capabilities of all involved, but no way of absorbing human knowledge into an extant personality without damaging or destroying that personality.’

‘Did Diacomes do it?’

‘The Dark Age technologists did it. He was sure of that. There is a way to

transcend human limitations. Knowledge may be passed on.'

'But did Diacomes rediscover the technique?' Friedisch pressed.

Cawl placed the clone cylinder carefully back into its rest.

'No,' said Cawl. 'But he came close.'

Cawl's hand strayed to his memcore. His fingers rubbed on warm metal.

'And you think you can do it?' Friedisch snorted. 'Really, Belisarius.'

'I–'

Bang.

'What was that?' said Friedisch.

Bang. The ship shuddered.

'I think we're coming out of the warp.'

'With no warning?' said Friedisch incredulously.

'I don't think Hester Aspertia's Navigator likes us very much,' said Cawl. 'He's a nasty little mutant.'

A musical refrain began to play throughout the ship.

'Oh, now he's telling us!' said Friedisch. 'I'd dearly like to wring his scrawny neck.'

'No you wouldn't,' said Cawl. He locked the cylinder into place, then after a moment's thought, picked it up, opened his robes and inserted it into a compartment concealed in his stomach. 'You're not very warlike.'

'When did you put that in?' said Friedisch. 'In your, in your gut!'

'We've been on this ship for weeks, my friend. While you've been moping, I've been working.'

Bang.

The ship jumped hard.

'Come on, we should get to the command deck, we're about to arrive at Ryza.'

'Lead on, Beli–'

BANG!

Circa 10,000 years ago

Cawl frowned. He was on a ship, now he wasn't. Something wasn't right. He felt…

Tall, he thought. I feel tall?

Bang. Metal struck dully off rock. *Bang.*

The ship was gone from his mind. He was as tall as he had always been. He was outside the laboratorium complex, on the bridge in the mountains where he

liked to go to think, and there was someone else upon the bridge with him, but he could not look at him. How could he forget that?

'I am sorry, I am disturbing you,' said the man. 'I will leave you to your meditations.'

Bang.

'Do not go,' pleaded Cawl. 'I want more than anything to speak to you.'

Bang.

'Then look upon me,' said the man. 'You have nothing to fear.'

Cawl laughed apologetically.

'I find I can't, I am sorry.'

Overhead a mangy bird circled, black and brown feathers stuck out at untidy angles. Terra once had an abundance of wildlife matched by few worlds. They were so precious, Terran analogues. Inevitably, mankind ruined them wherever they were found, as he had ruined his own home. On Terra a few pest species persisted, mutated more often than not. The planet was not unique in its impoverishment.

'I know you could make me, but,' he gabbled. 'But I'd…' Cawl swallowed. 'I'd rather you didn't. It behoves one to make these efforts oneself. Do you not think?' His voice was strange, not his own, deeper, more arrogant.

'I do not force men to do anything, Belisarius Cawl.'

Why did the man call him that? Belisarius Cawl was not his name.

The man chuckled softly at what Cawl thought. He could hear what he was thinking. He could hear what everyone was thinking. He came to stand by Cawl's side. 'I require a break from the work also. I will stand with you here a while, and we can enjoy the view together. I find it helps to imagine how it will look when it is restored, and life is returned in full measure to this world. Would you like me to describe how it should look? I remember. I could show you, if you would like.'

Cawl still could not turn his head to look at the man, but he smiled, and let gratitude warm his foreign voice.

'I would like that very much.'

'Then you must look at me.'

Hesitantly, Cawl looked up into the brown eyes of the man. He expected them to be brown, because they always were. Incredible eyes, steeped in compassion and power. Otherwise, He seemed so nondescript, with long brown hair and skin the colour of light recaff. At least He was today. The Emperor's face was unremarkable, and should have been easily recalled, but although Cawl had met

Him many times, he could never remember exactly what He looked like between meetings, as if He were not a man, but a figure from a recurring dream only remembered during sleep, and forgotten with the first rays of daylight. It was rarely the same face twice.

The Emperor of Mankind smiled. He had an easy smile. Reassuring. Warm. His smile was so full of positive things that the thought of His frown frightened Cawl. If it were as judgemental as the Emperor's smile was uplifting, he had no wish ever to see it.

'Please,' the Emperor said, gesturing down at the riverbed. 'I did not mean to interrupt your rest. It is good to stop and think, to prevent us rushing in haste into decisions we may later regret. Haste is man's greatest enemy. Contemplation is a neglected art.'

Bang went the metal.

Cawl's body prickled with electricity to be so close to Him. It was neither a pleasant nor a wholly unpleasant feeling.

'I have something to ask you,' said the Emperor. 'A personal favour.'

Cawl was taken aback. The mightiest man in existence wanted something from him. He gaped. The Emperor found this amusing. His smile quirked.

Cawl recovered himself. 'Anything, my lord. You have but to command it.'

'Thank you.' He paused. The Emperor was unsure of what to say. When He opened His mouth, from it came…

Bang bang bang BANG!

The sensation of the presence returned. Not Friedisch, not the Emperor, the other thing, the thing in the warm and intimate dark that was watching him. It seemed… bored.

Now

BANGBANGBANGBANGBANG.

Felix let his boltstorm gauntlet fire on full automatic. The machine-spirit exulted in the freedom to do violence, chattering out a delight of staccato explosions. Fire burst all around as the bolts found their mark. Shrapnel cracked from his ceramite, and his helm chimed warnings at the proximity of the explosions. The genestealer was gutted, lifted up and away from him, its back blown out. Alien blood spattered over Felix's faceplate, obscuring his view of the Hall of the Founder further.

Among the echoes of the Scythes' last stand, living genestealers lurked, and

they were throwing themselves out of the Pharos' remembrance and onto Felix's men. Threat alarms chimed in his helmet. He held his fist out, shooting almost blind. His battleplate cogitator had as much trouble telling past from present as he did. Targeting reticules danced over xenos killing machines and fired, only to find them phantoms. He activated his sword's power field and swung wildly. In passing through a creature that was not there, it cleaved into one that was, cutting through its exoskeletal ribs and exploding its organs with a flash of light.

Felix was knocked off balance by the blow. The forces emanating from the centre of the chamber buffeted him, sending him turning about as he was pushed back. The projection of the battle showed nothing of these vortices, but to be close to the centre of the display was to suffer the wrath of invisible storms.

'Cawl!' he shouted. 'Shut it off!' His vox emission was strangled by the Pharos' workings, shattered into feedback that made his ears ring. Cawl stood rigidly at the centre of it all, his acolyte still calmly taking notes. A genestealer leapt out of the projection, and claws outstretched to gut the magos encountered an energy field that threw it back with a flash of light. Stray bolt-rounds were similarly deflected. Several were transmuted to bursts of energy as a full burst clipped him.

'Watch the archmagos!' Felix roared. 'Control your fire!'

Again his words were thrown back at him. Vox was dead. He turned from the centre, guard up, and headed out to the edge of the room.

The other Space Marines were doing the same, backing further away from the projection circle and the play of ghosts. Genestealers that emerged from the hard edge of the phantoms were easily marked and cut down. Felix's helm display was a confused mess of broken inputs. He could not call up the status of his warriors, but at least one armoured figure of today was down amid yesterday's dead.

Felix signed one-handed with his boltstorm gauntlet, the fat digits of the power fist limning his orders with lightning.

Double fire line, backs to wall, avoid magos. Move! he signed.

His and Thracian's men stood shoulder to shoulder, their boltguns and bolt rifles putting out a wall of shot that nothing could cross. Genestealers reared up and died, purple blood flying from their crimson bodies. There was confusion, no time to think, only to fire. Thracian's Terminators were moving round the projection to create a crossfire, trusting their heavy suits of armour to protect them from savage tyranid claws.

The creatures had seemed to be materialising directly from the projection, but

then Alpha Primus and Gathein began to hurl psychic lightning at the enemy, lighting up the room, and Felix saw the source of the threat was on the far side of the chamber.

They're coming from the lower levels, he signed, and directed half the Space Marines to lay down covering fire on the entrance. Brother Ixen pumped the slide of his grenade launcher repeatedly, filling the down stair with clouds of shrapnel. The light from the explosions and the witchfire revealed a press of aliens, all rushing up heedlessly into the Imperial guns. All was performed in the perfect silence of vacuum, no vox, no communication or outside sounds, only the sound of his own breathing and tremors from detonations powerful enough to overcome the Pharos' trembling.

Cominus ceased firing. He took his bolt rifle in one had so he could sign to the tetrarch.

They are fleeing. They are making for the exit.

Felix saw that this was true. The majority of the creatures that made it into the room were not coming for them, but pouring towards the bronze doors and the Crooked Stair. Screened by the Pharos' projection, their flight had evaded his notice but now he saw.

The genestealers were running away, right into the guns of the Space Marines outside.

A surge of power from the alien machine caused a loud crack across the vox. The display went out. The room fell dark. A pack of genestealers ran along the wall, heading for the doors. They died by the strobing light of bolt-fire.

The vox snapped back on.

'Cawl!' Felix shouted, striding forwards. The room seemed smaller now the display was off. Alien bodies crunched under his feet.

'Ah, tetrarch,' said Cawl. He smiled as if he had been momentarily distracted. 'Impressive, isn't it? More active than I thought.'

Felix stood before the magos.

'You could have killed us all,' said Felix. Behind him Yansar and Aratus were attending to the fallen. Felix's systems were working again. Two mortis runes shone in his eyes.

'Yes, well. Every investigation carries a certain amount of risk.' Cawl seemed distracted. Qvo irritated Felix by continuing his note taking.

'My lord!' Yansar hailed him. 'Brother Tullio is gravely injured. Brother Tobias and Sergeant Quintos of the Scythes are dead.'

The Scythes' Apothecary was already working on them to extract their

geneseed, while Thracian sent two of his warriors out to check on the gene vault in the Walk of the First Scythes.

'Give me your prognosis on Tullio,' Felix demanded.

'I can return him to combat effectiveness, if I can treat him somewhere with adequate facilities.'

'If you don't?'

'There is a fifteen per cent chance of death. In any case, he can't fight like this, and his armour's compromised.'

'You may use our apothecarion,' said Thracian. The Chapter Master joined Felix and Cawl. 'We can regroup in the Emperor's Watch and assess the situation while Brother Tullio is seen to and Sebastion completes his task. The tower can easily be held if need be. The upper chambers will not be so affected by the things under this mountain. They were sanctified by the Emperor Himself at the dawn of the Imperium.'

'The Emperor has no hold over this place,' said Alpha Primus. 'It is old, and evil.'

'Do you feel it, brother?' asked Gathein.

'I feel nothing at all. That is how I know,' said Primus.

'That's all theoretical. The practical is that I'll need to get Tullio's armour off and work on him in a properly equipped facility,' said Yansar.

'I am sure we can repressurise part of the tower,' said Thracian.

'Yansar?' asked Felix.

'It would be better than taking him back down the stairs and evacuating him from the mountain,' the Apothecary agreed.

'The disabling of the defence grid is our primary objective at this time,' said Felix. 'We will see it is done. Cawl, before you attempt anything like that you are to consult with me.'

'As you wish, Decimus. But I'm sure you'll agree, impressive results. Impressive results!' He moved off in consultation with Qvo.

'The genestealers are the lords of Mount Pharos now. We must be more careful,' said Gathein.

'Can you sense their psychic net?'

'It is incoherent,' said Gathein.

Primus nodded. 'Disrupted. They are afraid.'

'They are weak,' said Cominus. He bent over a shattered corpse. 'Look at this. These wounds are not from our weapons.' He jabbed two fingers into a perfectly neat hole burned into the creature's side. 'Nor is this.' A similarly clean slash

wound had cut away some of its spinal crest. ‘These look like particle beam wounds.’

‘They were fleeing,’ said one of the Scythes. His name plate proclaimed him to be Keltru. Both his legs were bionic replacements.

Felix nodded, and looked down the stairs. ‘From the Pharos.’

‘The engines are still running,’ said Daelus. He datapulsed a screed of readings to the tetrarch. ‘I’m seeing ghost echoes of energy spikes everywhere. What has Belisarius Cawl done?’

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

THE LORDS OF MOUNT PHAROS

‘I have checked over the monastery systems, and we can refill these three levels with atmosphere,’ said Daelus. Felix watched the Techmarine move his finger through the hololithic image projected by Cominus’ forearm comms unit. The image was semi-transparent, showing all the layers of the fortress-monastery. The central tower of the Emperor’s Watch clung to the very top of the mountain, its footings sunk right into the basalt encasing the blackstone. The rest of the fortress had grown up around it; though never engulfing the uppermost levels of the tower, it spread out and down the mountainsides. In the cartolith, the Pharos itself was an absence, an unscannable block of darkness beneath the fortress.

‘These levels include the apothecarion and the upper armouries,’ said Thracian. ‘It would be useful to both the Chosen and to the Scythes to have these parts pressurised.’

They were in the Vigilatum, a cylindrical, central hall that rose fully halfway up the tower’s height. Balustraded galleries overlooked the plunging drop, statues of Space Marines at every major support. Stairs wound their way up the interior, linking the landings. A set of blast doors, currently sealed, led onto the stairs going down into the Hall of the Founder.

‘What about power?’ said Felix.

‘The reactor is out and cold,’ said Cawl. ‘It would take several days and much fuel to reignite. However, there are indications of power output, separate from that of the mountain, that bear Imperial wave signatures. These will be the Chapter’s emergency battery systems. It should be easy to bring them to wakefulness. They will provide days of power, if they were fully charged before

the monastery's fall.'

'Then power and air are to be restored as secondary objectives. As a matter of priority communications must be established with the fleet and with Odessa Port,' said Felix. 'The primary objective remains the deactivation of the defence matrix.'

'A simple input of the armoury codes in the primary armament cogitation systems should be enough to shut it down,' said Sebastion. His finger moved down the tower's length to the very bottom, where a series of chambers sheltered beneath more than three hundred feet of rock. 'The Defensor Strategium centre is here, well below the peak.'

'The codes were not accepted remotely,' said Felix.

'What if your main systems have been compromised by the mountain like the gun on the wall?' asked Daelus.

'Then I will excise the xenos intrusion, overload the cogitators and destroy the control systems,' said Sebastion. 'Leaving the weapons intact. If that does not work, then the guns can be spiked remotely.'

'How long will that take?' said Felix.

'Two hours, maybe less,' said Sebastion. 'There are many armoured doors between here and there. If they do not respond to Chapter cyphers either, I shall have to cut my way through.'

'Troncus and I will help you,' said Daelus. 'It will be an honour to watch you work, Forgemaster.'

Troncus nodded.

Sebastion shook his head. 'Those of us with insight into the mysteries of Mars should divide our efforts,' said the Forgemaster. 'Accomplish all mission objectives at once. You are tech-acolytes. You should reengage the life support systems while I deal with the weapons.'

'That is the most efficient course of action,' said Qvo-87.

'Qvo-87 and I will attend to the power sinks,' said Cawl.

'Then Troncus and I will take environmental control, as the Forgemaster suggests,' said Daelus.

'Brother Esau will accompany you, Forgemaster. Brother Ulas shall go with Daelus' party,' said Thracian. 'I will be gladder if you are properly protected.'

'I will go with Sebastion also,' said Alpha Primus.

'Brother Esau will be sufficient,' said the Forgemaster.

'Then I will accompany Daelus' group,' said Primus.

'Who will watch over the archmagos?' said Thracian.

‘The archmagos will!’ scoffed Cawl. ‘I am perfectly capable of protecting myself.’ He raised up his weapons and spun them around. ‘I do not require Primus to be safe. The power sinks are isolated. Qvo and I will be fine. A better combat efficiency will be achieved if he travels with Daelus. The environmental controls are most central, and therefore the group there will be swiftest to respond to calls for aid. It makes sense they be the biggest company, and that Primus be most able to respond should something go wrong. He is the most gifted of you. Qvo-87 and I will not be long. We will join the central group once we have power restored.’

Felix reluctantly agreed. ‘Stay vigilant. Auspex scans indicate no lifeforms in the tower, but that does not mean there are no hibernating organisms here. Deactivate the weapons. Get those cannons offline. Cominus will guard the lower stairs with Cadmus,’ he continued. ‘Gathein will accompany me to the tower summit. We will check the citadel communications mast preparatory to reopening channels with the fleet. Yansar has already gone to the apothecarion and begun stabilising Brother Tullio.’

‘I and the remainder of my men will head to the armoury to retrieve our Chapter relics,’ said Thracian, ‘and prepare for the internment of our dead and the geneseed in the tombs. From the armoury my warriors will be able to act as a second rapid response force if the enemy attack.’

‘You are sure I will be able to overcome the Pharos’ interference from the top of the tower?’ Felix asked.

‘Our main communications array is powerful,’ said Thracian. ‘You will have no difficulty contacting the fleet from that altitude, even with the Pharos awakening.’ Thracian looked to Sebastion for confirmation.

‘It should be the case,’ said the Forgemaster. ‘I may be wrong. I’ve never seen interference like this. It is probable that you will have limited time. The mountain’s strength is growing.’

‘Then I will depart immediately. Once we have contact, I will order our drop-ship up to the northern landing pad the moment the fortress-monastery defences are offline,’ said Felix. ‘Daelus tells me it is the most intact.’

‘And then the real work can begin,’ said Cawl.

‘We shall meet here again in three hours,’ said Felix. ‘Set mission count.’

In a dozen Space Marine helmets, miniature chronographs blinked to zero.

‘Begin,’ said Felix.

Daelus watched Ulas through his autosenses. The Scythe was watching him

back.

They are hiding something. Felix had told them all of Cadmus' warning.

The corridors appeared as clean as if the fortress monastery were still operational, but then they would pass the wreck of one of the servitors that had serviced the place, its metallic components scattered and picked clean of organics, and the illusion broke.

Troncus was following the lines of piping along the ceiling. They reached a junction, and the group paused while Troncus pulled out a small auspex to take readings. He gestured down the left hand corridor to indicate the others should follow him.

'Your brother does not speak much,' said Alpha Primus softly.

Daelus made a noise of amusement. 'Troncus doesn't speak at all.'

Daelus waited for Alpha Primus to ask. You could build a picture of a man's mind by letting your sentences hang, and seeing where their curiosity took them. They always wanted to know when you were hiding something. In Daelus' experience, it was how they asked that let you look into their minds.

'Why?' Alpha Primus said eventually.

'Because when Troncus met the primarch, he was awestruck. He fumbled his words, he babbled, he made a fool of himself. He felt that he had so disgraced himself, that he had gone so far from what he thought a Techmarine should be, that he went down to his Chapter armoury and burned out his own tongue with a plasma cutter.'

'Really?' said Alpha Primus. He affected an emotionless air, but he could not conceal his interest.

'Yes,' said Daelus. 'You'd think an oath of silence would suffice, but Troncus never does things by halves. You have to imagine that a plasma cutter makes a mess of a man's face. He could have killed himself. He should have been executed, but his Chaplain enforced penance and they let him live, Emperor alone knows why. Maybe we shouldn't be surprised. Guilliman can have that sort of effect on people. It affected me when I first met him.' His voice became thoughtful. 'I've heard of mortals killing themselves after being in his presence, because they will never experience a more important moment.' His voice resumed its usual bright tone. 'I can't guess what it must have been like meeting more than one primarch at once. Whole rooms of people must have gone insane.'

Troncus was a blur ahead in the dark. When stablights glanced off his armour, the brief glimpses afforded made him seem like a mechanical ghost fleeing into

the gloom.

Primus watched him closely.

‘Are you lying?’ Primus said.

‘What do you think?’ said Daelus.

‘I could look into your mind.’

‘You wouldn’t violate the mind of an ally like that though, would you?’ said Daelus.

Primus growled. ‘If Troncus’ ideal of what a Techmarine should be is silent and sombre, what does he think of you?’

‘Primus has a point,’ said Ulas, breaking his watchful silence. ‘It is unseemly the amount that you speak.’

Daelus laughed. ‘Brothers! I take no offence. Troncus thinks I talk altogether too much. But I say to him, just because we tend to machines, it does not mean we have to love them more than our brothers or more than other men. Machines are made by men. Understanding the human mind properly gives insight into their spirits. Machine-spirits have their quirks as men do. I like to talk, because through talking and listening you learn. Brother Troncus doesn’t contradict my argument, so I assume I am right.’

‘Space Marines should not jabber,’ said Ulas.

‘We shall remain in amicable disagreement then.’ Daelus slowed and let his arm trail along the wall. The rockcrete changed colour there, where newer materials were bonded to a much older core. ‘See these walls?’ He tapped the inner band, weathered dark by ancient storms. ‘The original outer surface. This tower was much smaller when first built.’

‘Our history says this tower was built in the time of the Emperor, by great heroes of the age,’ said Ulas. ‘This is the most ancient part of our citadel, and the most holy. It was the heart of our fortress-monastery. They say the Emperor Himself came here, once.’

‘What of it?’ said Alpha Primus. Daelus was forming the opinion that Alpha Primus tried far too hard to sound disinterested.

‘Don’t you feel the smallest bit awed, Primus?’ said Daelus. ‘The history here. Guilliman walked these halls in the days of the Heresy. Perhaps others of the primarchs did too. The Pharos itself, its age, think of the secrets it contains. It is millions of years old. *Millions*.’

‘It is xenos technology. Dangerous. Unclean.’

‘You serve Cawl,’ said Daelus. ‘He does not believe so.’

Troncus disappeared into the dark. His suit light bobbed along the corridor, and

vanished round a corner.

'I don't serve him. I belong to him,' said Alpha Primus. 'That doesn't mean my mind is the same as his.'

'He is brilliant,' said Daelus. 'He made us all.'

'He saved our Chapter,' Ulas said.

'You do not know him as I do. He made me first,' said Alpha Primus. 'I have been at his side for a long time. He gave me too much. His designs were too ambitious. I suffer because of it.'

'How so?' said Ulas. 'You are mighty. If every Primaris Marine had your strength then–'

'I hurt,' Primus interrupted. 'Everywhere. My dreams are black. My soul is shackled by another man's ideal. I see more and know more than any human being ever should. In creating me, Cawl tried to match the Emperor's achievements. It did not work. I pay for his arrogance every second of every day. I tell you because you should know that the archmagos dominus' talents are not infinite. I am your prototype, and living evidence of his overreach.'

Alpha Primus pushed past Daelus roughly. His strength was phenomenal, and he knocked Daelus' servoharness into the wall.

When they had turned down the corridor Troncus had taken, the ceiling lumens blinked on. Daelus' suit registered a steady flow of power through the tower walls. Troncus emerged from a door further down and beckoned.

'The great Cawl,' Daelus voxed. 'Ever in favour with the machine-spirit.'

Troncus, as usual, said nothing.

'That is it,' said Ulas. 'Your friend has found the environmental control centre.'

'Then let us get some air into these halls,' said Daelus.

Sebastion came across another empty suit of armour. He spent a few minutes gathering the pieces together. When they were in a neat pile, the helmet on top, he marked them with a small datatag, and recorded the location in his cogitator while Esau looked on.

'Brother Sidonus,' said Sebastion sadly. 'Who will say the rites of the fallen over him? There are Chaplains again in the Scythes of the Emperor, good men, with souls as heavily armoured as their bodies, but though they may say the words and feel the sorrow of laying a brother to rest, they were not here when Sotha fell. They can never understand how we suffer.'

'We should move on,' Esau said.

'We make good time,' said Sebastion. 'These are relics of our Chapter. All must

be properly treated. As one age turns into the next, we cannot forget who we were.'

'We are few.'

'But we live.'

Sebastion activated the datatag and moved on. The stablights mounted on their battleplate picked out bolt impact craters on the walls. Whatever Brother Sidonus had fought there, in the centre of the Scythes of the Emperor's home, no trace was left. There were many such areas of damage. Battles which would never be recorded, fought by warriors left to die alone.

They came to a stair that descended deep into the mountain. The route they took went down into the most heavily defended parts of the fortress-monastery citadel, the most isolated. It was utterly black. Their suits provided the sole source of illumination. Crisp rounds of bright white light slid over a mural that curled downwards with the stair. It was very old, the paint faded, missing in many places where plaster had been replaced and the mural not repaired. It was more a relic than a decoration. Among its many battle scenes were long segments depicting humans and transhumans at work together, clearing the swiftly growing quicktrees that had cloaked the planet. It was constant work, and the nature of the terrain dictated that at least some of it had to be undertaken by hand.

'This was who we were,' said Sebastion. 'The Lords of Mount Pharos. We were not distant. We were protectors of the weak, the shield of the Imperium, as Space Marines were meant to be.'

'The Chapter will remember,' said Esau.

'It will,' said Sebastion. 'In dusty tomes and datacrystals. It will remember its history. But it will be history, Esau. A collection of curiosities and traditions, brought out and revered. Words to be recited. Deeds to be collated. But only history. To mean something a tradition has to survive, it has to be lived. I remember discovering when I went to Mars, to study there under the Auxilia Technologica Astartes, how much the tech-priests venerate knowledge. Through them, I too came to respect it, to crave it. I understand, however, that knowledge without experience is dry. It is an adornment to the intellect, it is not useful in the way a gun is useful. Knowledge is a weapon, but not while it is on paper. It is the same with these traditions. Even should the Chapter return to this mountain, and reoccupy these halls, the world these images remember is gone and will never return. The Primaris Marines will never work shoulder to shoulder with the common folk. They will never train in the phantine-haunted wilderness. They

will never learn to love the wildness and the peace of this world as we all did, no matter our origin. Our people are devoured. The forests are gone.'

'Thracian believes Cawl can bring it back,' said Esau. He swivelled the massive shoulders of his Terminator armour to play his suit light over a stylised image of Mount Pharos. Sothopolis was painted around its base. The Chapter fortress stood over all, depicted larger than life, the guarantor of the planet's safety.

'Cawl can deliver a facsimile. Nothing can bring back the past.' The stairs turned from stone to metal. The walls became embossed panels of plasteel. At that point the Emperor's Watch left the rock behind, its roots thrusting down into a great emptiness. The battery command centre and void shield control systems were located safe at the centre of a cavern.

'I remember the jubilation the day the Primaris contingent joined us. That feeling that we were saved, and we were. The Scythes of the Emperor would survive, but as something new. The old days are done, Esau. It is not our job to bring them back, but to lay them to rest. We have one last task to perform before that can be so. We must find the source of the evil that took us, and expunge it. We have to recover our honour.'

'Do you think Thracian can do it? He suffers great shame and anger.'

'Are you suggesting it clouds his thinking?'

'No, Forgemaster.'

'You should not. Fury makes him stronger,' Sebastion said. 'His fury will see this task done. He will look into the eyes of the foe and it will not be able to stay his hand.'

'Then we need to hurry. Soon there will be too few of us left to see the task done.'

The first of several heavy blast doors barred their way. When it refused to open, Sebastion went to the side and began to cut into the plasteel plating.

'We will do it, brother, though it will kill us all.' Plasma light played over the angular planes of his helm. 'When we have accomplished the final mission of the Scythes of the Emperor, we last few may fade, and leave the future to others. Let us pray our shame goes unrecorded.'

Yansar's stablight was bright and large, intended to illuminate his surgery when in battle, so it lit the powerless apothecarion well enough. His sole patient lay on the diagnostic slab of an auto-chirurgeon. The machine's spindly arms were pulled in like those of a dead insect. Whether it would work was as yet untested. He'd run diagnostic analysis on it through his own systems, but though the

mechanism appeared whole he couldn't be certain its datalooms were entire. He was no machine-priest. The look of the rest of the apothecarion didn't imbue confidence, and he'd already decided to perform the surgery himself. The place had been thoroughly smashed by the invaders. He had heard it was often the way with the tyranids.

'Mess halls and medicae,' he said to himself. Easy sources of organics for the invaders to consume. The apothecarions of the Space Marines contained genetic material of rare potency.

Tullio was in a bad way. Genestealer claws were sharper than scalpels, and many times stronger. They cleaved through ceramite as if it were a minor inconvenience. Tullio's breastplate was a shattered mess. The claws had gone deep, and Space Marine bone posed less of an obstacle than Space Marine armour. Scans suggested deep tissue trauma beneath the broken box of his ribcage, but the real problem was that until the atmosphere was restored, there was nothing Yansar could do about it. Sealant foams exuded by the damaged armour's cellular sub-structure had glued shattered bone, flesh and ceramite into an unholy mess. In this case the genius of the armour's construction worked against the Apothecary.

His vox bead chimed.

'Tetrarch,' he said.

'Yansar. How is your patient?'

'Stable. There is not much I can do for him yet. The facility is badly damaged, but I should be able to treat him effectively if I can get his armour off. He's sedated right now. I've given him medicaments to forestall the activation of his mucranoid and the Belisarian furnace. If he goes into a deep healing coma with his armour crushed into his chest it will kill him. I need an atmosphere in here.'

'Understood. Try to bring him back to combat readiness, if you can. I have reached the communications array and am standing by for power restoration.'

'You cannot reach the fleet yet?'

'Negative. The comms array was damaged, and the mountain's voice is too loud. They will not hear me without a significant signal boost. Should Cawl achieve his objective, all will be well. If we cannot restore power, I will have Ixen return down the mountain and out of the interference shadow while Gathein attempts psychic contact. Keep me apprised of Tullio's condition.'

'Yes, my lord. Before you go, there is something I feel I should report.'

'Go ahead.'

'When I brought Tullio here, I performed a quick investigation of the

apothecarion facilities.'

'You found something?'

'When I reached their geneseed vault, I discovered that some of the storage containers had been removed, but not all. Those remaining had been cracked open and the material inside consumed by the enemy. My question is, my lord, if the Scythes had time to retrieve any of their genestocks, why not take them all? Why did they leave some of it behind?'

'A question I hope we will have answers for soon, Yansar. Felix out.'

Felix cut the channel.

He was at the highest point of the Emperor's Watch. A turret projected from the main building. It was slender, not much use for defence, but a good place for a comms mast. A collection of rods and resonator coils, the mast had been tall enough that it could broadcast over the rumpled bustle of hills and lesser peaks behind the mountain into the valleys beyond. The main emitters were down; about halfway up they'd been cut diagonally across by bioplasma, leaving the upper part dangling by twisted cables which Felix had had to cut away. But enough of the smaller aerials remained.

He knelt by the base of the tower, leads snaking from an open panel in his arm to connect him to the array. After speaking with Yansar he cycled through the various groups within the fortress-monastery. Daelus. Ixen and Austen, then Cominus and Cadmus. Then Thracian, and last of all Cawl.

'You have it working, my lord,' said Gathein, returning through the access hatch from a patrol of the tower's uppermost chambers.

'I do,' said Felix. 'Cawl sends an automated message, Thracian answered me with the most perfunctory response, and Sebastion gave me a vox click, so although I can hardly say I have been met with the acme of Imperial cooperation, we at least have the option of contact.'

Gathein nodded. His helm was bulky with his psychic hood. He was imposing when helmeted, disturbing in a way that other Space Marines were not. In his reaction to Gathein's abilities, Felix wondered if he was experiencing an echo of the unease mortals felt when facing him. A Librarian was an object of mistrust and awe, even to another Space Marine.

'We are in a stronger position if we can communicate with the fleet.'

'Communicating with the void should be simple enough,' said Felix. 'If Cawl can provide us enough power to boost the signal over the Pharos' voice. We shall know in a few minutes.'

‘I will prepare myself to speak mind to mind, in case the objective is not met.’

‘Do so,’ said Felix. ‘Although I would prefer you to save your strength. This mountain is not done surprising us yet.’

‘If I weary myself, you have Alpha Primus. He is a rare talent.’

‘He is very powerful,’ said Felix.

‘Far more powerful than I,’ said Gathein. ‘I tried to look inside him, but he stopped me, and I would not dare attempt to skim the mind of Cawl for fear of Primus’ reaction. What manner of creature is he?’

‘He is a chimera,’ said Felix, making a few last adjustments. ‘Among certain circles he is well known. He is known to the primarch, and he is known to me. Infamous would be an appropriate word.’

‘For his deeds, or his nature?’

Felix didn’t answer immediately, but looked up from his comms panel. ‘I will tell you what Roboute Guilliman believes him to be, then you may decide yourself. This is information of the highest order of classification, but you, as a member of my bodyguard, must be aware of all threats. Do not repeat what I am about to say.’

‘Then you believe him to be a threat. That is good,’ said Gathein. ‘A gift like his makes for a fickle ally. You have my word I will speak to no one of what you say.’

‘Primus was among the first of us,’ said Felix. ‘Cawl says the first, though I suspect there were others, and that he is simply the first successful Primaris. Lord Guilliman had a device called the Sangprimus Portem. Do you know what that is?’

‘No, my lord.’

‘It is a repository of all surviving information pertaining to the creation of Lord Guilliman and his brothers. The Emperor’s greatest work. It is incomplete, so I was told, or else I doubt Guilliman would have given it to anyone, let alone Belisarius Cawl. Cawl was commanded to use the information contained inside to create a superior breed of Space Marine, which he did. But he is prone to flights of fancy. His ambition knows few limits. For example, he was expressly forbidden from putting Space Marines from the fallen primarch gene-lines into full production.’

‘He experimented with them?’ said Gathein in amazement.

‘Cawl is a follower of the Emperor as Omnissiah. He believes the eighteen genelines to be part of a sacred plan, and that that plan will only function properly if all its components are utilised. Lord Guilliman disagrees.’

‘Is Primus one of these abominations?’

‘Not quite. Lord Guilliman believes that Alpha Primus is something more than a prototype. He is a personal project of Cawl’s. He has certain gifts that no others have. His psychic ability is only part of it.’

‘Did he attempt to reproduce the Emperor’s work?’

‘I have no doubt Guilliman would have killed Cawl had he gone that far. Primus is a Space Marine, not like the rest of us perhaps, but a servant of the Imperium nonetheless, and Adeptus Astartes. He is no primarch. Not even Cawl would dare to attempt something that audacious. Even so, he abused Lord Guilliman’s trust. Our genefather does not approve of Primus. But he could not object. He was in his death state while Cawl worked. Nobody knew of Primus until he appeared one day at Cawl’s side. You were not present at the Yxian campaign.’

‘I am not like you, my lord. You were born when the Imperium was young. This is my century. I took little part in the Indomitus Crusade. But who has not heard of the Yxian campaign?’

‘Primus appeared there in public for the first time, but when I encountered him I was certain I had met him before. It was only through much effort that I recalled seeing him sometimes, aboard the *Zar Quaesitor* when I was being changed. If my memories are true, then Primus is as ancient as I am. More so, for he has been active for much longer than I have.’

‘I shall remember, and be wary,’ said Gathein.

‘Anyone with that amount of ability is a threat, brother. If history has taught us anything at all, it is that threats come more often from within than from the outside.’

Gathein stood by the parapet, looking down the plunging drop of the Emperor’s Watch to the layered courtyards of the monastery, and out beyond, down to Sothopolis and the empty ocean. ‘This must have been a beautiful world.’

‘By all accounts it was,’ said Felix.

‘Do you believe Cawl can restore it?’

‘Who knows what the magos is capable of? He is enigmatic.’

‘Those that hide their abilities and intentions are dangerous,’ said Gathein.

‘Dangerous he certainly is,’ said Felix.

The vox crackled in Felix’s ears.

‘My Lord,’ said Daelus. *‘Cawl has activated the back-up powercells. We have power enough for at least the next twelve hours. Troncus is close to bringing the atmospheric cyclers to good function. While he’s doing that, I’m going to give us*

all a little light.'

Lumens snapped on all over the fortress-monastery, illuminating the tower from top to bottom. Fresh vibrations trembled through the citadel's structure; the regular, steady feel of Imperial machinery at work, not the wild tremble of the xenos artefact.

'How sure of their power these tyranids are, not to slight our fortresses when they are done,' said Gathein. 'This place could stand for a million years more.'

'All things have weaknesses. Hubris is common to many species, even those that are the most alien,' said Felix. 'Help me, brother. We must realign the array. It is time to speak with our ships.'

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

A RECKLESS CUT

Sebastion and Esau descended further. Several doors stood in their way. All required opening, and that took time. A journey of minutes stretched into an hour, then longer. Finally, they reached the bottom.

Beyond the final door was a circular chamber. From it several heavily shielded doors led to various other chambers of strategic import. Bodies preserved by the vacuum lay about, all of them showing the signs of violent death. Lasguns and boltguns, not claws and acid, had felled these warriors. Chapter serfs lay among warriors dressed in the uniforms of Sotha's modest defence forces.

'Treachery,' said Sebastion. 'Our own kind turned against us.' He pushed over the frozen remains of a three-armed abomination. 'No other race is so foul.'

'These two doors are still sealed,' said Esau. 'No sign of enemy presence.'

Sebastion approached one of the doors and rested his hand upon the metal. 'Here is the place our Chapter fell – not on the walls, but here.'

A few minutes' work saw the door mechanisms hooked up to Sebastion's power unit and unlocked with Chapter cypher codes.

'Open,' Sebastion commanded the door-spirit.

The instant the door cracked, a rush of stale air blasted from inside. They walked down an access corridor guarded by dormant guns. Nothing had been touched. The tyranid swarm had never made it into that part of the monastery.

Then they passed through another door into battery command, and witnessed there the results of betrayal. Though the swarm had been kept outside, the subverted warriors of Sotha had broken in.

'The xenos slaves came in through the wall from the cavern,' said Sebastion.

He pointed out a square melta-cut through the side of the room. ‘This is how we fell. Emperor alone knows how they got through the mountain.’

He strode forwards into a scene of battle preserved by the airless dark. Mummified corpses lay everywhere. Many were mortal servants of the Chapter, their uniforms discoloured by spilled fluids and covered with frost. Many more were others dressed in the uniforms of the Sotharan defence force. There were more misshapen creatures among them.

‘The twisted progeny of man and alien,’ said Sebastion.

At the centre of the room there was a single transhuman figure slumped over the command station, a lasgun wound to the back of his head, placed exactly where it would kill him. An empty bolt pistol lay on the console near his open hand. Sebastion stopped when he saw him.

‘Brother Balthazar,’ said Sebastion. ‘Commander of the Batteries. Look, Esau, upon a hero of the Imperium. His body was ruined in battle. Still he served. I crafted these augmetics myself. No legs, one arm, his spine destroyed. He could have taken the Emperor’s mercy. He could have requested a Dreadnought’s tomb, but he opted to retire here where he might serve more. He always loved the biggest guns.’ Sebastion looked around at the corpses in the room. All had died violently. A couple of skeletal figures not far from the battery commander lay savagely embraced, hands locked about each other’s throats. ‘Three hundred years of loyal service,’ said Sebastion. ‘Treachery was his reward. They shut down the guns and the void shields. We thought we were safe. We were wrong.’

Sebastion stood in silent contemplation a moment, surveying the room as if it were a shrine. Then with a sudden growl of active motors, he began to move briskly, the arms of his servoharness picking up the corpses and moving them aside. Frozen limbs broke from torsos. Skulls wearing cracked masks of skin bounced along the floor. ‘Esau, aid me. Remove the dead from here. I must access the control panels.’

As they worked, the room thrummed to the surge of returning power. Screens came on under corpses welded to them by blood and ice.

‘The archmagos has done his part,’ said Sebastion. ‘Time for us to do ours.’ He went to the desk and blew frozen blood out of a primary input port with a jet of hot, compressed air. A mechadendrite emerged from his backpack and extended, a dataspike emerging from its spinning end.

The spike plunged home.

‘Curious,’ said Sebastion. ‘I am not getting any response from the fortress-monastery datanet.’

‘Forgemaster,’ said Esau. ‘Is this the cause?’

Sebastion looked to where Esau was pointing, his mechadendrite extracting itself and retracting as he turned.

Not far from the xeno-slaves’ ingress the room was breached a second time, by a silver spear of metal which split into smaller threads and wormed their way into the casings of machines. Invisible in the dark, they glinted malevolently under the revived lumens.

‘Xenos subversion tendrils, same as on the parapets. More blasphemy.’

Scanning beams played over the tendrils from Sebastion’s armour as he approached.

‘By Mars, it’s in everything.’ He went closer to the main root of silvery metal. ‘I dare not sever this.’ He walked alongside the spread of filaments, following one thread as it split and split again.

‘Here is the defence laser matrix,’ he said, reaching a boxy cogitator casing.

An arm lifted upon his back. The plasma cutter ignited.

‘Forgive me, spirit of this mechanism, for what I must do,’ he intoned. ‘This will not be an elegant repair,’ Sebastion said to Esau. ‘If I sever these linkages, it should remove the xenos influence from the main battery. Once it is expunged, we will remotely spike the guns, and the fleet will be able to draw near. We have no hope of saving them, not without risking their use against our own ships.’ He ran his hands along the path of the silver thread, not quite touching it. ‘Cutting this will provoke a response from the mountain. You must watch over me. Do not trust what you see.’

Sebastion opened a vox-channel to all the expedition members.

‘Brothers, archmagos. I have reached battery command and am about to commence excision of xenos infiltration. Destruction of orbital defences will follow. Prepare yourselves.’

He lowered the plasma cutter towards the thread.

The mountain began to shake before the flame touched the metal.

Esau raised his storm bolter, and stood guard.

Felix cut connection with the fleet.

‘It is done,’ he said. ‘The transport is prepared to come. The fleet is on standby for extraction. We shall go within.’

Gathein and he went inside the turret, descending metal steps towards the top level of the citadel.

‘I wish you to perform another psychic scan of the mountain, Epistolary,’ said

Felix when they were halfway down. ‘I want to know if the increased activity has any effect on the etheric readability of the–’

He stopped on a short landing. Gathein was nowhere to be seen. There was nowhere he could have gone. The inside of the turret was a hollow circle. The access stairs to the roof ran in a dull red circuit around the walls. Cables were neatly pinned to the ancient rockcrete, broken by a junction box decorated with a jawless steel skull. The room was completely featureless besides these few details. There was a single way in, and a single way out. Gathein had vanished.

‘Gathein!’ Felix brought his weaponry online with a thought. Powerfields crackled in the quiet.

He went back up the stairs to the armoured hatch leading to the roof. It was shut tight. He slammed his shoulder into the hatch, causing it to boom, but it would not budge.

‘Gathein,’ he voxed.

Soft static replied.

‘Decimus!’

A soft voice called to him from the ground, impossible in the vacuum, and yet he distinctly heard it. The door into the main body of the tower was closing. Felix caught a glimpse of movement before it swung closed.

‘Gathein? Gathein, I have a contact, I am in pursuit, tower upper level. Follow me if you can.’

He carried on down the stairs and went out cautiously, his boltstorm gauntlet held out in front of him. There was another stair down, a short flight that led into a hall in the centre of the tower. Several rooms occupied the level, all empty cells. Felix didn’t know much of the Scythes’ cult, but they looked like isolation rooms or meditation cells. They were all lockable from the outside only, each one having a hard cot and a single water spout.

He searched them one at a time. Nothing was in any of them. They must have been unoccupied at the time of the invasion, because they were undamaged. No real attack had come against the tower. The tyranids always went where there was prey.

Still, he was careful, pushing open the door with his closed power fist, the machine-spirit of his twinned guns ready to fire.

Atmospheric mix was pouring into the tower. The hiss of it grew in volume as the air thickened.

He’d checked five cells when he heard a burst of musical laughter from the end of the corridor. He backed out of the cell he was in quickly, banging the wall

hard with his bulky armour. The door in the last cell was closing. Again there was a flash of movement.

'Wait!' called Felix.

The door closed. He heard it now. Sound was filling the tower along with the air.

He ran down the corridor. The door was locked and would not open. The lock was a simple slide bar, sturdy enough to shut a Space Marine inside, but not sophisticated. No matter how hard he tugged on it, it would not move. He felt a terrible urge to get inside the room.

'Thracian, Cawl, Cominus, respond.'

The vox hissed in his ear.

'Gathein!' he shouted. His amplified voice killed the silence. The tower closed in on him. It seemed aware.

'Decimus?'

The soft voice came from the other side of the door, and he knew it.

'Nonus?'

'Come on, Decimus!'

'Nonus!' he shouted. His head swam. He couldn't focus, couldn't think. Nonus was dead. A period of time large enough to swallow the birth and death of an empire separated them. He knew this. Why then did he raise his fist with a cry and slam it into the bolt?

The door exploded off its hinges into the room, clanging off the wall. Felix plunged in.

The moist fronds of ferns slapped him in the face.

'Decimus!'

He was running. His feet were bare. Turf gave beneath his toes.

'Decimus, come find me!'

'Nonus!' he shouted.

He burst into a familiar clearing. Nonus was kneeling on the grass, an array of toys laid out in front of him.

'Nonus,' Felix said.

Nonus looked up from his playthings.

'You came! I'm so glad. I miss you. Come play with me.'

Felix held up his hands in amazement. They were human, unmodified. More than that, they were a boy's hands. He went over to his brother. He was the age he had been when Felix was taken, millennia ago, the day he was supposed to go to the Fortress of Hera, but was taken off the lighter moments before it launched.

‘Is this a memory?’

Nonus shook his head.

Felix walked forwards cautiously, taking everything in with a Space Marine’s attentiveness. It was comical in a small boy and his brother laughed.

‘It’s exactly as I remember it. The forest dome of Pembria park. The arboretum.’ He looked through a tangle of trees. High above them the crystalflex of an agri dome glinted in the sunlight. Laphis was too dry and sunburned to support natural forests. Grassland predominated. The only forests were in the parks. ‘I remember it all.’

He picked up a small toy, a mass-produced spacecraft bearing the iconography of the XIII Legion. ‘This was mine. I wanted to join them so badly.’

Nonus smiled. He had been three years younger than Felix, and looked upon him as if Felix were the centre of his universe. The future tetrarch felt a stab of pain in his single heart.

‘I know.’

He patted his brother’s knee and took the toy from his hand.

‘Where did you go? You were supposed to go to Macragge, but you vanished.’

Felix made a noise halfway between a laugh and a sob.

‘Where didn’t I go? It wasn’t my fault. I’m so sorry.’

‘We didn’t expect to see you again, but we never got to hear that you arrived. We never got news like the others. When we found out you were gone we were so sad. Mother cried every day for years. Father never smiled. People talked about you. They thought you’d done something wrong. Some of them said so, to mother, and that made her cry more. I tried to be happy for them, but I couldn’t. I tried and tried, but she cried and he never smiled. I missed you. We never knew what happened to you. Father never gave up. Never. Petitions to the enforcers, to the arbitrators when that didn’t work, then to the Ultramarines. He got into trouble. An arbitrator came to tell him off. But he never gave up. He was sad. So was I. Right until the day I died.’

‘Did you have a good life?’ asked Felix, half-dreading the answer.

‘I did.’

‘I am sorry I was not there to share it.’

‘It’s all right. You’re here now.’ Nonus smiled at him. ‘Nine and ten, together again.’

Felix ruffled his brother’s hair. ‘She wanted ten children.’

‘He only two.’

‘She counted down.’

They giggled at the joke in their names.

'Father let her after, you know,' he said. 'She had four more, my brothers and sisters. But we never forgot you, my biggest and best brother.' He smiled up at Felix in a way that crushed his heart.

'I'm sorry,' he said.

'Well, you're here now. Hey!' said Nonus, suddenly cheerful, pointing up. 'Let's climb the big tree.'

'Which one?' said Felix. All the trees in the arboretum were big, huge Macraggian oaks and silverpine.

'The very biggest,' said Nonus.

Gas hissed through vents into the apothecarion. Repressurisation to tolerable levels took only a few minutes. Yansar set to work on Tullio as soon as he was able.

He salvaged what materials he could from the Scythes' medical centre. Everything was in disarray, but he was able to put together a kit for the procedure that was far more versatile than his battlefield equipment. While he was waiting for atmosphere, he brought the apothecarion's medicae units into operation, including cleansing and sterilisation cabinets that he used upon the equipment. When the air pressure was high enough, he began cutting Tullio's armour away with a power saw. Dull metallic flakes of ceramite were gathered up and sucked away by a vacuum tube attached to the saw. When the plate was cut, he took out spray bottles of solvent and doused the area, softening the hardened gels that held the broken plate together.

This took several minutes. While he waited, he removed his helmet. Retinal displays made certain procedures easier, but he preferred to see what he was doing with his naked eyes, and removing the helmet gave his head a greater range of movement, important in a tricky operation such as this.

He checked the screens of the machine he had hooked up to the medical ports in Tullio's armour. The device constantly sampled the Space Marine's blood. Yansar was particularly attentive to the levels of pseudo hormones that governed the Belisarian furnace housed in Tullio's chest cavity. He frowned at the data, and adjusted the amount of counteragent the machine was pumping into him.

'Not yet,' he said to himself. 'Let's have a good look in there first.'

Yansar had removed Tullio's power plant to get him into the cot. Power was being supplied to his suit by a large battery pack under the table. Now he took Tullio's helmet off, easing it from his head. Tullio was in chemical sleep, and his

head lolled. Yansar laid it carefully against his armour neck ring.

Next he busied himself with the bolts locking Tullio's wargear together. He selected the appropriate head for the power driver mounted in his gauntlet. The blow that had wounded Tullio had been hard but not brutally so, so the chestplate was shredded but not badly distorted. All except one of the bolts came out as they should. The last was bent and had him clucking his tongue in annoyance. He retracted his driver and picked up the powersaw. Cutting lockbolts was difficult and made him feel more like a Techmarine than an Apothecary.

By the time the bolts were dealt with, the sealant gels were sufficiently softened. A shallow scan showed bonding between the foam and Tullio's clotted blood, gluing his mangled breastplate, under-armour and his bodyglove into his wounds.

'I'll be as gentle as I can, brother,' said Yansar. 'Because this will be painful.'

He eased the breastplate off. The under-plating was badly buckled and came away with the chest plate. A large section of Tullio's bodyglove lifted, tearing scabs away from wounds. Dark blood welled.

Yansar scowled. The wounds were worse than he thought.

Tullio's eyes flickered. His head rolled.

'Steady, brother.' Yansar worked quickly to cut away the bodyglove. A surgical laser mounted on his backpack arm vaporised fragments of plastek in the wound. The blood slowed. Larraman cells clotted it quickly.

Yansar extruded an array of lenses from his collar. They separated, and one flipped down in front of his right eye, magnifying the trauma site and highlighting flecks of ceramite and plastek in green. Yansar plucked them out with a tweezer, and pulled away the last of the torn bodyglove. After that, he took away Tullio's belly plating, cutting out the bodyglove from there as well.

Tullio's torso was naked from his belt to his neck. The wound was fully exposed – two long furrows that cut diagonally down from left to right.

The furrows started within a hairsbreadth of the arteries pulsing in the hollow of Tullio's neck, and raked across the site of his primary heart, where the fused box of his rib cage had been exposed and shone whitely in parted meat. Past that, the ribs had been breached. The claws of the xenos were so sharp that they had cut cleanly through rather than breaking the bone.

Yansar peered into the wound. The source of the vitae was an internal bleed that would have finished a mortal human. A Space Marine's blood was more easily staunched, but an arterial tear like that could still kill, given enough time, and the

danger of embolisms caused by hyperclotted blood circulating round Tullio's system could not be underestimated.

He had to cut away a section of Tullio's rib box to get to the injury. He was quick. Through a gap an inch square, a world of engineered organs was revealed.

Tullio's eyes flickered. He moaned. Yansar refrained from upping his sedation. He was nearly done.

Yansar's narthecium extended a probe, which he inserted into the hole. As he did so he changed the setting on his lenses so that they projected a laser drawn view of Tullio's innards onto his retina, the same way his helm could.

So much was packed into a Space Marine's body cavity, organs of such refined design and function no evolutionary process could have created them. Yansar allowed himself to feel awed as he worked. Few beings got to see what he saw. Cawl might name himself creator of the Primaris Space Marines, but this was the Emperor's work Yansar was witnessing.

The bleed was easily found, a tiny nick. Five bursts from the micro-las attached to the probe broke up the clots around it. A tiny grabber whipped out from the probe to clamp the tear shut while Yansar unfurled an adhesive web to close it. Once he allowed Tullio's enhanced systems to operate freely, the wound would heal fully within a day.

Tullio was stirring. Yansar increased the tempo of the operation. He withdrew the probe, then replaced the section of removed bone and stapled it to hold still while he sealed it up with a bone welder he'd taken from a cabinet. That done, he pulled the skin back into place, sutured the cuts closed and sprayed them with healing balms. He gave his work one last look over. He was satisfied, and permitted himself a smile.

He turned to the machine and disengaged the pumps filling Tullio's body with hormone suppressant. In a few moments, his Emperor's gifts would engage and finish Yansar's job for him.

There was a click, the soft, sharp noise of a safety catch being disengaged.

He turned back to Tullio. He had his bolt pistol in his hand. Slowly, he raised it to point at Yansar's head.

'Get down,' said Tullio hoarsely.

Yansar dropped to the floor.

Tullio fired once. The report, ignition and explosion of the bolt blurred into one loud boom that reverberated around the small room.

Yansar looked around.

On the ground were the smoking remains of a mechanoid drone.

The Apothecary walked over and nudged it with his foot. Six metal legs curled around its broken mechanical thorax.

'Xenos,' he said. 'Necron. It came through the vent.' He looked up to where a grille had covered over an air circulation shaft. The centre had been neatly disintegrated.

'Quiet,' said Tullio. 'Can you hear that?'

The sound of rustling came from outside the theatre door. Yansar drew his absolver pistol.

'Help me up,' said Tullio hoarsely.

'Stay there, brother. Cover me from the cot. You will not regain your strength for an hour or more. Let your body heal.'

'There's not time, something's coming.'

'Stay down!' Yansar went to the door and keyed it open, stopping it partway with a second press of the button.

The room on the other side was crawling with small, hexapedal robots. Flat green beams of light shone from their heads. Where they touched, matter frittered away into particles, which others of the swarm sucked up. The robots crawled over everything. A line of them entered and a line departed, carrying away their bounty as diligently as ants.

They did not appear to see Yansar, and he quickly shut the door.

'More of them.'

'Fetch me my bolt rifle,' said Tullio, gesturing weakly to the stand the gun rested on. Yansar strode across the room, picked it up and handed it to Tullio. The veteran checked it over, and racked a bolt into the firing chamber.

'If they attack, grenades will be of more use,' said Yansar. 'There are many of them.'

'What about my armour? It will be hard to fight like this.'

'It needs repair,' said Yansar. 'We're going to need help to get out of here.' He activated the vox. 'Tetrarch, this is Yansar, respond,' he voxed.

A menacing static hiss filled his hearing.

'Tetrarch, we have a problem.'

'No contact?'

Yansar held up a hand.

'Apothecary!' Tullio aimed at the door.

Dozens of spots of green light began to shine through the metal of the theatre door.

'Perhaps you'd better get up after all,' said Yansar, going to help Tullio to his

feet.

The vox whined.

‘Tetrarch?’

The sound of boltgun fire came with a distorted voice.

‘This is Thracian.’

‘We are under attack. We are trapped in theatre four of the apothecarion.’

‘Then we are coming to you.’

The door was frittering away to nothing, craters growing around the dots of light.

‘Hurry,’ said Yansar.

‘Forgemaster, something approaches.’ Esau datacast readings from his suit sensorium to Sebastion. A swarm of red dots crawled down towards their position on his cartograph. ‘The location and manner of enemy is uncertain,’ said Esau.

‘Whatever they are, they are on the exterior of strategic command,’ said Sebastion calmly. ‘Stand ready. I am nearly finished. The xenos machine infection is too widespread for me to regain control. All organic servitor components of the fortress network are gone, but the invading xenos network has replaced them. I have to rig the primary cogitation junction for detonation to prevent the mountain regaining control, then destroy the weapons themselves.’ He looked upwards. The multiple arms of his servo harness continued to work around him. ‘See to it I complete the task. If we leave these weapons active, I predict all will return to functionality and be suborned by the mountain. The fleet is in danger. Destruction of this nexus must be achieved.’

‘As you command, Forgemaster,’ said Esau.

Filaments of living metal lay shrivelled all around the main cogitation array. He had freed it, for now, but the speed with which the strands stirred and began to reconstruct themselves suggested they would not remain sundered for long. Having removed all linkages from the surface, Sebastion found more beneath. He burned back what he could.

Esau’s cartolith pulsed with movement.

‘They are gathering above us. Concentration here.’ He sent the location to Sebastion and raised his storm bolter to aim at the ceiling. ‘Increasing energy emissions. They are coming through.’

Esau’s power fist crackled into life, sending dancing blue light around the room that brought false life to the dead.

Sebastion unclamped a melta flask from his thigh. He depressed a panel in the side, exposing the input jack for a remote detonator. He attached this with his human hands while the arms of the servoharness darted and cut, driving back tendrils of the silver metal reinvading the systems. With the detonator in place, he twisted the handle on the top of the bomb to arm it, then placed it within the machine.

'Forgemaster,' Esau said calmly. 'I see them.'

A portion of the ceiling glowed green. A faint square, brighter to the centre, where a growing black dot spread outwards.

Sebastion glanced up at the breach. 'Gauss beams. I hypothesise first wave canoptek organisms. We have awoken the guardians of the mountain, my brother.'

Metal and rockcrete was being broken down into black, grainy particulate that pattered down from the ceiling like the sands in an hourglass.

'We will never be able to reoccupy this site,' said Esau. The brighter green spread to the very edges of the square. The blackness within it followed, compressing the green tighter and brighter; though both green and black were circular, neither exceeded the limits of the square. More disrupted matter fell.

'Initiating control implosion in main batteries.' Sebastion's many hands danced over the dusty console. The first of four cylinders rose from beneath a screen.

A tocsin honked, followed by a machine voice. <Warning. Defence battery control system self-destruct active.>

A small red cap flipped open on top of the first cylinder, revealing a dataport. 'Priming first defence laser denial device. Execute.' Sebastion's data shunt stabbed down into the lock, twisted, and depressed the cylinder. Code readers chimed acknowledgement. A brief tremor shook the room as the gun blew.

<Defence laser one inactive.>

The second cylinder rose upwards and exposed its dataport.

'Now this is the one that caused the trouble in the first place. The active cannon that fired upon the tetrarch,' Sebastion said.

Again his data interface slammed down. A second clarion of chimes. Another explosive rumble.

<Defence laser two inactive.>

The third cylinder was rising when Esau spoke.

'They are coming through.'

The square turned into a perfect shaft burrowed through dozens of feet of layered armour. Something moved back at the top, the green light cast by its

mechanisms shifting over the floor.

A flood of robotic drones dropped through.

Esau opened fire. He paced his shooting. Storm bolters were destructive, but ate ammunition greedily.

‘Hurry,’ he said.

He couldn’t kill them all. Many of the insectoid robots exploded but more crashed onto the floor, where they drew themselves up into a living carpet of silver. They poured in all directions, covering the floor with their undulations. A thousand green ocular sensors shone. They swarmed Esau’s legs, and he stamped them flat. Where they clambered up his legs he plucked them free from his body and crushed them in his power fist. They exploded with mighty bangs. Mandibles twitched over his plating, playing spreads of deadly light. Ceramite and plasteel dissolved into nothing. Exposed systems sparked with short circuits before they too were dissolved. Still he continued firing.

<Defence laser four inactive.>

Sebastion hurried. The living metal of the mountain was growing back quickly, accelerated by the presence of the drones. The upper limbs of his servoharness darted into the cogitation junction, cutting and burning. The lower pair reversed themselves, switched out their utility heads for short range plasma casters, and opened fire.

‘Now the lesser batteries,’ Sebastion said. Eight more cylinders. Two went down, the charges they were connected to detonating deep within the fortress-monastery and ripping out huge tranches of the control systems. Esau gave out a moan of pain.

He was being overwhelmed. Silver covered him head to toe, lit by flashes of gauss light. His storm bolter blasted a hole in the swarm, then vanished.

Esau’s flailing shape stood a moment longer, then collapsed in on itself. The swarm spread and flooded over the floor towards Sebastion. More of the drones were coming through the hole in the wall bored through by the traitors, during the fall of the fortress.

Sebastion left the last six cylinders, took up his bolter and turned to face his doom.

‘Severing your master’s link was a reckless cut, but it is done. Our guns will never be yours.’ He opened fire.

They came at him in a wave. He emptied his magazine into them and blasted their front rank apart. His servo arms whirled about, slaying hundreds with the energies of captive stars.

There were too many.

‘Detonate,’ Sebastion commanded.

The melta charge in the cogitation junction responded. Fusion glow backlit the Forgemaster as he fought, then fire ripped through the strategium, driving the dark back into the Pharos.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

IN THE SERVICE OF MANKIND

Circa 10,000 years ago

There was a problem. There always was a problem.

Cawl lay back in his chair. Its mechanisms cradled him more effectively than his own dear mother had centuries ago. Plush upholstery soothed his bare skin where he brushed it. Firm springs supported him. The air purification unit purred soothingly. But it was situated directly over his desk, it was always set too cold, and that spoiled everything.

He couldn't think in his office. He couldn't think out on the experimental line. It was too noisy, or too cold, or annoying in any one of a hundred different ways. He needed a little time to puzzle out the latest problem, but no one would give it to him.

A notification clarion played softly. Before he could respond the door opened, letting the soft noises of the experimental centre into his haven. Even that was too much to bear, and he groaned.

'Not feeling it today, Director Sedayne?'

A long, thin-fingered hand fell away from Cawl's eyes. A headache pulsed behind them. Jespin Creuz smiled at him winningly.

'No. Do you have to gurn like that?'

Cawl sat forwards. A small, pre-Dark Age device sat on the glass of his desk. He picked it up and began to fiddle with it.

'I am sorry my good humour offends you,' Creuz said good-humouredly. He was holding an active data-slate against his chest. Cawl could only see the back of it, but the lights from the screen shone colours from Creuz's white smock coat, and caught on the metal of the pens arrayed neatly in his pocket.

‘What do you want? Are those targets you have there?’ said Cawl.

‘They are.’

Creuz slid the slate across the desk.

Cawl glanced at the screen and grunted.

‘You are behind,’ said Creuz. ‘Significantly behind.’

‘I am old, that is what I am, Creuz. Three centuries weigh a man down. I need a rest.’

‘There can be no rest.’ Creuz gave Cawl a look of mock sympathy. His eyes were too small for his big bald skull, and they were lost in his sockets, which were smudged around with purple and black. ‘I wouldn’t bring up questions of age with Him, if I were you. He’s older than all of us, so they say.’

‘Well, He doesn’t look it, and He doesn’t look like He feels it,’ Cawl said. He put the ancient device down on the desktop, and gestured at it with an open hand. ‘This device was made by men with a far greater grasp of science than we have. Not one person I have met can decide exactly what it was created for. Yet if you look at it, it is simple. A spring loaded arm, no spring now, but that’s what it was. A proto-plastek disc to take something, perhaps a larger disc. This groove here,’ he ran his finger around it, ‘I think it took a protective material. Some kind of felt, maybe. And this.’ He picked it up and flipped it over. ‘This took a motor, I am sure. Perhaps this hole here took a lens of some kind.’

‘A data recording device?’

Cawl pointed at Creuz. ‘A lot of people say that. None of them can explain why they think so, or how it worked.’

Creuz shrugged. ‘Maybe He knows.’

‘He probably does. He probably saw the damn thing when it was working.’ Cawl looked into the reflection in the glass tabletop. A face that was not his own looked back. It had a high forehead over a face that was tall overall, a downturned mouth, a long, thin nose that would have been aquiline if it didn’t change its mind at the tip and turn upwards. Long hair, obviously dyed black, lay flat over his technologist’s robes. It was the countenance of a vain man who was not blessed with the genes to justify vanity. ‘He won’t say though, will He? He keeps His secrets close. We wallow about in the darkness of ignorance, He knows so much, but will He share? No.’

‘You sound disillusioned.’

‘I’m tired.’

Creuz retrieved his slate and gave Cawl a stern look. ‘It doesn’t matter if you are tired. You have a task. You were chosen by Him. He thinks you can do it, He

expects you to.'

'And I will!' snapped Cawl. 'I need more time. There are problems with the protein sequencing. The coding provided by the genarchs of Cambon is incorrect. I have had to go through the whole spool and reset it multiple times. It is not I who is at fault.'

'Then work quicker.'

'How many test subjects do you want me to kill?' said Cawl. 'I have run through four batches of volunteers, and innumerable vat blanks. The carapace is stable until implantation. The same problem, every time, only the cause of death changes.'

'This time?'

'The last batch spread uncontrollably and hardened prematurely,' said Cawl, waving his hands irritably.

'Six months ago it was disintegrating.'

'Well, they still all die, Creuz.'

'Amar Astarte will come down here next herself, you know, it won't be me.'

'I'm sick of that name,' growled Cawl. 'Tell her I have to go back to the baseline coding again. There are more faults in there. I will find them, but I need more time!'

Creuz bent lower. 'Well that you don't have, Director Sedayne,' he said. 'Work faster, or the Emperor will replace you. I'm warning you. I've seen it happen.'

'You mean *she'll* replace me.'

'You are serving mankind, not Him, and certainly not her,' Creuz scolded him.

'Then I will redouble my efforts, in the service of mankind,' said Cawl sourly.

'See that you do.' He looked around. 'Nice office. It would be a shame to lose it.'

Creuz bowed and departed with a polite 'good day'.

Cawl blew out a long, exasperated sigh. This man who called Himself the Emperor, He asked too much. He needed a rest. He wanted to go to the bridge. To watch the sun rise over old Miamar. To hear the sound of the wind and the…

BANG.

'Cawl.'

BANG.

'Belisarius Cawl.'

BANG.

Friedisch lay dying in his arms, blood spilling from his mouth as he tried to speak. 'Belisarius, don't do it. Please. Not for me. Save yourself.'

BANG.

Traitor Space Marines fired at him in a burning, subterranean field.

BANG.

Metal in the wind.

Insignificant.

BANG.

Come to me.

Now

Cawl opened his eyes.

He was in the power sink control node. Angled batteries were laid out in a circle around the platform. All hummed. Activity lights shone on them and on the machines that controlled them.

'I am Belisarius Cawl,' he said. 'I am!'

'Of course you are, archmagos dominus.'

Cawl blinked.

'Are you all right, archmagos dominus?'

'Yes?' said Cawl quizzically. 'Yes,' he affirmed. 'Scythes of the Emperor fortress-monastery citadel, Emperor's Watch. Sotha, post tyranid harvest.'

'That is the correct location,' Qvo-87 said. His limited mind was unnerved by Cawl's behaviour. He reached out with unsure hands to comfort, or perhaps ward off his madness. Nevertheless, he still recorded everything. Subsidiary arms worked quickly in the shadows of his robes, the stylus a blur on its data-slate.

'There was a voice,' said Cawl. 'That was new.' He blinked again. He moved around on his giant body. It seemed clumsy and unfamiliar.

'Master?'

'The Pharos is attempting contact. Real contact. I think it wants to talk. I must try a full interface.'

'Our equipment will be here soon, master.' Qvo-87 paused.

'There's not time for that. Matters are coming to a head.'

'Are you sure you are all right, my lord?'

'Never better, my dear Friedisch.'

Qvo-87 smiled at him sympathetically. 'I am not Friedisch, magos.'

BANG!

The noise threw Cawl a moment, but only a moment by the measure of the Mechanicus. A sliver of a second. An iota of time. He was already formulating a

dozen responses before the noise had died away, and had chosen the one he would employ the millisecond it ended.

'Was that an explosion?' Cawl said.

Yansar quickly reattached Tullio's powerplant, then Tullio leaned weakly against the wall while Yansar wrenched and heaved at the chirurgeon cot until he flipped it over. Behind this makeshift barricade, the two of them took shelter. Yansar piled up all the ammunition they had and placed their stock of grenades within easy reach.

The door was almost gone. Solid metal became a lacy sculpture under the mandibles of the drones. They fringed the door all the way round, legs clamped to the wall, cones of green light emitting from their mouth parts dissolving matter. Although there were now plenty of ways in for the robots, they ignored the Space Marines and concentrated on disassembling the door, atom by atom.

'Necron scarabs,' said Tullio. 'I fought their like in the War of Silence. You?'

'My Chapter was occupied with the Chikanti incursion. Did you battle their king?'

Tullio chuckled dryly, wincing at the pain it caused him. 'Not personally. I'm still alive. I don't think we were even in the same sector.'

'If this is a tomb complex, then these automata will be the least of our worries,' said Yansar. Both of them spoke low, not wishing to draw the attention of the drones. 'Why aren't they attacking?'

'They haven't registered us as a threat yet,' said Tullio. 'I've seen whole companies of Adeptus Astartes march through tomb complexes at the first stage of awakening and be ignored, as long as they're careful. They'll consume anything, but if you get out of the way while they're busy, they won't even notice. You can even kill them.' Tullio adjusted his grip. 'Then something changes, and that stops, and they attack.'

'So, we wait here until they attack and overwhelm us, or we wait here until they eat their way over here and consume us.'

'Those are the likely outcomes,' said Tullio. The scarabs withdrew, and they could see into the outer chamber. The walls were reduced to a skeleton of exposed support beams which were being assiduously disassembled as they watched. 'This world has had poor fortune. Devoured by tyranids, with the bones for necrons to gnaw.'

'Mark the third line in the deck plating,' said Yansar.

'Marked,' said Tullio.

‘They cross that, then we open fire. Grenades first into the outer chamber, you drive back the vanguard.’

The last of the door collapsed into black dust. As one, the gauss beams shut off. Green eye lights blinked in rippled sequence. Yansar’s autosenses registered the pattering drum of alien sensor arrays tasting the room. One of the robots ventured forwards. Sensing barbels stroked at the floor. Hyperplastek wings stirred.

‘This is it,’ said Tullio. ‘Ready?’ He sighted down his gun, mentally marking a target for each of the bolts in his magazine.

Yansar pulled a grenade out of its looped belt. ‘Ready.’

Other scarabs peeled themselves from the mass around the door, trooping after the first in a precisely straight line for a couple of yards then splitting apart with geometric precision into a fan of silver. More and more of the drones joined the advancing group. They spread in hypnotic patterns.

The scarabs began to deconstruct the floor.

The first drone reached the third line. There were now several hundred scarabs in the room.

‘Now,’ said Yansar. He flicked out the pin from a frag grenade and tossed it through the door.

Tullio squeezed his trigger, blasting apart the first scarab into a rain of metal particles. He kept his gun in single shot mode, aiming carefully before firing. A second scarab exploded as Yansar’s grenade detonated. Dozens of damaged drones were blasted into the room, smashing medicae equipment into pieces.

Hundreds of glowing eyes turned on them.

‘That got their attention,’ said Tullio.

An angry buzz of wings rose, and swarms of scarabs flew into the room, some aflame from the explosion. Yansar tossed two more grenades one after the other into the mass. Both were swarmed. The first exploded, blowing out a sphere of fire and shattered robots. The second was deconstructed before it could detonate, its energies siphoned into the abdomens of the scarabs.

The Space Marines were both shooting. Tullio switched fire mode, emptying the entire magazine in a couple of seconds. Metal ricocheted off their armour and the walls. Tullio hissed as his bare torso was stung by chips of flying shrapnel. Yansar tossed more grenades, holding on to them till the last moment before tossing them into the swarm to ensure they exploded. The magazine dropped from Tullio’s gun. He had another in place smoothly, never moving his gun from firing position, breaking his fusillade for the minimal amount of time.

The swarm drew closer, the whirring of wings an aggressive buzz. Killing green light flashed between glittering mandibles. A drone clamped itself to Yansar's backpack, chewing through the arm supporting his medical light before he seized it and smashed it against the wall.

'There are too many!' he shouted.

'There are.'

Tullio moved his bolt rifle smoothly. Each bolt claimed at least one scarab; the explosion of the micro-warhead and shrapnel from the blast taking down those nearby they were so tightly packed.

'Down to my last magazine,' said Tullio.

Yansar picked up a grenade bandolier. He primed one.

'For the Emperor,' he said.

'For the Emperor,' said Tullio.

Yansar hurled the grenade belt as hard as he could. It punched a hole through the cloud of mechanical insects, and flew into the next room. A tremendous explosion followed that took out the weakened wall between the theatre and the outer chamber. Scarabs were destroyed in their hundreds.

Smoke filled the apothecarion. The wings fell silent.

'That will not be enough,' said Tullio.

Silver limbs twitched on the floor. The scarabs righted themselves.

'Farewell, brother,' said Tullio. He drew his combat knife.

A blast of fire roared into the outer chamber, engulfing the recovering scarabs, burning promethium frying their systems. A second blast whooshed in. Tullio and Yansar got up, and began stamping scarabs to pieces. Three Scythes of the Emperor emerged from the smoke and fire, the lead bearing a flamer.

'I am Brother Bokari,' he said. 'Thracian sent me.'

An explosion shook the room. Weakened metal crashed down in a nearby chamber.

'Come,' Bokari said. 'We must be quick.'

They were at the top of the tree, higher than they had ever been before.

'We should be getting home now,' said Felix. 'It is near supper and mother will be upset if it goes cold again.' There was something bothering him. A memory that slipped and twisted just out of sight. Maybe it was because they were out too late again.

'Just a few more minutes,' said Nonus. 'I want to look. You can see the whole world from up here!'

‘This isn’t the world. It’s a dome. There’s our hab-block.’ Felix pointed through a gap in the trees to the metal skin of a slender domicile building. There were dozens of them in a spiral pattern you could only see from the air.

‘Is that the whole Imperium?’

‘No,’ he said, looking at his brother strangely. ‘That is just Pembria, on Laphis. The Imperium is lots of worlds.’

‘How many?’ asked Nonus.

‘A million, more or less,’ said Felix. ‘It is big. The biggest, best empire in history, and the Emperor is our master.’

‘And what is the primary constituent of its military strength?’ said Nonus in a harsh voice.

Felix looked at him sharply. The illusion flexed. He came close to remembering who he was.

Nonus blinked, his face all innocence. ‘I mean, the Space Marines! They are so strong. Are there lots and lots of them?’

The question from his brother made Felix uneasy.

‘Not very many,’ said Felix.

‘They are blue. I like blue.’

Felix smiled. ‘They’re not all blue. There are lots of different Chapters, all different colours.’

‘Really,’ said his brother. His manner had become strangely cold, his voice growled. **‘What about the warriors with the ability to wield the powers of the warp. Are there many of them?’**

Felix moved back from his brother. ‘Nonus, what are you talking about?’

‘I want to be a Space Marine!’ said his brother, childish again.

‘Let’s go home,’ said Felix uneasily. Outside the dome, clouds were turning orange, scudding rapidly across hard blue skies, blown by steppe winds. Inside, shadows slunk together under the trees for their evening congregation.

‘All right!’ shouted Nonus. He slid off the branch and clambered down the tree with the agility of a pterasquirrel.

‘Wait!’ said Felix. ‘Careful, you’ll hurt yourself.’

‘I won’t!’ said Nonus. He came to rest on a branch a few feet above the ground. Felix joined him.

‘I’ve got an idea!’ said Nonus. ‘Let’s jump down.’

‘Yes,’ said Felix. He tensed to leap, but he couldn’t.

‘Why are you waiting? Coward!’ teased Nonus. ‘You won’t be an Ultramarine, not if you can’t jump off the branch. We’ve done it loads of times.’

‘All right! All right!’ said Felix. ‘I’ll do it.’

‘Let’s count to three.’ His brother slipped his hand into his. It was small, warm, and a little sticky. Felix squeezed it.

‘I love you, Nonus. I am sorry,’ he said, but could no longer recall why.

‘I love you too, brother,’ said Nonus. ‘Are you ready?’

They looked down at the drop.

‘One…’ they began together.

‘Felix.’ The voice came from nowhere. Felix started.

‘Did you hear that?’

‘Two…’ Nonus continued. His hand gripped Felix’s so hard it hurt. Felix looked down and saw Nonus’ hand was skinned with shining metal. Light too powerful to contain shone through it. His own hand seemed huge, clad in armour. He blinked, and the image faded.

‘Tetrarch. Stop. Look at me. Tetrarch!’

‘Three!’ squealed Nonus in delight.

As Nonus leapt, something pulled hard at Felix, preventing him from leaping. He wanted to jump more than anything, to show his brother he wasn’t scared, then go home for his meal and the warm, dull predictability of scholum tomorrow. Nonus dragged at him, threatening to pitch him forwards off the branch. His brother was eight, and slightly built, but for the half second before their hands slipped apart he felt as heavy as eternity. Then he was off balance, falling back. The forest flickered, became a cold sky full of stars.

The killing drop off the roof of the Emperor’s Watch yawned before him.

Fall*,* the harsh voice said. **Fall!**

‘Tetrarch!’ Gathein had him, his right arm locked about Felix’s left. Felix’s battleplate was significantly heavier than Gathein’s. He was in danger of falling to his death and taking the Librarian with him. His suit’s muscle system and joints whined and growled, fighting to keep him upright.

Gathein was slipping. ‘Tetrarch, please!’

Felix came fully to his senses. The two of them staggered back onto the roof of the emitter tower, armour clashing together.

They recovered quickly.

‘How did I get up here?’ Felix asked.

‘I don’t know. I went down into the tower. I lost a few moments, then you were gone. I found you up here.’

‘The others,’ Felix said. He attempted contact with the groups of Space Marines scattered through the monastery. Static greeted him.

An explosion trembled the tower, so far deep as to be almost imperceptible, but the vibrational pattern was unmistakable.

‘Where is Belisarius Cawl?’ Felix said to Gathein.

The vox crackled. Thracian spoke.

‘Tetrarch,’ he said. *‘We are under attack.’*

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

INTO THE PHAROS

Gunfire drew them together. Felix coordinated the groups of scattered Space Marines as best he could, gathering them in the Vigilatum.

He and Gathein were first into the high chamber, chasing down the thunder of bolters from gallery to gallery. Before they reached the ground floor, Daelus, Troncus, Alpha Primus and Ulas came onto the mid-levels, shortly followed by Yansar and Tullio, whose armour was half removed. Some of the Scythes were with them. They were firing behind them as they arrived, and ran shouting from the gallery down the stairs to the main floor. Felix joined them. The Scythes of the Emperor Apothecary Aratus was helping Yansar check over Tullio, who, although he bore a number of fresh wounds on his bare skin to go with the livid mess of his chest, seemed ready to fight.

'Where's Thracian?' he asked one of the Scythes.

'I do not know,' said Bokari. 'We left him in the armoury to rescue your men. Be ready, tetrarch. The enemy are behind us.'

'They're coming!' shouted Keltru.

A swarm of flying constructs, thick as locusts, came roaring out of the passage.

'Fire!' said Felix.

Together the Space Marines put out such a tempest of bolt-fire that the swarm was shredded to pieces. Metal rained around them in sparking shards. More gunfire echoed up the lower passageways as Thracian and the rest of his men emerged in the Vigilatum.

'Sebastion?' Felix voxed.

'Dead in the service of the Emperor,' Thracian said. 'Esau too. The guns are

disabled. We have brought the wrath of the mountain on ourselves.'

The swarm seemed to go on forever, boiling relentlessly from the corridor and swooping down towards the Space Marines. The machines had no long-ranged weaponry, or else they would have perished. The roaring bang of bolters was deafening even to Space Marines. All the extra sensors on Felix's battle suit were confounded by the storm of metal. It was therefore a surprise when Cawl, accompanied by his aide, came stalking from the same lower passageway as Thracian had, aimed his weapons up into the swarm of robots, and opened fire.

His solar atomiser spewed out a fat beam of searing energy that cut through the swarm and into the wall behind, vapourising hundreds of drones. Metal fell as molten rain.

Qvo-87 pulled a short stave from beneath his robes and brandished it over his head. Section after section telescoped out of the centre until he held a slender, tapering staff in his hand. Cawl fired again. The swarm burst apart around the energy beam, twisting itself up into a monstrous spiral to avoid it, turned about, and dived.

From the top of Qvo's staff an energy shield spread, slow as syrup, running down the air around the Space Marines to encase them in a hemisphere. The Imperial force continued to fire, blasting apart the front of the plunging mass so that although it drove down at them, the drones were continuously shattered into fragments that rained down thickly, tinkling loudly enough off the paving to be heard over the roar of guns and the thrum of wings.

The energy skin reached the floor.

'Prepare yourselves!' Cawl boomed over the drone of thousands of contra-grav engines.

'For what?' grunted Thracian.

Cawl let his actions speak for themselves.

A metal ovoid shot out of the top of his dorsal array with a loud pop. It lofted up, where it was caught by the swarm.

There was a brief flash. A punishing electromagnetic wavefront blasted out from the device, then another, then three more in quick succession.

The energy shield was extinguished. The pulses hit the Space Marines and the tech-priests hard. Cawl let out an electronic squawk. Qvo staggered. Felix's displays crackled off and his power plant was knocked offline, even though his armour was hardened against haywire attacks. The Space Marines sagged, forced to rely on their own strength to stand in their heavy battle suits.

The necron drones were far worse affected. The green lights burning in their

eyes went out in a spreading ripple. The glow emanating from their innards guttered and died. Wings froze. Gravitic impellers cut out.

'By the Emperor,' swore Thracian.

The swarm collapsed.

With a crash of metal, hundreds of drones fell from the air onto the Space Marines. Qvo threw himself down under Felix, who crouched to protect him. Tullio hunkered down, his hands held over his unarmoured head. The drones battered at the warriors. They were hefty, and rang from ceramite with punishing force. Together, they pummelled the warriors of the Emperor into the ground. Only Cawl stood unaffected, the drones slamming into his conversion field where their mass was annihilated and converted into searing bursts of light.

Felix knelt trapped and dazed under a pile of alien metal. His armour clicked and whined as it attempted to restart its power feed. Chimes sounded. His displays blinked back on.

He heaved himself up. The inert shells of xenos drones slithered off him.

Qvo cowered on the ground.

'Are you all right?' asked Felix. He offered a hand. Qvo took it and pulled himself upright.

'I live,' said Qvo.

Space Marines stirred under a silver carpet as thick as fish poured from a pelagic harvester's nets. Metal clattered. Cawl looked upon them all with an amused expression.

'I told you to inform me of your actions, archmagos!' Felix said.

Cawl chuckled. 'And spoil the surprise? There was no time.'

'The phrase "haywire pulse" takes less than a second to voice,' said Felix.

'Well,' said Cawl, which along with a shrug was halfway to an admission of guilt. 'We're all alive, aren't we?' A mechadendrite darted from his casing and plucked up one of the robots from the floor. Its legs were curled inwards, making it look like a sculpture of a dead arthropod. Cawl shook it then tossed it aside. 'All things are dependent on the motive force, that will always be a weakness, even for the necrons,' he said. 'Although they are somewhat inured to these tactics, so I apologise for the strength of the pulse. Their circuitry must be burned out, it is the only way. Now we must be quick. The immediate threat is past, but the peace is temporary. A facility like this can manufacture an infinity of these devices, and worse. Now we have acted against the mountain, larger and more dangerous constructs will be awakening. Even these will not lie dead for long. Already their self-repair mechanisms begin to make good the damage

caused.’

‘Then what is your suggestion?’ said Felix.

‘I have another solution to the problem of the swarms. But to effect it we must go into the Pharos now, where I may interface with its control matrix. The longer we delay the more danger we are in.’

‘Agreed,’ said Felix. ‘I have ordered the Overlord to relocate to the north pad. We now have a way out.’

‘Wise,’ said Cawl.

‘There is more, and you will not object to it,’ said Felix. ‘I have ordered my ship into an anchorage geosynchronous with the mountain. As we speak, its weapons are trained upon the Pharos. If we are not out of this facility before twelve hours have passed, it will be destroyed. If we leave before then, it will be destroyed. If the shipmaster deems fit, it will be destroyed. There is no scenario, Cawl, that sees this mountain remaining intact.’

‘I agree,’ said Cawl, affecting surprise. ‘Why would I not? Send them these codes, and the *Zar Quaesitor* will help in the destruction. I shall have what I need by then.’

Cawl canted a hefty spread of data to Felix. The tetrarch tasked his cogitator to reroute it to the *Lord of Vespator*.

‘I am sorry, Thracian,’ said Felix, turning to the Chapter Master. ‘I had hoped to return your fortress-monastery to you, but this device is too dangerous to be permitted to stand.’

Thracian and the remaining Scythes of the Emperor stared at him long enough that Felix thought they would object, but then Thracian nodded.

‘I agreed to its destruction, if necessary,’ he said. ‘Nothing that has occurred here alters that. We lost our fortress-monastery to one alien horror, now another awakens. Mount Pharos belongs to the past. Let the Chapter find a new home now. I told you I would not object, and I do not.’

‘I am glad you agree.’

‘I will follow you willingly, tetrarch, but I have a request.’

‘Name it.’

‘Allow us to leave you now. We must attend to our own task. Performing the last rites for our old geneseed is a matter of honour. Our Chapter has come to the ending of an era. We must lay our legacy to rest.’

They are hiding something. Cadmus’ words came back to Felix. He almost asked them what it was. He did not. The question died inside him. Sometimes, a man must bear his shame alone.

‘Go with my blessing, Chapter Master. Twelve hours, no more. Be at the north landing pad or die with your ancestors.’

Thracian took Felix’s arm in the ancient warrior’s clasp, wrist to wrist.

‘It has been my honour to fight with you, tetrarch. Sothara is in good hands. Destroy this place. Do not let a necron tomb world rise here to add to the sector’s woes.’

‘Oh,’ said Cawl cheerfully. ‘I have already said that it is not a tomb world, Chapter Master. It is something far worse than that.’

Before they opened the blast doors to descend back down to the Hall of the Founder, Felix voxed Diamedes and Austen. Already the Pharos was beginning to overcome the boosted vox signal, and he spoke hastily, ordering Austen to lead the tanks back down the mountain to Odessa Port, which was at sufficient distance to escape the destruction of the mountain. Austen would drive the lead tank, while the others would slave link to his, and proceed under the direction of their machine-spirits.

Diamedes he ordered to bring armour spares up into the Hall of the Founder, though he urged him to take all caution as he came within the monastery, where he would link with Cadmus and Tullio, aid Tullio in rearmament and then accompany them to the northern pad. Tullio was too injured to fight on, and Felix feared the occurrences in the monastery may affect Cadmus’ judgement. Together, the three of them were to secure the pad and await the gunship.

That left Felix, Gathein, Cominus, Ixen, Troncus, Daelus and Yansar to accompany Cawl, Qvo and Alpha Primus. Thracian’s depleted party made ready to leave, with their geneseed vault and their recovered dead protected by their remaining three Terminators.

They all faced the blast doors, waiting for Cawl and Qvo to override the mechanisms. Felix kept a wary eye on the mound of disabled drones, but they did not move. Finally, the tech-priests were finished.

‘These doors will never close again, once we are through. Are we ready?’ Cawl hummed.

‘We are,’ said Felix.

‘Then I bid thee, machine-spirits, open this door for the final time.’

Felix couldn’t tell if Cawl were being sincere or was grandstanding. It could well have been both.

The door opened, and they went down wide marble stairs back into the Hall of the Founder, where Cawl once again busied himself at the centre of the room.

‘Tetrarch,’ said Thracian, ‘it is now that we shall part ways.’

‘Emperor be with you, brother,’ said Felix.

The Scythes filed past onto the downward staircase, carrying their dead. Thracian waited for the gene vault and its Terminator escort to begin its descent, then slammed his fist against his breastplate in salute.

‘Farewell, Decimus Felix.’

With that he turned and followed his men into the dark.

‘We shall not see him again,’ said Alpha Primus.

‘They may survive,’ said Felix.

‘They will not,’ said Primus. ‘They do not intend to live.’

Cawl was up against the wall towards the rear of the Hall of the Founder, running his hands and other appendages over the marble facing still surviving. ‘Did you notice anything strange about Thracian, Decimus?’ he asked. A mechadendrite played a scan beam over a decorated panel. Metal knuckles knocked on the stone.

‘He is hiding something, so Cadmus said.’

‘What, though?’ said Cawl. ‘Did you not see the modifications to his armour?’

‘There were many,’ said Felix. ‘Field repairs, honours and battle trophies.’

Cawl looked at him while his supplementary limbs continued their work. ‘Really, Decimus. Did you not see anything more significant?’

‘No.’

‘Ah well, the modifications are subtle, and so I suppose easy to miss.’

‘I will put you out of your misery, lord tetrarch,’ said Primus, prompting a grumble from Cawl.

‘You spoil my fun,’ said Cawl, and went back to feeling the marble.

‘Then do you command me not to speak, master?’

‘No, go ahead,’ said Cawl, moving onto the next panel. He gestured impatiently at Qvo-87 to come to his side. ‘Felix obviously did not see. Enlighten him.’

Primus’ glum manner had a hint of amusement. ‘The Chapter Master was wearing a psychic inhibitor as part of his panoply. It was situated at the back of his helmet though I noticed it because of its effect – Thracian is surrounded by a null-field.’

‘What of it?’

‘It is a weak field. Devices like that are of little use against battle psykers or sorcery,’ said Primus.

‘They are commonly worn by those who wish to remain unobtrusive. Criminals. Petty witches. So we have to ask why a Chapter Master of the

Adeptus Astartes was wearing it,' said Cawl. 'Either he was an undeclared psyker of mean talents, which is unlikely, or we have to consider what possible benefit it could bring him in this particular place?'

'Are you suggesting he was seeking to block out the genestealers' psychic net?'

'It would make sense, don't you think?' said Cawl. 'A low level psychic field like that could be disrupted by such a device. Come on, he is wearing a psy-suppressor. A null-field. Why do you think that is?'

'I'm sure you're going to tell me,' said Felix wearily.

Cawl reared up. 'Think! That's why I'm talking to you, my boy. You think I patronise you. I do not. You have a keen mind. It is time to use it. Item one – why is Thracian wearing a null-field?'

'The Scythes are compromised,' said Felix.

'It would explain their secrecy,' said Cawl. 'It's only an idea, and not that I'm right all of the time, but,' he said slyly, 'if they are, then we must address item two – what do they have in their box?'

'The box? It is a gene vault.'

'Is it?' said Cawl. 'Now, here I think.' A short-range laser flashed at the end of a metal tentacle, scoring an x into the stone. 'Alpha Primus, if you would.'

Primus searched around the statues, paying close attention to their weapons.

'What do you mean?' said Felix. 'About Thracian.'

'All in good time. You think about it. I have finished with the subject.' Cawl came scuttling over to Felix. 'This place is marked in the old books as Primary Location Alpha. Before it was a memorial to the Scythes of the Emperor's first Master, it was the centre of research in this mountain. It is named in the books remaining as a tuning stage. It is an apt name. You saw the phantoms we conjured here?'

'They were hard to miss, archmagos,' Felix said.

'Quite. Well, that was my attempt to see if the mechanisms that underpin Primary Location Alpha worked. The mechanisms of the necrons are nothing so crude as moving parts and wires, but atomic arrangements of the most sublime intricacy built into the very stone. From what little remains in the library, I was led to understand that this location was irreparably damaged during the Heresy. It has evidently repaired itself to a degree. However, it does not have the full functionality that I require. Once, this place could project a living being instantaneously across the cosmos. It could send information anywhere in the galaxy.'

'We do not require those things.'

‘No, we require a map,’ said Cawl. ‘I need to find my way into the belly of this machine before you vaporise it. We can’t do that without a map. This facility does not exist in solely four dimensions. If we go in without a map, we will never come out. I can access the infosphere of the device, but it has yet to regain full functionality. For that we must go deeper.’

‘What is your ultimate goal?’

‘To reach the centre, the Heart of the Pharos. This map will lead us to another map. The second map is what I seek.’

Alpha Primus stopped by the statue of a Chapter Master whose hand rested on the counterweight of a two-handed hammer. He grabbed the handle, and heaved at it, snapping the handle halfway down and yanking the head from its seat. He hefted it as if it were a real weapon, and strode to the marked section.

‘Stand back, everyone!’ Cawl shouted.

Primus hit the marked spot three times. With each strike chips of marble flew. Upon the third blow the hammer shattered into lumps of stone as it crashed through the wall facing. Primus discarded the sculpture and used the opening to wrench the wall away.

On the other side was a surface of blackstone. Halfway across the hole Primus had made the stone turned into ferrocrete, rough with age and discoloured by mineral leaching.

‘Expose more, if you would, Primus!’ Cawl asked.

‘Yes, master,’ Primus replied. He tore down the marble with his bare hands, pulling away whole panels now he could brace himself against the hidden stone of the mountain. In a few minutes, he had revealed a plugged tunnel leading out from the Hall of the Founder.

‘Our way is blocked,’ said Felix.

‘Only for a moment,’ said Cawl. He moved his immense self to the middle of the chamber and raised his hands, then dropped them. ‘You asked me to inform you the next time I did anything dramatic. I am about to. In a few moments, the scarab swarm will be brought back to life, and it will come down those stairs there. They will get us into the Pharos.’

‘How?’ said Felix.

Cawl raised his hands. ‘The breadth of my knowledge is quite amazing, Decimus. They will get us in, because they will be under my control. Now, I advise you to stand back, warriors. You don’t want to get in their way.’

Cawl smiled. He held up his arms. The mountain trembled with the activity of hidden alien machinery.

‘Watch,’ he said.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

THE GATES OF DEATH

Down the stairs from the Hall of the Founder were the catacombs of the Chapter. That section of the fortress-monastery alone occupied parts of the alien labyrinth, the rest avoiding the Pharos' blackstone core and either burrowing through the basalt shell or built atop of it. It was dark down there, and eternally silent, the perfect home for the dead.

At the foot of the stairs was a broad corridor that headed down at a steady angle. For part of the way the walls were ancient masonry, different in style to the rest of the fortress, hiding the black uncanny stone of the Pharos. Legend had it that the Sons of Dorn had built that part of the Scythes' home. If they had, Thracian and the rest had no idea why.

After a time the ancient masonry ceased, and stonework nearly as old but differently dressed took its place. The work was inferior, and in those parts tremors and the actions of tyranids had taken part of the walls down. Behind them the mountain's alien rock gleamed.

Thracian and his men proceeded on high alert. They could have run to the tombs in minutes, but they went at a cautious pace, guns held at readiness. Every shadow was scanned and checked. Soft lightning played around power weapons. Their auspexes and other devices were useless. The mountain throbbed now with the activity of the xenos machines, and tremors coursed from depths to summit with predictable regularity.

Hadrios had the keys to all of this. Thracian interrogated his memories, trying to place him in some context before the flight from the fortress-monastery, but he could not. Nobody, it seemed, could remember Hadrios before the fall. It

wasn't unusual in a Chapter of a thousand and more members, especially when elements of the order could be away on campaign for decades, but Hadrios insisted he had been present at the monastery and had escaped himself. Perhaps he had. It was impossible to say what was truth and what was a lie.

Like fools, they had accepted his story. They had accepted him, each assuming the others knew him, none of them ever checking. Not one of them had put the pieces together. When they turned their attention towards the matter of the infiltrators, their vision was obscured. They became pliant, stupid. Aratus had said repeatedly that they had had no choice, that they were victims of xenos conspiracy. This message formed a large part of Thracian's reconditioning. Aratus said what Hadrios had done could never be undone. Thracian refused to believe they had no choice. They had been weak. There were no innocents when it came to failure.

The things he had discovered, after the full horror of the situation came to light, chilled Thracian to the core still.

He felt the nullifier nestling against the back of his neck. He felt the shame it represented. He felt more at having deceived the tetrarch.

He was impure.

Every shadow, every crack in the wall, every tunnel uncovered by the Pharos' shifting, they approached as if it were an armoured portal with enemies behind. It was tedious. They were chafing to get on with the mission, but Thracian trusted only the tenets of the Codex Astartes and applied Guilliman's wisdom to the letter. He did not trust his own judgement any longer.

The methalon casket and its contents must survive.

There was an empty stone bier outside the gates to the tombs. It was plain, fashioned from a single piece of rock without carvings, the only adornment a stone pillow whose edges, despite its enormous age, were still sharply defined. There were many legends attached to the bed. One said the first human settler had lain in state there upon his death. That was not widely believed. The bier had been made large enough for a Space Marine to lie upon. Another version of the legend said the bier had never been occupied. The same story said it was made for a traitor redeemed who gave his life for Roboute Guilliman, and whose body had not been recovered. Another story told that it was a symbolic resting place for the vision of Imperium destroyed by Horus in his betrayal.

Versions differed. Who or what the memorial had actually been meant for was lost to time. That it predated the Chapter was all that was known for sure.

Thracian had cared about these tales, finding the distant history of his Chapter

entrancing. He had written treatises on the matter. Now all he felt was embarrassment and shame when he thought of the unknown warrior, knowing that whoever he was, he would have condemned the Scythes of the Emperor for their failings.

Directly behind the bier was a blackstone tunnel. Some yards away, a huge archway of Sothan basalt was worked into the width. Giant bronze hinge spikes projected from the carved supports, but the arch had never possessed gates. Fallen warriors must be allowed to pass from life to death with no barrier, or so the Sotharan belief had it. After death a warrior should have no more gates to storm.

Above the arch, in ornate script, was worked the legend 'Finis Officium'.

Duty's End.

They stopped before the gate. A faint breeze blew from below. The tunnel was repressurising slowly, only this was not the work of the fortress-monastery's life support systems, but the actions of the mountain.

'Air,' said Aratus. 'At this rate, there will be a breathable atmosphere within the Pharos inside a day.'

'The Pharos will no longer be here by then,' said Thracian. He turned to his men. The blackness of the tunnel and the tombs it held framed him.

'My brothers, we stand here on the threshold of death. Each one of us has sworn an oath to see the stain on our Chapter's honour removed, so that those warriors who have replaced us may carry our legacy onwards into the future without shame or fear of censure.'

He looked to them all: Keltru, who had fought on through so much agony; Apothecary Aratus, who had assumed responsibility for their spiritual as well as their physical welfare; Galerius, Ulas and Ren, who plodded implacably forwards around the cryo-vault in carefully salvaged Terminator plate with all the skill and honour of centuried veterans; Bokari, half-trained by Sebastion to replace him, and who would now never be initiated into the Machine-God's mysteries; and Brother Doror, whose valiant attempts to replenish the Chapter's numbers had been so treacherously undone.

'We who were once a great brotherhood, are now a tiny band,' Thracian said. 'But in each of us exists a germ of the Emperor's will – through His gifts, and His teachings, and the wisdom of His son. It is but a mote, a tiny flicker in the great darkness that threatens to consume the galaxy, and yet it is mighty, strong enough to overcome the hive mind. Strong enough to keep us true to who we are despite the invidious tactics of our enemies. The future of our Chapter is secure,

that we must not concern ourselves with any longer. It will be a long and glorious future, but it is a future we shall have no part in, and nor should we. Once we pass through this portal, through which the mortal remains of our brethren have been conveyed for nigh on a hundred centuries, we too shall be no more. We too shall be lost. We stand here as the dead. We enter these vaults and we become the dead, for though our bolters shall kick in our fists and our weapons crackle with the Emperor's wrath, we shall be dead. But in our death, we shall have our vengeance.

'It is time,' he said. 'Set aside the dead. Wake our cargo.'

'Here and now, my lord?' Aratus stood forwards.

'Yes.'

'Then I challenge you as I must. Hear this – once the subject is awoken, it will be impossible to put it back into hibernation.'

'Here and now, Apothecary,' said Thracian. 'As abhorrent as it is, we must make use of it. Time grows short.'

'As you wish, my lord,' said Aratus. With all the solemnity the occasion demanded, he retrieved a small scythe hanging around his neck on an adamantium chain. It appeared to be a piece of jewellery, but hidden inside was a signum key.

'With this key, I reveal the shame of our Chapter for all to see,' he said.

He broke the head from the scythe, activating the key.

'Our brotherhood is sundered by our shame,' he said.

Lights blinked all down the side of the gene vault. Super-chilled gas vented from the sides, dispersing rapidly into the sparse air.

The sides opened, spilling billowing white out into the near vacuum.

Inside should have been racks to carry armoured geneseed flasks, the most precious resource of any Space Marine Chapter. They had been removed, and a cramped methalon casket rigged in their place. Liquid close to absolute zero kept the occupant in a state of suspended animation. The suspension chamber in such devices was usually a rigid container of some sort. Lack of space had forced Aratus and Sebastion to make the unit from a resistant plastek sack. The material was opaque, but the thing inside was roughly humanoid, presenting the outline of a bulbous head and a body curled into a foetal position. Three arms wrapped around a hunched torso. Its legs were sharply defined against the pliable material.

Aratus went to a control panel bolted into the innards of the machine. The genevault had been carefully cut to take several cylinders of various fluids.

Tubes led from the cylinders into the sack via tight seals. Everything was covered in a thick layer of frost.

'Shall I commence the reanimation cycle, my lord?' said Aratus. 'This is the last chance we have to abandon this course of action.'

'Do it,' said Thracian. 'This is the end of us. Our death approaches.'

'As you command,' said Aratus. 'Initiating reanimation cycle.'

Aratus keyed in a code on a grid of featureless green buttons. He depressed the final cypher in the code, and the machine set to work.

The temperature of the hibernating occupant was raised rapidly. Cryo-protectants in the fluids that replaced its blood prevented ice crystals forming and destroying its cellular walls. When the cryoprotectants were sufficiently fluid, they were pumped out, and warmed blood pumped in.

Aratus monitored the process. The three Terminators faced outwards, on watch. The rest of the brothers observed in silence. The sack and cylinders, being warmed by the machine, steamed with the sublimation of ices. Inside pressurised glassite, liquids bubbled.

'Vitae replacement complete,' said Aratus. 'Beginning cardiovascular restart.'

A small screen blinked on, displaying flat lines and readings all at zero. Lights flickered on the console. With a keystroke, Aratus sent a jolt of power into the sack's occupant. It spasmed. Some of the lines bumped, then went flat.

'Again,' said Thracian.

Once more Aratus sent a jolt into the being. Its limbs spasmed together. The lines spiked, settled back to flatness, then twitched into peaks and troughs: heartbeat, breathing, finally brain activity.

The head turned outwards. Heavy brows pressed against the plastek, then a handless arm, the stump cap pushing out.

'Free it,' said Thracian.

Aratus took out his combat knife, spun it round in his hand so he was holding it hilt up, and sliced quickly down.

The occupant spilled out trailing wires and tubes. Some small fraction of it was human, that was evident in the eyes. Though yellow and deeply set, they had a human's quick intelligence. The rest of it was entirely alien. Three arms, a swollen head of off-white hue, plates of chitin and a pronounced exoskeletal cage around a torso of ivory. Towards the extremities its colouration approached that of a Sotharan human, a warm olive, but only just. A vestigial tail of bare, human bone snapped back and forth at the bottom of its back.

The Scythes of the Emperor had mutilated the creature. A muzzle covered its

mouth, immovable, bolted through flesh to bone. A heavy collar sat on its neck. All three of its hands had been amputated, and the talons on its toes clipped to the quick. It stared at them with hatred that, in its purity and ferocity, was human too.

Thracian had no pity for this creature. It was a tyrannic being, a hybrid fathered by vanguard organisms to spread unrest and bring down civilisations before the hive fleets arrived to feast. The fact that it was part human only made Thracian hate it more. It was the weakness of the Terran race incarnate. It was the symbol of the Chapter's shame.

He stared into its eyes. Under its muzzle-mask, a fanged maw hissed.

It leapt at him, the stumps of its arms held out to strike.

Aratus tapped a box attached to his belt. The creature fell down mid-leap and landed hard on the floor, where it squirmed in agony. Its limbs pounded the glassy rock. It arched its back and squealed.

'Enough,' said Thracian.

Aratus tapped the box again. The creature curled up on itself.

Keltru stepped forwards and snapped a heavy chain to a ring welded to the back of its collar and dragged it to its feet.

Thracian stared at the hybrid. Its eyes locked with his. Even with the null-field, he could feel its psychic influence, a calming aura that urged him to trust it. The soothing effect it had on him fired his anger. This was the most insidious trick of this particular brood, psychic subversion to cow those who would discover them, strong enough to dull a Space Marine's wits. 'Turn on its vox beads,' Thracian said.

Aratus did so.

The Chapter Master crouched low, so he might stare into its eyes directly. It wrinkled its nose beneath its mask at its own reflection. It knew on some level what it was, Thracian was certain.

'When Hadrios first showed me you, days after the fall of Sotha, he said one day you would help me find the source of corruption that had undone our world and our Chapter. Everything else Hadrios said was a lie, but by the Emperor I shall have that one truth out of him.

'Abomination, redeem yourself,' said Thracian. 'Take us to your father.'

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

PRIMARY LOCATION BETA

Necron drones formed a wall of seething metal. They burrowed through the ancient ferrocrete with incredible speed, mandibles flashing with molecular deconstruction beams. They whirled about in complicated patterns, a living drillhead, wings thrumming, those that had their fill of matter flying away to the edges of the tunnel where they laboured anew to lay down fresh layers of blackstone. Cracks, barely glimpsed as the rockcrete was stripped away, were filled. Pitted surfaces were brought to a lustrous sheen. When excavated, the tunnel's walls played with distant foxfires deep within the rock.

Felix's group proceeded out of the Hall of the Founder, or Primary Location Alpha, as Cawl now referred to it, at a steady walking pace. In the vacuum there was no sound, but their vox-net was alive with small noises as thick and varied as a jungle soundscape. The scarabs gave off a rattling noise. The miniature gauss beams hissed, crackling out an occasional burst of electromagnetic violence as a large lump of false stone was rendered into energy and absorbed. Otherwise the disturbing quiet of the vacuum blanketed them, accentuating the eeriness of the drones.

There were many lesser tunnels branching from the main, and a crevasse running along the floor, also plugged with ferrocrete. Sub-swarms of scarabs repeatedly attempted to peel away to attend to these, but Cawl's subversion routines pulsed loud enough that Felix's vox beads thumped with their signals, and the scarabs flew back to the main mass. Felix leaned aside as two groups of a dozen each rushed by his head, the emissions of their xenos motive units tripping alarms in his battleplate. Cawl's servo-skulls bobbed behind them like

single-minded herding dogs, but Cawl himself was dangerously relaxed. There was a kinship between this many-legged ex-human and the alien machines he had enslaved. It was not right.

'Do not worry, Decimus,' said Cawl. 'They are completely under my command. They will not harm you.'

'They want to break free,' said Felix.

'Their basic drives are strong. They wish to repair all of the Pharos. Indeed, as we go lower, I expect this little coopted colony of ours will become unnecessary. The lower tunnels will have been cleared already by their fellows. There will be many thousands, if not millions, of the scarabs at work in the depths of the mountain. Their basest instincts are to repair and reproduce. They are marvellous things. In terms you might understand, they render matter down into raw energy, and use it to construct whatever they wish. If they are left to their own devices, they will reproduce exponentially. One of my colleagues told me of a world that had been entirely disassembled by them, replaced with a ball of endlessly recycling scarabs. Gravity worked against them – it ever will attempt to make planets from sufficient mass – but the scarabs fought.' He smiled. 'I would dearly love to see it. Amazing. Imagine that power under our control. We have so much to learn from the necrons, Decimus. So much.' He tapped a metal finger against this temple. 'Blasphemy, I know, but that does not mean it isn't true, as I like to say.'

'How can you control them? Not once have I heard of a tech-priest managing to break into the necron carrier signal.'

Cawl sighed with contentment at his mastery over the scarabs. 'This is me, Decimus, you know I can do many things. The tuning stage of Primary Location Alpha gives access to much more than the old Mechanicum believed. It is a primary interface with the mechanisms of the mountain, and although it has yet to re-attain full functionality, it does allow one to control these drones, if one has the appropriate knowledge. That I do, having gained certain information from one of their technicians, though how I did so I shall keep to myself. It would shock you.' He winked, a gesture Felix found entirely inappropriate.

'Your lack of seriousness is a failing,' Felix said. 'You will make a mistake.'

'I will not,' said Cawl. 'Besides, I wear this personality for you, Decimus. It is the one you respond best to. Your psychological profile cannot lie.'

'You don't know everything, Cawl,' said Felix. 'Your profile is wrong.'

'Is it now?' said Cawl. Felix hated that turn of phrase. The way Cawl used it, in a lofty, superior sort of way, he hated even more. 'For example, I know you are

annoyed with me, Decimus,' Cawl said conversationally.

'I am angry with you, not annoyed,' said Felix stoically. 'You are infuriating, and irresponsible. You hide the truth from me for the purposes of drama. You are unstable, aggravating, arrogant and dangerous.'

'Will that be your report to Roboute?'

'That will be the start of it, and the general flavour. There will be details. Lots of them. The lord regent likes detail.'

'Doesn't he just?' said Cawl. 'Ah well, I should not mock him for it. What are the statistics and information he craves if not data, and what is data if not knowledge in its rawest form? I annoy him like I annoy you, dear Decimus, but he and I are not so different.'

'Your requests to be Fabricator General of Mars irritate him,' said Felix. 'And reveal the depths of your ambition.'

At that Cawl's weird locomotion ceased, and he turned about suddenly to look at Felix. The drones' smooth working hiccupped, and Cawl had to bring them back under control. When he had, his voice was concerned.

'I have done no such thing,' said Cawl.

'Your machine, the Cawl Inferior, it keeps asking him. With every message,' said Felix.

The scarabs continued their excavation, drawing away from the humans.

'Really? That is interesting. I will have to do something about that.'

'Do not pretend you do not know. This repeated request irritates the Lord Guilliman more than anything. He says you know you cannot be made the leader of the Martian Cult. Not without risking civil war.'

'Of course I can't be Fabricator General!' said Cawl. He set off again, his feet tip-tapping on the glossy floor. 'Half the Mechanicus think me the anti-maker cloaked in metal and flesh.' He swayed in close to deliver a loud stage whisper to Felix. 'I do research, you know. There are some that call me scientist!' He laughed. 'There would be immediate and devastating violence across all the forge worlds if I raised so much as a meaningful eyebrow in the direction of the Fabricator General's Forge. We would suffer a replay of the Heresy itself. Though I do admit that makes me sound a little full of myself, it is true.'

'Then why do you keep requesting it be done?'

Cawl smiled. 'Here's the funny thing, Decimus – I don't. I have no wish to be Fabricator General. Absolutely none whatsoever. It is a political role. I am not a politician, I am a genius. I do not crave power. I have no desire to rule. Rulership comes with many responsibilities. Responsibilities are fetters, and genius should

never, ever be fettered. Do you really believe that is my heart's desire?' He chuckled and shook his head. 'No, no, no.'

Felix looked at his creator. 'Then what is it you do want?'

'I want what you want, Decimus. I have told you repeatedly! How many more times must I say?' said Cawl. 'I want to save humanity from Chaos, and all the other great evils of this universe. I dream one day of slaying the great daemon of ignorance and setting mankind free from darkness. I want what your gene-father wants, even if we don't always see eye to eye on how it should be done. It pains me that others must suffer.' He became serious. 'Would you believe that it pains me what I did to you? If I could, I would never have turned any of you boys into Space Marines. You would have stayed at home and lived out your lives, but the Machina Opus of the Machine-God is polluted. The Great Work of the universe does not run as it should. It must be set right, so that men might live in peace. And I can do it, Felix. I see how to do it. I can see how to banish Chaos, how to meet the threat of the necrons, how to convince the aeldari to cease their manipulations. But I need your help, Decimus. I need so much help. I cannot do it all alone.'

Felix's temper remained sharp. 'Then why must you infuriate me so? You do it on purpose.'

'I do,' Cawl admitted.

'Why?'

'I annoy you?'

'Yes.'

'Enrage, frustrate, upset and goad you?'

'Every time I see you.'

'How does that make you feel?'

'More determined to get out from under your shadow than you can know,' said Felix.

'Well then,' said Cawl, his smile showing coyly round his augmetic mask. 'I think we can say that you're not afraid of me. Are you frightened of me, Decimus?'

Legs rattling, Cawl pulled ahead, humming an ancient air that brought Felix cold chills of recognition.

Annoyingly, Cawl was right. Felix wasn't afraid of him. Not any more.

They continued down. The geography of the Pharos was uncanny. Felix's cogitator presented cartoliths that made no sense. According to his auto-senses,

they were walking on the ceiling in defiance of gravity, heading down when to all intents they looked to be going up, or passing through the same section several times without doubling back. The device's attempts to build a meaningful map came to nothing, and it bleeped in frustration. Felix shut the function down before the machine-spirit took ill from the effort.

The corridor branched more frequently, and the branchings became larger. Some of these must have been airtight, for they yielded pockets of ancient air that had kept out the ferrocrete. The tunnel became steeper and narrower, treacherous to ceramite boots, and gave no purchase to either their grips or to maglocking. Felix saw traces of metal in the ferrocrete. When he pointed these out to Cawl, the archmagos paused, drew back his stolen excavators, and pulsed out fresh instructions. When the scarabs burrowed onwards, they left behind ancient walkways and steps cast from plasteel.

'These are of Imperial make,' said Felix, taking in the Opus Machina stamped into the metal.

'They are the product of the old Mechanicum, left here ten thousand years ago,' said Cawl. 'We are not the first of our species to come this way.'

Evidently, the mountain had been active, even then, for the Imperial artefacts were half absorbed into the green-black stone of the tunnels. The scarabs seemed to find these additions especially abhorrent, and Cawl needed to repeatedly divert them away from the fastenings holding the walkways to the alien stone.

They passed an open tunnel that corkscrewed around on itself. A walkway followed the curve, warped and buckled and half drowned in living rock.

'There was a map in the Library of Ptolemy,' said Cawl. 'It is useless now. As you can see, the Pharos is not bound to one shape.'

An hour later, the tunnel opened up into a huge cavern. The ferrocrete there was restricted to one side of the space, the inner face rippled with partial absorption. A number of dead scarabs – Felix could think of them in no other way than living things – lay on the ground. Several of Cawl's hijacked swarm detached themselves to tend to their inactive fellows. They darted over the broken machines, their silver surfaces glinting. In a few seconds repairs were effected. Reactivated scarabs rose from their resting place, and resumed work abandoned who knew how many centuries before.

'There is a large amount of ferrocrete to remove here,' said Cawl. 'I must give the xenos drones my full attention. You may rest, if you wish.'

Felix's men would do no such thing, but spread out through the cavern. Suit lights bounced off the glossy black rock without penetrating it, although they

could see deep within to where luminous shapes moved. Many tunnels opened off the cavern, worming their way to parts unknown. They entered through every surface of the cave, and varied enormously in size, from microscopic to several big enough to accommodate a Land Raider.

Felix looked into the stone. Ghostlights congregated where he watched, pulling his attention closer. Under his gaze, the lights coalesced, becoming shapes that he almost recognised. He reached out a hand. The shining rock rippled.

'Tetrarch!' Cominus' vox snapped Felix's attention away. His fist clenched. The lights were gone, the rock still.

Cominus was advancing on an aperture five feet high, set in the side of the cave with the base at about waist height. Its oval encompassed blackness, and so it appeared a tunnel, but when Cominus' light shone through, it glanced off far walls. There was a second cavern on the far side.

'I saw lights,' he said. He had his gun ready.

Ixen and Daelus flanked Cominus. They approached the gap from the sides, then Cominus flung himself in front of it.

Light flashed from the other side.

'There's someone there!' Cominus shouted. 'Adeptus Astartes! Hold fire!'

Lights flashed in and out of the cave. Then Cominus' gun wavered; he peered forwards, and stepped back, his aim renewed.

'By the Emperor,' he whispered.

Felix pushed forwards to stand by his sergeant.

On the far side of the hole he saw Cominus, Daelus and Ixen staring back. The doppelgangers were inverted, standing on the ceiling. Past the tops of their heads Felix saw another Cawl working xenos drones to clear ferrocrete, and other Space Marines drawing near to look.

'Stand down!' Cominus said to them.

The other Cominus was doing the same, their guns pointed directly at each other. Felix saw his counterpart reach up a restraining hand as he did so himself.

'It's us,' said Felix. 'Don't shoot.'

'It's a xenos trick,' snarled Cominus.

'I am ordering you to stand down,' said Felix. He looked to his men. 'All of you.'

Reluctantly, Cominus put up his gun. The other Cominus did so a fraction of a second later.

'Astounding,' said Daelus. 'What is it?'

'Come away,' said Alpha Primus. He joined them. 'Do not look.'

‘Is it an image?’ said Daelus. ‘Is it a trick?’

Felix noted then that there was no Alpha Primus on the far side. He peered around and saw there were more Space Marines in his stead stood in guard around Cawl. They were all in grey armour, and numbered twenty in total.

‘It is a dimensional mirror,’ said Alpha Primus. ‘We see a representation of reality as it might have been, had fate taken another course.’

Three of the grey-armoured Primaris Marines left their master and approached. They seemed to be arguing. A fourth came, then a fifth, and around the fists and heads of these last two, nimbuses of psychic power ignited.

Felix saw other differences. There was no Ixen in the image. Another warrior stood exactly where Ixen was, and his heraldry was not of the Aquiloan Brotherhood. Gathein wore a normal battle brother’s wargear. Troncus lacked his Martian red and servoharness, and wore Apothecary’s white, while Felix saw belatedly that the hand his other self rested on Cominus’ pauldron was a shining augmetic.

‘Look away from it,’ said Alpha Primus. ‘I can feel agitation. Step back, and the vision will fade.’

‘You know this because of Cawl,’ said Cominus, who turned away.

Primus nodded. ‘Cawl teaches me many things. He made me for these eventualities.’ He drew in a sharp, pained breath. ‘Quickly! We peer through barriers not meant to breached.’

‘It is not the warp,’ said Gathein, fascinated.

‘It is not any place. It is a glimpse of different possibilities,’ said Primus. ‘Other ways things might have been.’

‘Is it real?’

Primus shrugged. ‘Objectively? Who can say? I feel thoughts from them. But it could be a projection of the machine designed to confound us. Ask Cawl. He might tell you, if he feels like it.’

The psychic warriors were coming closer. The alternate Cominus was becoming angry, and threw off his tetrarch’s hand.

‘Do it. Turn away now,’ said Felix. ‘We do not know if we can interact with them. It is safest to remain ignorant.’

‘I’ll not turn my back on someone holding a gun on me,’ said Ixen.

‘You will, brother, and you will do so now,’ said Cominus.

The entire party turned their backs except Alpha Primus. Slowly, they walked away. Felix expected a bolt-round between his shoulders at any moment.

‘Stop,’ he said, when he had taken a score of steps.

‘Do not look back,’ said Alpha Primus.

‘I must,’ said Felix.

He turned back to look. For a second he saw through the hole into a kaleidoscopic display of variant caves, whence a multitude of Felixes stared back.

Alpha Primus’ hands fell on him and turned him around.

‘That is enough, tetrarch.’

Some minutes later, when Felix looked again, the tunnel mouth had gone. Smooth rock covered it over so flawlessly he doubted the aperture had ever been there.

They stayed close to Cawl while he worked after that. Ferrocrete fell away in glittering showers. The archmagos directed the drones to fabricate more of their kind, and the work hastened. The rest of the energy they stored needed venting, and the cavern sparkled with the reflected light of discharge as from energy, the drones made air.

At length, Cawl stepped back, and the xenos drones fell into a drifting flock overhead, shepherded by his servo-skulls.

‘We’re through’ he said, gesturing to smooth black walls and an open tunnel. ‘After you, Decimus.’

The amount of ferrocrete the party encountered thereafter diminished. Cawl’s suborned swarm of drones spent most of its time flying about him in ordered streams. Each patch of false stone they came across showed signs of having already been gnawed back by particle beams, melted away like snowdrifts dying in the warmth of spring. Likewise there was less and less of the ancient walkway left, until there was none at all, and the Space Marines were forced to proceed slowly in case they slipped and fell into the darkness of the mountain.

They came to a near vertical drop that ran right across the width of the passage. On the far side, the passage continued. It was a distance a Primaris Space Marine could clear with a jump, but Cawl went to the edge of the chute, peered down and said:

‘We must go down. The secondary control stage is beneath us. Primary Location Beta, as my illustrious brethren called it.’

The chute had been cleared by other hands, and no trace of the walkways remained, or else the chute was new and there had never been any structures placed there by humans; either way it was impassible to the Space Marines, being utterly smooth and impossible to climb. Cawl managed it easily enough.

He was big enough to brace himself against the sides of the chute, and had enough feet and hands that the stone's slickness didn't matter. But the Space Marines could not climb like him. They had no measure of how deep the pit was. Armour could protect them only so much against a fall.

'I will go alone,' said Cawl. 'Primus will accompany me. We will return shortly.'

He waved a hand. The drones flew off back up the passage and landed in neat ranks that stretched far back up the way they had come. Thousands of single green eyes dimmed into blackness.

'You will not go alone,' said Felix. 'I'm coming with you.'

'If you insist, Decimus,' said Cawl distractedly. 'If you insist.'

'My lord…' began Cominus.

'No, sergeant, not this time. Wait here. If we do not return, you are to retreat to the extraction point at the northern landing pad. Is that clear?'

'Tetrarch…'

'It is an order, Cominus. Follow it.'

Cawl gave a wave and clanked away down the drop, where he vanished quickly into the inky black.

'Ixen,' Felix said. 'Bring me ropes.'

'Not necessary,' said Alpha Primus. He stepped forwards and raised a hand. Blue light blazed around his fist, and he lifted up from the floor and floated forwards. When Primus was over the drop, he raised his other hand and Felix rose up upon a second cushion of psychic force.

'How do you manage these feats?' Gathein called to him. 'Can you sustain levitation all the way down?'

'I can,' said Primus.

'The blackstone pains my soul. Does it not hurt you?' the Epistolary said as Primus sank down the shaft.

'It hurts me,' said Primus. 'But I am used to pain. Everything hurts, all of the time.'

Felix followed him down the shaft. Beneath his feet the lights of Cawl's augmetics glanced from polished stone, but he could not see the archmagos himself.

A lip of black rose past his face, and he sank into blackness as thick as oil.

Primus grunted with effort as they set down. If the ferrocrete poured down the shafts in ancient times had got that far, there was no sign of it any longer. They

emerged at a nexus where several tunnels came together. Cawl was waiting for them there. The passageway he pointed out for them to follow was tall and narrow, a slot rather than a tube. A servo-skull drifted out, its reconnaissance completed.

'It is this way, I am sure of it,' he said. 'All has changed since the old maps were made, and according to the chronicles the tunnels were inconstant anyway, but this slot is the same as the one described within the tomes of the Library of Ptolemy.' His pale face, lit blue by his atmospheric energy mask, smiled.

Felix thought there was little chance that Cawl could fit through the gap, but the giant tech-priest contorted himself, various portions flattening out or retracting, until he was of a good shape, and he slid into the slot like a sword into a scabbard. The tunnel curved around inwards, and he disappeared from sight again.

'You first,' said Alpha Primus miserably, holding out his hand. 'I will guard the rear.'

Felix prepared his boltstorm gauntlet.

'Weapons are not necessary here,' said Primus.

Felix held his fist out all the same when he headed into the spiral.

Cawl found Primary Location Beta as intriguing as the books had suggested. It was tall, divided into two bell-shaped chambers set neck to neck so that it resembled an hourglass. The top was graced with one of the Pharos' many tunnels that wound off through stone and time and space. It had a sculpted, purposeful beauty that moved Cawl, all the more so since he was beginning to understand why it was that shape, why the stone shone so, why the wall came in a few hundredths of an inch just so by the entrance. He was on the cusp of discovery, and it excited him deeply.

Expectant silence filled the chamber as surely as water would a pitcher.

Decimus Felix came edging into the bell chamber, then Alpha Primus. They noticed the import of the moment. Alpha Primus tried so hard to be stoic at all times, but this time failed. His miserabilism was too pronounced. He wallowed in sorrow, that one. If Cawl had the capacity to make another Alpha Primus, he would start over and tweak the genes for joy. Regrettably that was impossible. Primus was and would remain unique. Even so, he looked around the chamber in wonder.

Felix, on the other hand, was far more human in his humours. There was a childish defiance in Felix, a desperate need to prove himself worthy of the

authority the primarch had bestowed upon him. Felix was a favourite of Cawl's, he brought out paternal instincts in him he never knew he had. The interface was going to be more difficult with them present, but life with an audience was always better, especially when such great deeds were about to be done.

'Decimus, stand over there.' Cawl made his way to the centre of the chamber. He pulsed invisible commands to his attendant flock of skulls, and they filed out in orderly fashion, one by one.

'The forces that are to be unleashed in here might damage my devices,' he said. 'I can't have that.' Mechadendrites rattled back into housings. His guns deactivated and pulled in closer to his body. 'Take my axe, please, Primus,' he said, holding out the massive, cog-toothed weapon he bore. Primus took the haft. 'Go stand by Decimus, right there. Yes,' said Cawl.

He hunkered down a little as his legs pulled in. He made a show of bracing himself, but he really did need to do it.

'What I am about to attempt has never been done before,' he said portentously, indulging himself. 'I have the means in here,' he tapped his head. 'To my knowledge, no Imperial servant has successfully joined with a necron network to the extent that I am about to, not once, ever,' he said emphatically. 'Do not leave the side of the room. Do not touch me. Do not touch the walls.' In his tightly packed cranium, augmetics came alive. He felt the alien heat of the blackstone bead in his head. 'No matter what happens. Very well?' Green lights flickered in the rock. Random at first, they drew together, and sketched predictable, circuit-like patterns.

'Get on with it, Cawl,' said Felix.

'You do know how to spoil a dramatic moment, Decimus,' said Cawl.

He placed his primary hands palm to palm. The lights ran quicker in the stone.

The Pharos sang.

'Now I begin,' he said. He plunged headlong into the xenos infosphere, whereupon some potent force slammed into his machine-laced soul.

It hurt to an almost intolerable degree.

CHAPTER NINETEEN

A REFUSABLE OFFER

Insect, said the voice of the mountain.

'I bring most humble greetings,' said Cawl. 'I am so very pleased to make your acquaintance. I am Beli–'

Insignificant, but bold. You come to us now, out of your cage of metal and flesh. You show yourself, light to light. Why?

Belisarius Cawl was alone in the dark, his body lit only by the light of his augmetics. This was not a physical space. His body was a machine projection. A form of imagination shared.

<Unauthorised memcore access.>

Cawl enacted a dozen sub processes to guard his mind. The probing presence withdrew.

Interesting, the voice said. **Primitive, but well protected. Let us try another way.**

A force gripped Cawl and pulled his limbs outwards, leaving him like an insect pinned to a board. Cawl screamed. This time, the being breached his outer data walls and slipped into the upper layers of his soul. The laws of time and space stretched and bent. Cawl had the impression of an immense data probe riffling through his past.

Not your original form. Not your original being.

Again Cawl screamed. The pain was a phantom, but felt all too real. Every one of his augmentations was carefully ripped away and pulled out for display. The Pharos sought to model him, and turn back his existence through time to see what he had been before. It was all illusory, but it still hurt.

Nerve impulse, organic, bioelectrical, overlaid mechanical and electronic enhancements, but evolved from… the thing paused. **You are one of *their* things, ultimately.** Another pause. **You do not know this. You are ignorant of your genesis. A debased thing of a debased age.**

'Oh, great one!' Cawl panted. 'Hearken to me. I bring offers of an alliance between–'

Nerve impulses detected in material form of subject. Purpose of impulse, production of vibrations in gas medium. Result, it talks, said the voice. **It will cease talking.**

Pain flooded Cawl's being, tormenting him down to the lowest sub-atomic particle and beyond.

He yelped. 'No need for that!'

Still it talks. Cease!

The pain increased.

'I have a proposal to bring to you!' said Cawl. 'Show yourself! Let me speak with you, face to face!'

Face? queried the being. **Face. Frontal expressive area to fore of upper body, often attached to endoskeletal box housing the organ of material-immaterial interface,** it said with finality. **Face. Face to face. A curious expression. Implication of personal contact. You have no 'face', only the facsimile of one, and in your corporeal state the face you have is not your own.** The voice was pleased with itself. **We have no face. Light needs no face. Let us see what face was yours, once.**

The most deeply rooted of Cawl's implants were teased from their housings. Cawl shrieked as metal separated from bone. He blinked in surprise as flesh long ago purged crept across his features. By now, his immediate vicinity was crowded with floating components.

Time is nothing to us, the voice pompously declaimed. **You are a thing of time.** It paused. Cawl felt it scrabble at his consciousness. So far, the deeper parts of his being remained inviolate. This annoyed the being. **Insect,** it said petulantly.

'You wish to understand me,' said Cawl.

We wish to vivisect you, said the thing. **There is nothing worth understanding in you, but we will pull you apart all the same, to see how you work. We must understand this new age.**

'There's no need for that, we are kindred spirits, you and I!' Cawl gasped, somehow. Bits of his thoracic extension were drifting away in the dark, where

they disassembled themselves into their constituent components and floated in exploded diagrammatical form. It was very neat, if rather disturbing.

We are not like you, said the voice. **We are a god. You are nothing.**

Immobile, wracked with pain, Cawl still laughed. The thing's annoyance grew.

'God's a flexible term, in my experience. There is one god, the Machine-God, and you are not He.'

It was the thing's turn to laugh. Its voice broke into a dozen mocking voices, booming from unseen horizons and overwhelming Cawl's mind. The thing redoubled its efforts to penetrate Cawl's defences and mine his soul for information. It forced itself a little deeper. Cawl groaned.

These are the gods of your time. God of Machines. Gods of Chaos. God of… men? Men. It paused, evaluating the word. **There is weakness in this era. You are a man. You are weak. Your species is weak, far removed from the original plan of our enemy. These are not gods you worship, this Machine-God, these entities in the warp, this Emperor. We will explain. The first is a lie. The second are emergent consciousnesses caused by etheric disturbance. The third is a weapon.** It paused at this. **There is war. The… rift? A rift has opened. The purity of reality is polluted. The war continues. Our war. You fight it. But you are weak. You are echoes. Echoes of might. Blots on purity. Glory has left this galaxy.**

'Actually, I can be strong if needed,' said Cawl. 'If we talk, you and I, you shall see. I have much to offer! See how I continue my efforts to charm you while you torment me.'

Searing pain coursed through him. He howled, then smiled.

'You're not going to shut me up. Listen to me.'

The thing was silent.

Perhaps, it said.

'I can help you.'

Perhaps.

'We have much to teach each other.'

That is definitely not so. You can never learn what we know, and you have nothing to teach us.

'You are wrong.'

Instead, you will free us.

It paused.

You have heard that before. We see it in the patterns of your mind.

Cawl said nothing.

You have heard that before, from one of your so-called gods. The voice insisted. Cawl got the sense of something settling back to regard him from a greater distance, the action of a being desiring to understand the whole of a complex mechanism by changing perspective. **This is a strange era. We have much to learn. We shall adjust your temporal resonance again, so that you may show us more.**

'Wait!' said Cawl, but by then he was back in the past.

Circa 10,000 years ago

Cawl and Friedisch spent an uncomfortable month locked in their quarters on the Altrix's ship. The craft was fast, and the warp smooth, but Terra was a long way from Ryza. Time dragged. They became fractious and Cawl, especially, disgraced himself with his pettish behaviour. They were allowed to socialise at first, but eventually became sick of each other, so spent much of the voyage apart at opposite ends of their shared quarters, bickering every time they spoke.

In a moment of unusual thoughtfulness, the Altrix allowed them onto the observation deck when the ship passed the holy orb of Mars. A guard came for them and led them up through the ship. They sniped and argued like rival dowagers until they came to the gallery windows, where the sight of the great evils done to Mars silenced them.

They gaped. Friedisch gripped Cawl's arm.

They sailed near Mars, not far off the higher anchorages. The world was crowded by debris clouds of stupendous scale, their components ranging in size from substantial parts of battle cruisers to flecks of paint that glittered in the sun like morning frost, misting the view. But though thick, the clouds could not conceal all that had happened to Cawl and Friedisch's world.

Giant black scars cut across the red deserts. Whole cities had been razed. New and awful craters gouged the surface where once temple forges and industrial complexes had lifted their spires in praise of the Machine-God.

'Belisarius, it's gone. My home, it's gone.' Friedisch raised a shaking hand and pointed to where a deep fissure marked the location of Mundus Planus fabricatory conurb.

All over Mars cities had been wiped away. Impact patterns spread their dark splashes over the ground. The fabled Ring of Iron, which circled the equator, had suffered as much as the mother world. Sections were missing, the material broken off and floating among the wrecks huddling around the red world. Mars'

polluted skies twinkled with re-entry tracks and the flash of laser discharge shooting down the largest pieces of debris.

'This is Mars,' said the Altrix. She stood with her hands clasped behind her, back straight, like an officer delivering a report to her general. 'This is your home. You will note the large amount of damage done to the world by the Adeptus Mechanicus reclamation force. I understand that fighting is still going on in the deeper hives. The traitors are tenacious.'

'All the knowledge, all those people,' said Friedisch quietly. He stifled a sob.

'I assume you are making some kind of point here,' said Cawl grimly.

The Altrix nodded once. 'I am making a point. I want you to see how much has been lost. I want you to remember what you see here when the director makes his offer. Knowledge is precious. Almost as much wisdom as blood was spilled in the war. We must work together to preserve what remains.' She looked at them and curled her lip. 'No matter how distasteful that might be.' She unclasped her hands. 'I shall leave you here to observe the results of man's folly, and think upon what I have said. My men will take you back to your quarters. We arrive at Terra in three days.' She walked by them, pausing as she passed. 'This will soon be over,' she said.

It was the only kindly thing Cawl ever heard her say.

Terra greeted them with the cold indifference of a neglectful mother. The worn out birthplace of humanity had little affection for its trillions of children before Horus' great betrayal. In the aftermath of war, it had none left at all. For Cawl and Friedisch this coldness was to be expected, and they returned it. Their loyalties lay with Mars.

Terra was in worse condition even than the Red Planet. Wounded, grey and black, all traces of the Emperor's efforts at rejuvenation wiped clean, it cities were smouldering piles and its people, where they survived, were lost in shock. Its mighty court of orbital plates was missing. Old Earth was naked, dead, diminished; a corpse world crawling with vermin.

They rode their shuttle down in grim silence. Altrix Herminia caught Cawl's eye and raised a questioning eyebrow at him.

He turned away.

They arrived at the half-ruined Lion's Gate spaceport to find a world in mourning, and not solely for the loss of the Emperor. There was not one person untouched by the war. Everyone, from legionary to peon, had lost someone. Black adorned everything.

Security was tight, but the Altrix had clearance of the highest sort. Her warriors were ushered through the crowds of troopers manning the checkpoints. No questions were asked regarding her guests.

They had to drive through what was left of the Imperial Palace. Most of the transit system was wrecked. Only the most important roads were clear. They wound a circuitous route through a broken wasteland of metal and rubble haunted by grey survivors. Legionaries patrolled the streets in incongruously bright armour. They were all laden with honours that told of heroic actions in the defence. Even such minor celebration of victory seemed obscene.

There were precious few of these transhumans. The Legions were shattered, their survivors gone in pursuit of the fleeing enemy.

Their transport was military, all-terrain, a truck held high over the ground on eight fat tyres. Nothing less than that could have traversed the ruins.

They passed long lines of emaciated people waiting for rations being distributed from a burned-out hab block. Though barely more than a shell, it was in far better shape than its neighbouring buildings, which were reduced to cones of rubble scores of yards high.

Through armoured windows Cawl peered at diseased faces. He knew enough of human physiology to see that most of the people would not last out the winter. ‘Such a waste,’ said Cawl. ‘So much death.’

‘The wages of treachery are always collected by the undeserving,’ said the Altrix. ‘You see, now you understand what Director Sedayne understands – that humanity needs to be saved from its victory. Only knowledge can do that.’

Cawl looked at her from under his cowl. He was in a foul temper and didn’t care to hide it. ‘You know, you will not hear much disagreement from me on that count, so why the need for the men with the guns?’

‘Mortal minds are fickle. Individual choice cannot be allowed to stand in the way of destiny.’

‘Charming. What manner of education produced a woman like you?’ Cawl said.

‘A truthful one,’ she replied.

The transport turned a corner on to one of the palace’s gargantuan processional ways. Its great width was narrowed to a ravine by falls of debris from downed hives. In the distance, the jagged buttes of the broken palace walls bit at the horizon.

Night was coming. Days were short and cold. There was so much material in the atmosphere it would take a thousand years for the sun to shine cleanly again. Sol tracked across the grey heavens, a woeful smear as miserable in colour and

movement as every other soul on Terra.

There were a few places where luxury hid. There were buildings intact, and some entire spires, the surprise survivals that exist in any war, and, as in any war, such places were monopolised by the rich.

Herminia took Cawl and Friedisch to a starscraper in Outer Gryphonia, not far from the remains of the Celantine Wall. The building stood amid a multi-level wasteland formed from the bones of its brothers and sisters. Though still erect, the scraper's lower levels were a honeycomb of blasted-out walls and gaping, artificial caves. The effects of war continued all the way up its considerable height to the top, where wounds in its silvery skin caused by voidship lance fire looked like the claw marks of gargantuan beasts.

But there was life within. The inside was full of servitors shoring up the structure. They laboured, each absorbed in their own limited tasks, but together they produced work of stunning complexity, and at speed.

'Terra will rise again,' said Friedisch. 'I hope the same is happening on Mars.'

'Both worlds survive,' said Herminia blackly. 'They will never be the same again.'

They entered a lifter with Herminia's guards at their back. It rose rapidly. Atmospheric controls were malfunctioning, and their ears popped several times before the lifter began its long deceleration.

They disembarked on a high floor which appeared whole but whose corridors played host to the antics of freezing Himalazian winds. Atmospheric cyclers groaned in their attempts to maintain a breathable pressure. Already high upon the mountains, the altitude the building added thinned the air to nothing, and both Cawl and Friedisch panted plumes of ice crystals.

Herminia took no consideration of their difficulties, and they were hustled down the corridors by her guards. Neither she nor they suffered from the rarefied atmosphere, and they arrived in perfect formation, helms and weapons gleaming amid the dereliction, while Cawl and Friedisch struggled to breathe.

They came to a grand door swathed with the limp plastek sheeting of an auxiliary airlock. The airlock inflated like a balloon, until it stood rigid, enabling the door to open. Cawl and Friedisch were shoved inside, where they took grateful gulps of warmed, thicker air. Once inside they got a good look at the room door. It was bronze, ten feet high. The etched decoration of civilians and Space Marines leading humanity to a better future seemed painfully quaint.

A suite of rooms welcomed them, the principal of which was huge and opulent.

There was a window overlooking the battered city, but it had been darkened to near total opacity, shutting out Terra's pain. Rich carpets ran to walls of pleasingly sinuous shape. Antiques furnished the rooms. Artefacts and pieces of art from Terra's long past stood in downlit alcoves. It was designed perfectly, a calming space. But this echo of Imperium's lost promise had not escaped the ruin entirely. A thin layer of fine dust lay on everything, despite the best efforts of the ventilation system to keep it out. At least in there the pressure was more bearable, and the tech-priests' breathing settled.

There was a single man in the room. Two of Herminia's soldiers stayed behind to stand sentry, the rest exited to an antechamber, leaving the sum of the occupants at six. It seemed too small a number to fill the room. The carpeted floor hid dangerous gulfs.

'Belisarius Cawl, Friedisch Adum Silip Qvo, I present to you Director Ezekiel Sedayne, technologist and scientist of the Emperor's inner research cadres, biotechnical division.'

Sedayne took the delivery of his title with studied diffidence, and turned to a table covered in dull gold leaf, where stood a selection of decanters and several expensive looking glasses.

'Do you drink, Cawl? Qvo?' he said. 'Alcohol, I mean.' He addressed the bottles rather than his guests.

'I am not as pedantic as some of my colleagues,' said Cawl. 'I don't deny myself the pleasures of flesh either. They are given to us by the Machine-God to enjoy.'

'Your religion is so charming,' said Sedayne.

'Yes, I drink,' said Cawl frostily.

Sedayne smiled, again at the bottles and not at the men. 'Then allow me to select you something.'

He spent a moment doing so, then picked a tall, fluted vessel, and poured purple liquor from it into three glasses. He took them all up in one large hand, and presented one each to Friedisch and Cawl.

'Plum brandy.' Sedayne looked at them gravely, then smiled. He had grey, intense eyes and the thin skin of someone living on mortgaged time. 'They have made this for thousands of years around the Mediterran desert. I am rather partial to it. I hope you enjoy it.'

Cawl took the glass. Friedisch's hand shook as he accepted his.

Sedayne was tall and thin. Cawl would have suspected off-world heritage, a life in low-g habitats, but Sedayne wore no supplementary braces on his limbs to

help him move under Terra's pull. Although he did lean for support on a glossy cane, that seemed more because of his age. He had long black hair, and features that had many of the ingredients of handsomeness but which did not come together to provide it. Clothes of simple cut but expensive make clad him in black and greys.

'I shall try not to be trite, nor mysterious, but straightforward,' said Sedayne. 'I know you have training in the arts biologica, Cawl. I don't know about you, adept…?'

'Acolytum Friedisch Adum Silip Qvo,' said Friedisch, annoyed his name had already been forgotten.

'Acolytum?'

'I was days away from securing my first ranking when the war came to Trisolian,' said Friedisch. 'You will find me competent in several fields, notably–'

'Thank you,' said Sedayne, silencing him with a raised hand. 'As I was saying, it will be apparent to you that I am old, and that I have but a little time to live. I am sorry to interrupt you, acolytum, but time is short. Please, be seated.' He gestured to a nest of over-padded chairs. 'I will tell you what you must know, and make the offer the Altrix here has no doubt intimated I will.'

They sat. Sedayne moved with grace, but stiffness was setting in.

'Adarnian vitality?' said Cawl.

'You know your rejuvenats.' Sedayne nodded. 'Stolen life, I regret to say.'

'Illegal,' said Cawl. He sipped his drink. Sweet and heady with a scent from the past, in it were trapped long summers and gentle lands gone into dust.

'Then you know me a little already,' said Sedayne. 'I did not take it lightly, and I did not take it for myself.'

'No? You wished to give the Adarnians a sense of purpose?' said Cawl.

'Droll,' said Sedayne. His grey eyes hardened. 'I heard that about you, that you undermine others by making light of what is important to them, while pompously declaiming your own worth.'

Cawl shrugged. 'I strive for perfection in the eyes of the Machine-God. I have yet to attain it. I do better than most though.'

Sedayne shook his head. 'You see, Altrix, this is the poor standard of inquiring minds in this benighted age. Machine-God!' he snorted. 'But I am sure we agree on some things, Cawl. Tell me, what is the most valuable thing in the universe?'

'Knowledge,' said Cawl and Friedisch simultaneously.

'Exactly,' said Sedyane. 'It was for knowledge's sake that I prolonged my life

in so barbaric a way. Do you think I have no empathy for the sentient beings that died so that I could live? No. Similarly, it is for the sake of the same knowledge I had you brought here.' He cradled his drink in long, veinous fingers. 'I am one of the fortunate few who worked with the Emperor Himself. There are not many of us left now. Old age took many of us. The war many more. Soon there will be one less. I am dying.'

Cawl sipped his drink again. Friedisch peered at his suspiciously.

'I know you must have an interest in the biological work of the Emperor. You were a student of Diacomes, yes?'

Cawl nodded.

'He was a colleague of mine, a long time ago.' Sedayne attempted a winning smile. He had cosmetically altered teeth, very straight, and horribly, unnaturally white. They looked bizarre in his chem-smoothed face, as if he were a plastek recreation of a man. 'He was gifted, if deluded like all your creed. That was before I worked on the creation of the Legiones Astartes. I was the director of the carapace project.'

False modesty wrapped his words, tight as apple skin.

'Do you know that the black carapace was an unusual part of the Astartes program?' Sedayne said. 'It is the final stage implant, and unlike some of the other organs, that can, if necessary, be grown internally from seed germs, the carapace must be grafted in substantial pieces. Once in place, it encourages the human body to adopt it as its own, and it spreads. It is an engineered, controlled cancer.' He smiled at his recollections. 'This is now a matter of fact, and the signature element of Terra's greatest warriors. No other gen-altered warriors have it. You will know a legionary by his carapace. It nearly was not so. It looked for a long time that we would not perfect it. Try as we might, we could not get the body to grow the carapace. It is far from the materials of the human body, being mostly a plastek compound with mineralised elements of rare sort. Nevertheless, it is crucial to the functioning of the Adeptus Astartes. Without it, their neural plugs are hard to implant, and without the plugs they cannot control their armour. As glorious a creation as the Legiones Astartes are, they are creatures of two parts, the biological, and the mechanical. Not so very different from the qualities your Cult finds so appealing, the union of man and machine, yes?'

'Indeed,' said Cawl.

Sedayne sat back, getting into his stride. He was a man who enjoyed regaling others with his achievements. 'Much of the black carapace work was undertaken

by servants of Amar Astarte, a name which is already ill-favoured, when not so very long ago it was spoken with respect. She was one of the greatest genotects of this era, perhaps any era. Her work outshone that of the gene-witches of the Selenar. You know of them?'

'Of course!' said Cawl. 'We are not entirely ignorant.'

Sedayne was unoffended by Cawl's waspishness. Instead he seemed to approve. 'Good, good, you fight your corner. That is good,' he said, stroking the side of his glass with his forefinger. 'No one will remember her, in a few hundred years. The favour of the powerful means so much, and she no longer has it. I didn't rate her myself. The work I received was substandard. It didn't work, so I fixed it. I made the carapace possible. You could say that the success of the Emperor's own Legions was only possible because of what I did.' Sedayne sipped his wine with a triumphant expression. 'Now, imagine what you could do if you shared that knowledge.'

'Is he joking?' said Friedisch suddenly. He set his untouched glass aside on a low table. 'He is joking, isn't he?'

'He certainly seems very pleased with himself, Friedisch, old friend,' said Cawl.

Sedayne's expression darkened. 'Why shouldn't I celebrate what I have done? I have achieved so much. What have you done, Cawl, but dodge your responsibilities? Whereas you,' he curled his lip at Friedisch. 'You are a red-robed, Martian nobody.'

'Well, this is getting off to a flying start,' said Cawl. 'I believe there was something you were going to offer me. If it is simply this tedious lecture, I think we'll be going, eh, Friedisch?'

'Let's,' said Friedisch.

'I am offering my knowledge!' said Sedayne loudly. His mood turned as quickly as badlands weather. 'I am offering you everything that I am, and everything that I have learned. Your religion purports to worship knowledge. Here I am offering it, and you scoff at me.'

Cawl smiled. 'I'm sorry if we insult you. But there are a number of things that trouble me about this. If this is such a marvellous offer, why drag me and my friend here halfway across the galaxy at gunpoint? I have to say that your underling has been nothing but threatening from beginning to end. This leads me to believe that you think I might turn down your offer, so I have to wonder, why me? And why is it inevitably not going to be as attractive as you are attempting to make it sound?'

‘Name me the methods of direct knowledge transfer,’ said Sedayne.

‘Engrammatic reproduction,’ said Cawl. ‘Psychic rip, genophagy, noospheric upload. There are many, but they are flawed.’

‘They all are,’ agreed Sedayne.

‘Diacomes thought there was another way,’ said Cawl.

‘He did.’

‘The direct grafting of one consciousness, via machinic connection through the infospheric medium, from one mind to another.’

‘Yes.’

‘You know he utilised xenos technologies for this,’ said Cawl.

‘I do,’ said Sedayne.

‘Technologies that were proscribed.’

‘They were and are,’ admitted Sedayne. ‘That didn’t seem to stop you working for him. In fact, if I am correct about you, I would hazard a guess that it’s why you went to him in the first place.’

Friedisch gave Cawl a questioning look. Cawl ignored it.

‘The technology is dangerous for both parties,’ said Cawl. ‘He never managed to do it, you know. When I left him he had been trying for hundreds of years.’

Sedayne leaned forwards. ‘Does that trouble you?’

‘What do you think!’ snapped Cawl. ‘You are obviously intent on using this technology on me, in which case I will effectively die. So thank you, but no thank you.’

‘I offer you all my experience, all my memories, my discoveries. It is a gift,’ said Sedayne.

‘Yes, a gift with a guarantee of my mind being wiped, and a high probability of death or insanity for the new being created. The only thing certain about it is failure. Diacomes turned the brains of his test subjects into gruel, director,’ said Cawl. ‘I was there. I wanted no part of it then, and I certainly want no part of it now. Good day.’

Cawl stood.

‘Wait,’ said Sedayne.

Cawl tensed. Herminia was staring at him. She shook her head emphatically and drew her gun. The guards levelled theirs at Cawl.

‘Since you put it like that,’ said Cawl.

Cawl turned back to see Sedayne also had a weapon in his hand. It was small, perfectly formed, built to an aesthetic standard of a higher age. It was one of the most beautiful and dangerous things Cawl had ever seen.

‘I thought people like you got others to do their dirty work for them,’ said Cawl. ‘You have your own gun. Remarkable.’

‘Sit down,’ said Sedayne.

Cawl sat. Friedisch hadn’t moved.

‘Experience taught me it’s always best to be armed,’ said Sedayne. ‘Hear me out. I perfected Diacomes’ techniques. It will succeed. Minutes, that is what it will take, minutes to grant you my lifetime’s knowledge. You will be wondering why I chose you.’

‘I wasn’t,’ said Cawl. ‘I was on my way out of the door, but I assume I’m going to find out whether I want to or not.’

‘You have memcore alterations recommended to you by Diacomes. You were one of only eleven apprentices that he took on.’

‘Then approach one of them.’

‘I did. The first three were with him before he perfected the memcore alterations. Two of them are in any case dead. Two are unaccounted for. Two went insane. Three more died during the war, the last died when, well, Herminia killed her trying to bring her in. That leaves you. You have the memcore alterations. You are also knowledgeable yourself, and intelligent. Think what our intellects might achieve together.’

‘It is not together, is it, director? I know that one intended effect of these memcore alterations is an increased receptiveness to mental overwriting. It’s one of the reasons I left him. He was using us.’ Cawl sighed. ‘Diacomes was almost successful during my apprenticeship with him,’ said Cawl. ‘It is theoretically possible to blend minds, permanently, but Diacomes found that the donor mind always suppresses and ultimately supplants that of the host body. Always. It would have been the great failing of his work, had all of his test subjects not gone mad or died. I’d say those were bigger failings, on balance.’

Sedayne smiled regretfully. ‘A pity.’

‘You know what I say is true.’

‘I do.’

‘I won’t believe you if you tell me you overcame the problem.’

‘I won’t, because I haven’t. You will have my knowledge, all of it. But you will also be me. We’ll make a fine pair, you and I. You won’t be lost. You will live on, in me, a tiny piece at least. A whole new lifetime of discovery awaits us, Belisarius Cawl. You may watch it through my new eyes. Your eyes.’

‘I’m not going to do it.’

‘You will,’ said Sedayne.

Cawl laughed at Herminia and the guards, and at Sedayne, all of whom were pointing weapons at him.

'It will do you no good to shoot me. Then we both lose.'

'That is why I am not going to shoot you,' said Sedayne. 'The Altrix will shoot your friend instead.'

As soon as the words were out of his mouth, the bullet was out of her gun.

Friedisch fell to the floor. Fyceline drifted between the tech-priest and the scientist. The back of his chair was a bloody mess of stuffing and splintered wood. It was the only reason he was still alive.

'Belisarius!' said Friedisch. His hands paddled in the pool of blood filling the hollow in his gut. 'I am shot!'

Cawl fell to his knees by his friend's side. He gripped Friedisch's hand in his own. It was slippery, hot.

'A small calibre bolt pistol,' said Sedayne dispassionately. 'Enough to kill. If we are quick, and complete the transfer now, I might be able to save him.' He smiled his skull's smile again. 'Once I am you.'

Another age, another place, another grand intellect looked down on Cawl with contempt.

It was a repeated theme in Cawl's life.

Insect, the mountain said. **Useful. Find us. This is what you seek. Take it. Come to us. Be our slave. You will free us. We will bring you to us. We are here.**

Knowledge speared Cawl hard. Information was agony when delivered so forcefully, but he felt its sweetness all the same.

Now

Cawl came round with a gasp. His body had not moved, and the sense of dislocation was so pronounced he swayed and almost fell.

'I…' He was hot, tired. Something troubled him, the way the ancients said that someone had walked over their grave. 'I have the most peculiar sensation. I…' He looked to his companions. 'I remember. Friedisch. I remember how it happened.'

'Cawl,' Felix came to his side. 'Magos, are you well?'

Cawl felt decidedly unwell. Curious alien subroutines were rushing through his neural infrastructure, judging him.

'I am fine,' he lied, simultaneously enacting a cortical purge, while his own

defensive hunt phages sorted out the pain from useful data. They chased out the mountain's inquiring spirits, latching onto what was needed and keeping it close. He felt immediately better.

'Do you have your map?'

'Um, no…' said Cawl. 'No I do not. Instead, well, something else has occurred.'

The mountain rumbled. Far beneath them, something stirred.

'Cawl!' Felix shouted as the tremor built in strength. 'It is happening again.'

'No,' said Alpha Primus. 'This is something different.'

The floor vanished into nothing, and they fell suddenly away into the dark.

CHAPTER TWENTY

TAINTED BLOOD

The hybrid strained against its chain, forcing Keltru to lean back and brace himself as best he could on the slippery floors. As they went deeper, Imperial stonework faded away, and the ferrocrete petered out. Glossy green-black took its place completely. There were walkways here and there, and where a run of side tunnels had been coopted by the Chapter to lay their dead to rest stone and brass effigies stared out from tomb walls, but blackstone predominated. That part of the Pharos had not yet awoken. Green lights flashed deep in the walls, the beginnings of processes that raced round angular circuit loops, never quite catching each other. Perhaps the dead really did hold sway in the tunnels the last Scythes of the Emperor trod, but whatever ruled the mountain stirred, even in those sacred environs.

The hybrid strained and lunged, dragging them deeper into the mountain. The air was thickening. The scrabble clack of alien claws upon the stone echoed from silent apertures. There were many openings, of all sizes, and those that were not plugged with shrines or tomb doors glared blackly at the Space Marines as they passed by. The presence of air, though enabling sound, enabled silence too. There was a difference between the silence of vacuum and the silence of a tomb. The latter was alive, watchful, disturbing because it could be broken.

They came to a large cave that was unevenly fluid in shape and pierced with many holes, resembling a stone organ in the living body of the mountain. There were more lights in the walls there, languidly switching about in unknowable mineral currents. Otherwise it was dark, too dark even for the alien eyes of the hybrid to see.

The floor of the chamber was some way below the level of the tunnel. The Terminators went first, their power-armoured brothers pulling on cables to prevent them falling. When the heavier brethren were down, the rest followed, skidding down slick rock to the lower level. Doror lost his balance and banged into the back of the Terminator-clad Ren, almost sending them both down. Bokari slipped and clashed down the stone, sliding out of control into the bowl of the floor. He fell several dozen feet, his suit light flashing off rounded corners and black entrances.

Eventually he came to a stop.

'Brother?' Thracian asked.

'I am unharmed,' Bokari said. 'There is something here, on the floor.'

The Terminators trained their suit lights on him. Bokari got onto his hands and knees. Around him fragments of bone and chitin lay in pools of light. He picked up a partial skull and examined it.

'Genestealer,' he said.

The hybrid jerked on its chain and hissed. Keltru yanked it back, tugging it off its feet.

'Sliced clean through. Particle beamer.' Bokari got to his feet. 'They've been picked clean, partially absorbed. Look.' He panned his stablight onto a skeleton half sunk into the floor. Strands of milky white trailed from it, as if the floor were acid, and the remains were dissolving into it.

'The devourers devoured,' said Ren.

'A little irony to ease our death,' said Thracian. 'Bokari, get out of there. Keltru, which way?'

Keltru payed out a little chain. The hybrid moved its mutilated head around, casting for psychic spoor. It pulled hard towards the largest tunnel on the far side of the room. 'That way.'

'Very well,' said Thracian. 'Move out.'

'Wait!' shouted Doror. 'The floor!'

Bokari looked down. The glassy rock around his feet was shining with a brightening green glow.

'Get out of there!' Thracian yelled.

Bokari began to run. Behind him the skeletons stirred. Three xenos constructs phased up through the glass and into the air, half in one reality, half in another. Their angled plates picked up fragments of genestealer bodies that clung on for a moment before falling through and clattering off the floor. One bore long whips of banded metal that it lashed after Bokari, yanking him off his feet and dragging

him through the pit of bones. Claws hummed with alien power, flashed down, and Bokari was no more.

'Wraiths!' yelled Brother Ren.

The Pharos trembled.

The Scythes of the Emperor opened fire, blasting at the wraiths from close range, but the creatures were fast, hard to hit as they spun about, lithe as dancers, their bodies moving like ribbons of cloth. When bolts found their target they passed through their semi-solid forms. Those that caught the constructs when they were fully manifested exploded on armour plating.

A beam of violently coloured light speared Brother Ren. His bones showed through his armour in glowing negative, black on white, then the beam focus imploded, casting him into some other pocket of space and time.

'Bring them down!' Thracian roared. His gun barked.

Bang! Bang! Bang!

The Pharos shook.

The lead wraith phased out to a phantasmal outline. Bokari's body fell through its claws. It swam through the air towards Ulas, phasing back into reality at the last second, when its claws were already angled for a decapitation strike. Ulas was ready, deflecting them with his power fist. One claw exploded, flying away from the construct and crashing into the heaps of bones. Ulas' storm bolter filled the machine's underside with detonations, and it was thrown back, broken and smoking.

Thracian's world shifted.

'Not now!' he cried, and emptied his magazine into a wraith. All the bolts save one passed through its ghostly form. He ejected his magazine, and slammed in a fresh load, but already his hold on the present was slipping.

Bang! Bang! BANG!

Thracian remembered.

He ran alone onto the bridge of the *Heart of Cronus*. His armour was scored with claw marks. His hearts were broken.

He had failed.

Mind-slaved thralls that came at him fell as scraps of flesh and mists of blood before his bolter, but he was too late, the rebellion was close to success.

There was fire everywhere. Bodies burned at their stations. The chorus of servitors ranked up the back of the command deck were all ablaze, each touched by promethium to become a human candle. Bereft of sensation and reason, they

tried to perform their allotted tasks on broken instruments, while their organic parts cooked and augmetics melted.

It was to be expected of servitors, but most of the bridge crew was as passive. They stood, mouths slack, unable to act as they burned.

They should have been screaming. They should have been fighting, but they did nothing. Nothing whatsoever.

The rot had spread right through the fleet. All of them were psy-locked.

'Hadrios!' Thracian roared. He ran through the flames. Alarms rang from panicking machines. Fire raced along combustible cable housings, gutting work stations. Drifting embers of insulation fell as fiery snow.

'Hadrios!'

A whoosh of promethium igniting drew the Chapter Master across the deck. He ran through walls of fire, vaulting the burning forms of silently screaming serfs. A torrent of liquid flame washed down into the main hololith pit.

'Hadrios,' said Thracian. He advanced on the traitor through sheets of flame and smoke, drawing short of where they did their work. The inferno blocked his view. When the fires died back a moment, the man he expected was not there.

Shipmistress Hannelore calmly ejected an empty promethium flask from her flamer, unclamped a replacement from her belt and screwed it into place.

Thracian raised his gun and his sword.

'Hannelore!' he said.

'You were expecting someone else?' She looked towards a broken pile of blackened armour. 'Poor Hadrios, misunderstood to the end.'

Thracian recovered his senses. 'Put down your weapon.'

'No, my lord,' she said. 'You know I cannot do that.' There was a smile in her voice under the dreamy, glassy-eyed look.

'Then I have no choice.'

'No, you really don't.'

Hannelore turned towards him.

The Chapter Master's finger tightened on the trigger, but he couldn't pull it. Sweat sprang out on his brow. The trigger was immovable.

Hannelore walked down the bridge's central walkway, raised her flamer and sprayed out a burning cone of liquid. Everywhere it landed it kissed little fires into life. Gel screens burst. Glass shattered. Placid people burned. She stood before the Chapter Master, and pushed his gun aside. Inhuman strength hid in her slight limbs.

'Why?' Thracian gurgled.

Hannelore laughed. ‘You know why. You know *exactly* why. You’ve been complicit since the start. Can’t you see that?’ More promethium whooshed from the muzzle of the gun. The bridge was a large space, but the shipmistress had been efficient, and most of it was ablaze.

‘They’re coming. Your replacements. These new children of a new era. I did not want this, you understand. I don’t want to die. None of us do. But they’ll find out. I do not have time to put them off the scent. I am going to have to start again. It should be possible. It’s been done once. All the Family had to do was be patient.’

Gunfire rattled outside. Thracian’s last men had fought a running battle with monsters surging up from the lower decks. Loyal crew who had served since Sotha fell had turned on them without reservation.

Hannelore looked over Thracian’s shoulder. She did not seem concerned about defeat. An icy knot in Thracian’s gut told him she might win.

‘You cannot stop us all,’ Thracian said. He struggled to speak. The same weight that foiled his trigger finger crushed at his throat. Hannelore’s eyes burned with psychic power. ‘Your spawn are dying. We have won.’

Firelight danced on Hannelore’s cheeks. ‘Not yet. How many battle brothers remain, Thracian? Four dozen, three? Hardly any at all. And there are more of the gifted ones waiting in the dark. I am not so foolish as to risk them all.’ She walked towards Thracian.

‘Then this is your plan? Burn everything before the reinforcement fleet arrives? You’ll never be able to explain it.’

‘I can be very persuasive, as you have seen.’ Hannelore stopped in front of him. ‘You never suspected me. I pity you, Thracian. You probably think yourself a fool, believing me, never questioning who I was or what I was doing, all the while suspecting poor, loyal Hadrios. He was doing his job, as much as he was able. If it makes this any easier, you had no choice. None of us do. The will of the Four-Armed Emperor is so powerful, so pure, it cannot be resisted. I am so sorry you will not see his coming. I am sorry you will not be saved. You are a good man.’

‘You are a slave to those who would devour us! The genestealers are tyranids, Hannelore.’

‘The hive fleet is a test,’ she said. ‘I passed it. The worthy will ascend, to fight at the Emperor’s side forever. I pity you. I shall remember you in my prayers.’

She levelled the flamer at the Chapter Master.

‘This is what I will tell them. There was an accident. A plasma leak. The bridge

burned out, most of the brethren dead. So few of us left anyway. Our crews infected with xenos plague, a rebellion, regretfully, that was nearly successful. I find lies are so much more believable when they are scaffolded in truth. There will be no evidence to examine, not here where it counts. And no one to gainsay me, I, the last true servant of the Scythes of the Emperor. The Family will go back into the dark, and we shall bide our time, until the day of ascension is at hand.'

The hissing pilot light came close to Thracian's eyes. Gunfire was coming closer to the command deck.

'You have lost. We have won out. Put down the flamer. Surrender. Accept judgement.'

Hannelore shook her head.

'You will be saved. I will save you. All of you.'

Thracian.

'Goodbye, Thracian.'

Thracian.

Flames engulfed the Chapter Master, biting into him, charring heat resistant ceramite.

'Thracian! Thracian! Wake up!'

'By the warden of the light, is he with us?' Doror looked to the Apothecary.

'I don't know.' Aratus consulted his narthecium screen. 'I have never seen brainwaves like this. He's not asleep, he's not unconscious. He's just not *there*.'

The Chapter Master lay on the ground. His armour prevented anything like a natural posture. He looked more like a malfunctioning machine than a man.

Galerius and Ulas had the last wraith penned in by the wall. It phased out, passing through their bodies, but Keltru was waiting when it rematerialised, firing one handed as he struggled with the hybrid's leash.

'Get him up, by the Emperor,' said Doror.

'My lord!' Aratus tried again. 'Come back to us, the enemy are–'

Thracian came around screaming. He lunged up from the floor, grappling Aratus about the chest before the Apothecary could move. Their armour rang from the stone as they wrestled.

'My lord! Stop!' Doror moved in to pull him back, but Thracian twisted, and shoved Doror so hard he lost his footing on the treacherous floor and fell.

Thracian rained blows onto his brother. Aratus' helm twisted with every strike. Ceramite clad fingers skidded over his faceplate, seeking to wrench it from the

Apothecary's face.

Thracian felt the fire. He felt his skin burn, the sight cook out of his left eye.

'Hannelore!' he roared. 'Hannelore!'

He jammed his hands under the chin of Aratus' helm, found the soft seal, and began to strangle.

'My lord! Please! Thracian!' Aratus struck inwards at the Chapter Master's arms with his forearms, but could not break his grip.

'You will not destroy our Chapter,' Thracian grunted. 'I will not let you.'

Ulas and Galerius chased the wraith around the room with a hail of bolts, but it ducked and weaved, and then dived in to attack. Keltru, Ulas and Galerius blasted at it as it came, hoping to catch it when it phased back into its solid form.

Doror scrambled up, armour whining, and launched himself at his lord, slamming into Thracian's side and knocking him off balance and sending them both tumbling down the incline of the floor into the heaps of bones. Aratus broke free, coughing.

Brother Doror had the Chapter Master on the ground, but Thracian was strong, and bucked under Doror's hold, his cries of rage echoing far along the Pharos' network of tunnels over the barking of bolters. Aratus flung himself down onto Thracian's body, and together he and Doror pinned him in place, their armour screeching on the blackstone. Bones rattled off them.

'Get his helmet off!' cried Aratus. He locked out Thracian's arm, freeing up one hand. Together, he and Doror wrestled off Thracian's helmet. For a moment he stared at them uncomprehendingly, his sighted eye wide in his scarred face.

'He doesn't recognise us!' Aratus fumbled at his own helm and cast it aside. It bounced along the curving tunnel floor and vanished into a side vent.

'It's me! Thracian, it is Aratus.'

Thracian gasped. Sweat ran off him in rivulets.

'Calm yourself! Calm! Thracian, Thracian, look at me!'

The Chapter Master stared up at his battle brother. Recognition dawned.

'I cannot stop them. I cannot stop the visions. I don't know if it's this damned machine or the father beast waiting for us.'

Warm air sang mournfully through the tunnels from the depths of the mountain.

Thracian reached up a hand. Aratus and Doror pulled him to his feet.

'Neither is good.'

The wraith was thrashing about on the ground. A lucky hit had broken its dimensional phase shifter, and Ulas had its tail trapped under his boot. Galerius went to its head, kicked away its stabbing scythe arms, and punched its head flat

with a single blow of his power fist.

The last gunshots died away.

Thracian looked to his men earnestly. ‘We have to finish this,’ he said. ‘I have to finish this. Help me find the beast that corrupted our world.’

Far beneath their feet, distant machinery rumbled.

‘We need to find it now,’ Thracian said. ‘Before I lose my mind.’

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

THE PIT

They fell through a fractured landscape of black mirrors and dazzling flashes of green lightning. Felix could not see Alpha Primus or the magos, although he saw himself endlessly repeated. The reflected versions nearest him were subtly different, those far away extremely divergent. He tumbled for what seemed like hours, surrounded by multiplying variants of himself, one leaf among a million leaves. His body twisted, smeared about like paint applied to a board and pushed by fevered artistry to resemble something other than himself, yet in essence the same. There was no pain. There was no emotion or thought, only strange spectacles that were snatched away as soon as glimpsed, and consigned to oblivion.

Suddenly, he stopped.

He lifted his head with a sharp breath. He was lying face down on a floor of shining blackstone.

'Cawl!' he said instinctively.

Giant machines thudded around him, persistent as heartbeats, just as vital, beating out the finite time of reality as surely as Felix's own hearts measured his mortal life.

'Cawl!' he said. His face was wet. Blood, he thought at first, but the soft burn of spilled Betcher's venom told him he had drooled freely while he lay insensible.

'Cawl, respond to me. Where are you?'

He turned his head. The cowling of his armour restricted his view to either side. He saw sloped machines cut with channels where energies raced. Helm displays

were down. His retinal feed was off. He tried to rise, and had no help from his battleplate. All of its systems were dead. The weight of his armour and the slipperiness of the floor conspired against him, and he fell down before he attained his knees.

A hand grabbed him under the armpit.

'I will help you,' Alpha Primus said.

Aided by Primus' strength, Felix rose up. His reactor coughed, an unhealthy sound for such blessed technology, but its power flooded him and his displays reignited. Readings showed a breathable atmosphere.

'Where are we?' asked Felix. 'Where is Cawl?'

'I do not know,' said Primus. 'Not for sure. This place resembles somewhere my master once described to me.'

'Then he has been here before.'

Primus shrugged. He did not seem to care. He wasn't wearing his helmet. His usual miserable expression had a touch of mystification to it.

The itch of acid spittle on his chin suddenly irritated Felix. He wrestled his own helmet off, and took a breath of air charged by arcane energies. It smelled hot without being so. Chemical scents he could not identify made it pleasantly rich.

Machinery was all around them. Dozens of low, long, ingot-shaped devices covered over with angular patterns of light. Each was the size of a battle tank, and all were identical. Only a few tunnels opened up into the great cavern that housed the machines. A shelf ran along one wall. The wall next to that bore the traces of walkways and machinery of human make.

'The Heart of the Pharos?' said Felix. 'Is this it?'

Primus shook his head unsurely. 'Cawl told me of the Heart of the Pharos a long time ago. I forget nothing. He told me it was empty.'

'He said the same to me,' said Felix.

'This place is not empty,' said Primus. He went to collect Cawl's axe from where it lay on the floor.

The buzz of contra-grav approached, and Felix raised his gauntlet ready to fire. An insectile construct drifted past. Multi-lensed eyes glowed, and weapons arms twitched, but it ignored them and floated by.

'Maintenance canoptek construct,' said Primus. 'This part of the complex is not on a defence footing.'

'Then they will not attack unless we attack,' said Felix. He powered down his gauntlet. 'We must find the magos.'

They walked between the engines of the ancients. Felix was no savant of the tech cults, but he recognised power. Whatever these things did, they radiated might. Their very existence spoke of undreamed of knowledge. According to Cawl, the original machines had been carved up and taken away by the priests of Mars, and yet here they were, remade by the floating drones that tended them.

They passed among the scarabs and the spyders drifting through the maze. Felix couldn't help but see echoes of insects in summer gardens, contentedly drifting over fields of blooms. The Primaris Marines kept their weapons inactive and holstered, and were ignored, though Felix couldn't count on that state of affairs lasting, and the command to reactivate them was ever at the forefront of his mind.

After crossing the machine hall, they came to an opening in the wall that led through a tunnel of energy fields projected through solid rock. Primus stopped at the edge. On the far side was a reddish light, and the busy thrum of more mechanisms.

'Do we proceed?'

'There is not much choice,' said Felix. 'The vox is jammed. We must search for the archmagos. He is an irksome character, but he is of too much value to leave behind.'

Primus frowned at Felix.

'I am joking, Primus,' said Felix. 'I seek to lighten the mood. We are in grave danger.'

'Humour is no weapon against death,' said Primus.

'I emulate the primarch,' said Felix. 'He can be unexpectedly light. I agree it does not work.'

Primus strode purposefully into the tunnel, and Felix followed.

Through shimmering planes of coherent light they glimpsed a bottomless gulf. Passing through it quickly, they made it to the other side.

They entered another great hall. What they had taken for the sound of more of the great engines was in fact the buzz of a vast swarm of constructs which circled a hole in the ground. From the pit shone a dull red light, and there came a ferocious heat. The constructs orbited the pit in a helical spin, one group heading down, the others returning. Those that came up glowed cherry red, and dripped molten stone. They flew off up to the high ceiling, where thousands of holes led away into the mountain.

Primus and Felix approached cautiously, and yet still they were ignored. The noise of the scarab swarm grew, from a drowsy hum to a roar of grav engines

and clatter of wings.

'They are mining the planet's mantle,' said Felix. The upward glow of distant molten rock bathed his face. 'That must be where they obtained the materials to repair the beacon.' He slowed. 'Can you hear voices?'

Primus strained to listen through the thrum of robotic wings. 'Yes,' he said. 'On the very edge of hearing. But they are illusory, the work of the Pharos.'

'Can you block them?'

'The Pharos is not psychic in nature. There is nothing of the spirit about this place,' said Primus. 'We are hearing echoes of states of being that cannot normally be seen.' They skirted the tower of scarabs droning up from the pit, and were forced to shout over their noise. 'This place is cut off from the empyrean entirely, far from the daemon's notice and the Emperor's light both. My powers will not work here.'

'Then how does this place function?' asked Felix.

'Exploitation of trans-dimensional interstices,' said Primus. He looked down at Felix. 'That is what Cawl told me. I know no more than that. Necron tech archana is beyond me.'

'I am not sure this is necron,' said Felix.

Beyond the pit was a high wall, covered in alien script and fashioned to appear like the facade of a great temple. Sixteen niches held sixteen statues in two rows of eight, each statue humanoid but five times the height of a man. Those in the lower rows showed beings of knowing countenance. The craftsmanship was perfect, the materials smoothed to the molecular level, the artistry of the sculpture beyond sublime. The figures were rendered in different materials, the qualities of each reflecting the personality depicted in the pose and expression of the characters. One promised knowledge, another friendship, a third power, and so on it went. Above them the same beings were shown, but all in flawless silver, and bound by broad-linked chains. In the upper tier the faces showed torment. Necron glyphs circled both sets of niches, flowing on to join lines of millions of characters that ran in bands across the wall, and shone with the ubiquitous corpse glow of the aliens' technology.

At the foot of the wall, in the very centre, was a triangular gateway of shining bronze. A soulless face adorned the apex. An energy field covered the aperture.

Primus stopped. 'What are these? They look almost human.'

'I have seen sculptures like this before,' said Felix. 'They are gods, worshipped by the xenos dynasties.'

'I did not know the necrons worshipped anything,' said Primus.

‘They do not any more,’ said Felix. ‘Come, there is only one way to go, through this portal.’

‘It may be dangerous,’ said Primus.

‘Then this will be a short trip.’

They emerged into some other place far from the Pharos, far perhaps from the material realm. A plain of blackstone stretched away into infinity. A killing cold bit into Felix’s face, and he replaced his helmet before he continued. Primus followed suit.

‘There is no psychic dampener in here,’ Primus said. His voice was loud from his voxmitter. The darkness stirred. He fell quiet until the feeling receded, then continued at lower volume. ‘Unlike the last chamber, this place is flooded with the essence of the warp. It is concentrated around that.’

He pointed up.

There was little in that place; it was as empty as death, save eight huge sarcophagi hanging without support a hundred feet from the floor. Seven were dark. But the fourth in from the left shone with baleful power, and it was this that Primus indicated and this that allowed them to see. It lit the other sarcophagi with hard planes of light and pockets of utter black shadow, showing up stylised representations of the eight beings depicted on the other side of the gate. Here they stared ahead proudly, arms crossed over their chests, their hands clutching badges of their authority. If they were tools, weapons or only symbols, Felix could not say.

The light was multi-spectral, a warm orange, like that of a star, but it was an ill-omened star if so. It bathed the Primaris Marines and made Felix feel unclean. Lines of glimmering blue intersected it from above and below, beamed from no readily identifiable source. There were eight threads of light.

‘Tombs of the gods,’ said Primus. ‘Wrapped in chains of empyrical energy. This blackstone is tuned for psy-amplification.’ Primus looked around the endless dark. The sarcophagus and its uncanny chains cast a patch of light of conflicting blue and orange. Though bright, the combined glow stretched only a short way before being swallowed up by the nothingness.

‘Cawl is here,’ said Primus. He peered into the darkness.

‘Can you be sure?’ asked Felix.

‘I sense him,’ said Primus. ‘Knowing where he is is part of my function. In here, without the psy-damping of the mountain, my witch talents work. He is here, with us. But where?’

As if in answer to Primus' question, a patch of glossy black floor was illuminated from beneath. Within the ring was Belisarius Cawl.

'Master,' Primus said, and started forwards.

Felix grabbed his arm. 'Wait.'

'He is unconscious. I must go to him,' said Primus. He sounded almost panicked, enough that Felix wondered how much of a hold the archmagos had on him.

'It is likely a trap. If it is not, he seems safe enough for now.'

Cawl's long carriage was inert, his torso held upright by the augmetics that attached him to his lower assembly.

The Space Marines' footsteps boomed with unnatural volume as they approached the magos, but the sound faded fast, and the darkness seemed to press in closer.

Primus stopped at the edge of the pool of light and walked around it, not letting it touch him. 'He is in communion,' said Primus. 'Data is being exchanged.' He looked at Felix from the other side of the illuminated area. 'My armour systems are keyed in to my master's favoured data frequencies,' he explained.

'What is he speaking with?'

'Speaking? It is not speech. He communes in the machine world with that.' Primus looked again to the lit sarcophagus.

'That does not look like the containment unit for an entangled supermass of isolated particles,' said Felix.

'Whatever is in there is the true heart of the mountain,' said Primus. 'That is what my master came here to find.'

Felix checked his chronometer.

'Then he must hurry. He has four hours until this mountain is destroyed,' he said. 'We shall wait three, no more.'

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

THE TOMB OF THE FOUNDER

The Scythes of the Emperor followed the ancient paths of the dead, their captive hybrid wrenching at its chain, Aratus' machinery keeping it biddable enough for Keltru to handle. Down there in the depths, the Pharos sang strongly. Seemingly pointless tunnels revealed themselves as resonation chambers whose cries combined into a haunting chorus that rose and fell and dwindled to single notes but never faded completely, always returning, growing in strength to a shrieking crescendo. Machinery far beneath the surface throbbed and thundered. Hot winds blew. Particle streams smeared helm displays with interference snow. Their vox sets rattled with machine croaks.

On they went. Time and space became as twisted as the tunnels they walked. Phantoms dogged them. Ulas fell into a catatonic slumber, and would not be woken for twenty minutes, whereafter he wept for an hour. Voices, few of them human, hallooed from far off chambers, and always the tremors built, coming more regularly, each one bringing visions and forgotten fears, so that in the end the Space Marines dismissed their conscious minds, and fell upon ingrained battle rites to see them through.

The tombs became more ornate the deeper they went, reminders of higher ages. Warriors carried weapons whose manufacture had been forgotten. Their armour changed, becoming unfamiliar in form. Though still the wargear of Adeptus Astartes, their garb was like no other suits held in the Chapter armoury before the Kraken came.

Thracian had been down here only once. All captains made the pilgrimage to the tomb of the Founder upon their promotion. There they knelt in the cold and

the dark the mountain held before it had awoken, and meditated on the life of their noble forebear for a night and a day. None of the others had gone this deep. They fell quiet, not only for fear of the machine's influence, but from the knowledge they trod on sacred ground.

It was inevitable that the originator of the Family who had corrupted the Chapter should seek to claim the Founder's tomb. That was the way of the alien. They left no good thing untouched.

The Pharos worked on their minds, showing them glimpses of the heroes they passed in life. A century or two of thankless service most of them had, then thousands of years rotting in the dark. That was the message of the xenos machine. Thracian disdained it, even as his feet grew heavier and his hearts thumped slowly. He put his feet one in front of the other.

'By the Emperor and by the Founder of my line. By the ten sacred horses of our Chapter. By the righteousness of mankind's dominance, let me see this done,' he said.

Each step grew heavy. He almost faltered, and then he became aware of singing. Not the bizarre alien wails of the waking mountain, but the good, bass chanting of Space Marines. His men sang not of death, but of victory. Thracian joined his voice to theirs, and so buoyed, made his way to the last and first grave of the catacombs.

Without realising he had arrived, he stood in the antechamber of the Founder's tomb. It was a large space, colonnaded, and adorned with stone friezes depicting heroic acts done long ago. The mountain's stirring had cast many of the frieze panels down, and they were broken in pieces, the gaps they left showing blackstone crowded with racing lights. The mountain was not solely to blame. Several of the panels still standing had been raked by tripartite claws, the faces carved away in acts of wanton vandalism.

Above the entry to the tomb proper, a motto endured, one of the very few places in all the mountain where the blackstone had been cut successfully. Alive now with motes of alien devilry, the words were nevertheless clear.

Hic iacet Oberdeii. Dominus est Falcatis ab Imperatore.

'Oberdeii, the first lord. The Founder,' said Aratus. Emotion stole into his voice.

The hybrid suddenly leapt forwards, breaking the chain holding it to Keltru. It scuttled in through the open gates and vanished into the darkness.

Thracian drew his long falx. 'It is in there. The last moments of our order are here.' He saluted each of his warriors in turn. They responded in kind.

‘I thank you for your service,’ he said, then, ‘Emperor be with you,’ and he strode into the tomb.

It was waiting inside for them.

Oberdeii’s tomb was small, thirty feet on each side. The Founder’s body was held in a niche, walled away and forgotten. He was memorialised in the form of a great statue, twice life size, which had sat within a great throne of marble. It was too large for the room. Thracian remembered Oberdeii’s face as brooding, sorrowful, touched by defiance. His left hand rested on the hilt of a falx stood at his side, the right was at his chin, one finger held up to his lips as if demanding silence. Crossed scythes were carved into the wall over the throne.

Thracian had wondered when he spent his vigil there if the warrior had been accurately captured, or if the stone was simply a more solid form of legend.

That was all gone. Green crystals shining with captive energies thrust up through the floor and from the walls, pushing out the ashlar blocks that had turned the xenos chamber into a room, and revealing the fluid, black walls behind. Alien light played over the stern faces of dead Imperial heroes.

The statue of Oberdeii had been wrenched from its setting and thrown down. It was in pieces now, his likeness forever lost. To do such a thing would have required prodigious strength, but the creature that had usurped the Founder’s place had a surfeit.

Thracian had never seen a genestealer so huge. It was three times the size of its lesser kin. Its armour had darkened with age to a deep red, scabbed with excrescences and ridged with whorled growth patterns, while the cream of its skin had faded to an almost luminescent white.

Its lower hands, folded in its lap almost daintily, were vast, big enough to grasp an armoured Space Marine around the chest. The three-clawed upper limbs were equally huge, the talons massive triangles of mineral-laced chitin, and although they seemed too large to be sharp, light glinted from wicked edges. Two forms of xenos evil supplanted Imperial sanctity. Necron technology burned with building power as the mountain awoke. Greater still was the psychic aura surrounding the genestealer patriarch.

It was aware of them before they entered, staring with malevolent intelligence at the entrance, awaiting them, a wicked despot eager to hear the pleas of his trembling subjects. The hybrid squatted at its father’s feet, and hissed as Thracian approached.

‘You are the doom of our Chapter,’ Thracian said, addressing the monster. He

felt the thing's mind pushing at his, demanding that he submit. Some deep part of Thracian yearned to obey, but the null-field helped him, and his will was strong. Defiant, he pushed aside the thing's attempts to enslave him. 'You sought to corrupt us,' he said. He gritted his teeth. Sweat sprang up on his forehead. The patriarch stared at him, a hideous curiosity on its alien features. Its nostrils twitched. 'You failed,' Thracian said, his voice increasingly strangled. 'I have become your doom instead, for I can never be ensnared. I am a servant of the Emperor!'

His last few warriors formed up behind him in a fan. They presented their weapons. Thracian levelled his boltgun at the patriarch's head.

'Now you will die.'

In his mind, he squeezed the trigger. Nothing happened. His finger refused to move.

'You will die!' he insisted, his voice a wheeze emitted from an unwilling throat.

Yellow eyes full of malice older than the stars locked with his. The thing that observed Thracian was old, evil, committed only to the destruction of humanity. A terrible weapon forged from mankind's own genetic code. Behind it was something terrifying, a vast intelligence huger than the cosmos, ancient beyond human comprehension, a force of nature to rival the violent birth of galaxies.

Thracian hated it with all his being, and yet he could do nothing. Some part of him hearkened to the patriarch's call. Its will locked onto his and squeezed, crushing his volition into nothing.

The genestealer watched him. It reached down with one of its upper claws and petted the hybrid absentmindedly.

Thracian's power to move was restricted to his eyes. His field of vision was restricted by his helmet. He could see only Ulas, but all his men were looking to him. The patriarch's attention was mostly on Thracian. The others might be able to act.

'Kill it!' Thracian said. 'Kill it!' But his words were little more than a breath in his own ears, and did not reach his men.

The patriarch's claw caught on the cybernetics bonded to the hybrid. It looked at it as if seeing the mutilations for the first time. The hybrid shrank into itself submissively. The patriarch extended a claw and traced the outlines of the stump caps, the muzzle, the neural control centre. The hybrid shivered in pleasure at the attention.

The patriarch snarled, and tore off its head. The hybrid's body collapsed, spraying blood as it fell.

The genestealer rose from the throne, majestic and vile.

'Kill it!' Thracian said, a little more loudly. He wet his lips. His hatred battled with his paralysis. 'Kill it!'

The patriarch approached them.

'Kill it!' Thracian said, louder now. 'Kill it now!'

Ulas was the first to break from the spell. His storm bolter roared at the xenos fiend, tearing off a chunk of its exoskeleton.

They all opened fire then, except for Thracian. He remained rooted to the spot, unable to move. Gunfire boomed behind him. His gaze was fixed forwards, but he could see enough to see Ulas die.

The patriarch moved with lightning speed, and more grace than a monster like that should have had. It tore into the Terminator, wrenched his head off, taking half a dozen direct hits as it did so with little ill effect. It used the toppling Terminator as a step to launch itself, arms outstretched, towards its next victim.

Thracian listened to his men die.

And still he could not move.

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

I AM YOU, YOU ARE ME

Circa 10,000 years ago

‘You had better be quick,’ said Ezekiel Sedayne. He gestured with his gun to one of two articulated beds made of plain steel. Steel restraints at waist, throat, ankles, wrists and chest hung open, ready for Cawl. The second bed was set at a sixty degree angle to the first, top to top, so that the heads were almost touching and the feet some distance apart. Two heavy silver helmets waited on stands at the sides. Banks of machines enclosed in smooth facings filled the rest of the room. It was all so neat, so clinical.

Cawl hesitated.

This was the moment you were made, said the voice of the mountain.

There were two Belisarius Cawls. One heard the mountain speak, the other could not. Both experienced past events as if they happened for the first time.

You are not who you claim to be, the mountain said. **Curious.**

‘Quicker than that,’ said Sedayne. ‘I do not have much time, but your friend has substantially less.’ Sedayne made a show of checking his pocket chronometer. ‘It is about ten minutes until Qvo bleeds out. At this rate, he will die.’

Herminia stood between the beds. ‘In,’ she said, pointing her gun.

‘You swear you will save Friedisch?’ Cawl asked. ‘Give me your word.’

‘I give you my word,’ said Sedayne. ‘I never do so insincerely. If you allow this process to go ahead, I swear he will live. I have no wish for needless death.’

‘Very well,’ said Cawl. ‘For Friedisch.’ He meant what he said, though he was still feverishly trying to think his way out of the situation.

Herminia stood to one side and gestured at the right hand bed. Cawl sat himself on it, then lay down.

‘I have to restrain you,’ she said. ‘Then insert the cortical probe. That will hurt.’

‘You enjoy this sort of thing too much. Can we dispose of her, when we are one?’ said Cawl. ‘She’s really not very pleasant.’

Sedayne handed his weapon to one of his soldiers. The other kept his gun trained on Cawl. Sedayne lay himself down with a wince. The anti-agapics were wearing off.

‘Getting a little stiff, are we?’ said Cawl.

‘Enjoy yourself while you can,’ said Sedayne. ‘There may be some small vestige of you left once my psyche is transferred into your body, but there will not be much. Certainly not enough to engage in such pointless attempts at humour.’

Herminia finished binding Cawl to the bed, then opened up his memcore cover. She set it carefully aside in a stainless steel bowl. She keyed a code sequence into an instrument panel nearby that called out a cranial probe from a port in the bed. Filaments wormed their way roughly into Cawl’s memcore.

‘Ow!’ he said.

‘I told you it would hurt,’ said the Altrix. ‘Are you ready, director?’

He nodded. He crossed his hands across his chest. ‘Begin, please, Altrix.’

‘Yes, sir,’ she said. She removed a flap of synth skin from Sedayne’s head, exposing a memcore port similar to the one on Cawl’s own, unorthodox implant.

‘This is nothing personal, you understand,’ Sedayne said. He too winced as the probe interfaced with him. ‘The Emperor is gone. My knowledge must survive. I thank you, Belisarius Cawl. I promise to take good care of both of us.’

‘From where I am sitting, that is scant comfort,’ said Cawl.

Sedayne’s face hardened. ‘You could be a little more gracious. With me, you will live for thousands of years. What would you have achieved on your own?’ His eyes became malevolent slits. ‘Nothing. You should be thankful.’

Cawl watched the Altrix. Despite the peril he was in, he found being surrounded by machines and being hooked up to them comforting. He was calm, and not afraid in the least.

‘We’ll see who’s thaaaannnnnnn…’ His voice stuck on his last syllable like a malfunctioning voxcorder.

‘Begin,’ said Sedayne tersely.

Circa 10,000 years ago

There were thousands of children in the line, of which Belisarius Cawl was only

one. To all intents and purposes they were identical, male and female alike; slight, pale, their heads shaved and their spare frames hung with robes folded from a single piece of pleated cloth. Each had a numerical tattoo across the outside of their left wrist. The numbers there were different. That was as much individuality as they were allowed.

Trapped in a deep trench, watched over by buzzing cyborg menials pacing the steel lip, the children stood in a single file that stretched dead straight all the way back to the birthing chambers, now many, many miles away. When Cawl turned back, he could see a row of bald heads disappearing into the distance. Cawl turned forwards, and the same line continued on a short distance before being abruptly cut off by a wall in which were set three doors.

He had seen little of the world. Though he appeared to be about ten years of age, he was only hours old, fast-grown in the Xanthe Terra flesh vats of Magos Biologis Hammareth. There were children born on Mars in the time-honoured way – that was, after all, the initial design the Machine-God had chosen for mankind – but the higher tech-priests had no time to waste on something so trivial as procreation. The Machine-God had created man so that he might improve himself.

This information and more had been inloaded during Cawl's gestation, but his direct experience of life was confined to ejection from the tube, the unpleasant aftermath of that, the trench, the line and the stripe of sky framed by metal walls. The sky was burnt orange, full of enormous shapes and moving machines half obscured by clouds of drifting smog.

The air tasted of thousands of years of industry. Metallic, chemical smells burned his throat. It was wholly unpleasant, and he wished he did not have to experience it. Already he knew there were ways to remove that sensation, if he chose.

Built out from the side of the trench in front of the doors was a pulpit occupied by something that had once been a man. A mountain of cable-infested flesh, graced with many arms, the man wore a tall, pointed hat, beneath which three lenses framed in brass evaluated each child in turn. A tube went from his mouth into the workings of his pulpit. The lenses and the tube were his sole facial features. Thin scraps of oil-seamed skin held them together.

Pistons forced open the rightmost gate and a child stepped through. The man made a note in a ledger on the lectern of his pulpit, then turned his attention to the next child.

The children stepped one at a time to stand beneath his quivering bulk. Multiple

mechanical arms shot out from all sides and prodded and probed the child, dusting them with tell-tale chemicals, sampling blood and spittle, testing eye pressure, blood pressure, heart rate, digestive efficiency and more. Light rays visible and invisible fanned out and swept down their skin. Sonar pulses vibrated bones. Magnetism stirred tides in their humours. X-rays flashed the silhouettes of their skeletons into datastores that would never be looked at.

Buzz, clank, hiss, bang! The machines sang.

'Next supplicant,' the man said.

Buzz, clank, hiss, bang!

One of the three gates opened, representing, Cawl already knew, the three-fold nature of his god: Machine-God, Omnissiah, and the Motive Force.

Buzz, clank, hiss, bang!

'Next supplicant!'

The left gate opened, the right gate opened, funnelling off children to their algorithmically determined fates. Rarely did the centre gate part. When it did, the man wrote a little more in his book.

'Next supplicant.'

Buzz, clank, hiss, bang!

The right gate opened, the child stepped wordlessly through.

It was Cawl's turn.

'Next supplicant.'

Cawl stepped forwards. The machines on arms whisked around him on their mysterious errands.

'Who are you?' Cawl asked.

The man leaned forwards to peer down at him over the edge of his ledger. 'You speak?'

'I speak. Language has been force-implanted in my mind.'

'The others do not speak,' said the man, in equal parts query, challenge and demand that Cawl be silent.

'My given designation is Belisarius Cawl,' he said.

'The others do not speak. They are not ready to speak. Observe.'

One of the man's many supplemental limbs lifted. The child behind Cawl went rigid. A stream of nonsense babbled from their mouth.

'Binharic, of the fourth formation,' Cawl said. 'They do not have the correct machinery to emit it correctly. Only this.' He rubbed his throat with the blade of his hand. 'This is not sufficient. Upgrade is required. I suppose it will do for now.'

Emotionless red lenses peered at him for a long time. The man made a noise in his throat that hummed in the tube plugging his mouth. ‘You are precocious, aren’t you?’ his voxmitter rumbled.

‘You are a manifestation of the Machine-God, but you are not He. Where is He? Where is my father?’

The arms froze, then retracted a little.

‘Hmmm,’ said the man.

The centre doors clashed open. Cawl looked at them, then at the man. He did not move.

‘Proceed or die,’ the man said.

Cawl stepped through.

‘Next supplicant,’ the tech-priest said, settling a little into his throne.

There was no one ahead of Cawl in the middle channel.

The gates shut hard.

BANG!

Circa 11,000 years ago

The last sign of human life Ezekiel Sedayne encountered nearly killed him. A cracking in the air far away, the whine of a bullet, the screech of ricochet. He threw himself into the grit at the sound of the gunshot. It rumbled around the stony desolation of the valley, before taking flight to disappear over the mountains.

He lay there some time. No other shot came.

He rose only when the sky began to dim and the temperature drop.

Glancing nervously over his shoulder, he scrambled up the loose rock. Darkness fell quickly that time of year. By the time he had found a path, it was pitch black, and the cold began to bite. Men died in the mountains in autumn, succumbing to the chill more often than to the hill clans who dwelled in the hollow ruins of arcologies found all through the peaks. In the square caves of old rooms fires burned, but none were close to Sedayne, so he struggled on through the night. The way was perilous. He nearly lost his footing twice, but he dared not risk a light.

Night passed slowly. Stars wheeled overhead. The arcologies fell behind him, until by morning he was walking through glens of bare rock surrounded by the bald, wrinkled heads of the Alapi. Ancient roads went nowhere. Time-worn stones marked the graves of buildings. There were no signs of human life more

recent than these.

Nothing and no one lived in the blasted wasteland, only the Master of the Lines.

What Sedayne attempted was an incredible risk. The Master of the Lines came to the people. The people did not go to him. Not if they wanted to live.

The sun came up on a landscape glittering with frost. Sedayne could not feel his feet or his fingers. His rags were scant protection against mountain cold.

He breakfasted on a mouthful of brackish water. He swilled his canteen around. It sloshed loudly. There was more air than water within.

The sun rose, pitilessly bright, piteously cold. The protective layers of the upper atmosphere were thin so far north, and he felt his skin begin to blister. He adjusted the ragged hood he wore, pulling it to shade more of his face, then pushed on.

A mountain rose above him. Each step he took raised it higher, it seemed to Sedayne, so that in no time it barred his path completely, walling off the glen with crags of rock that resembled angry faces. Bare stone reflected weak, poisonous sunlight upon him, dazzling his eyes and burning his cheeks. He raised his canteen to his lips, the metal edge finding cracked, painful skin there, and drank down the last of his water. There was nowhere to get more. He was too far on to turn back. He must either complete his journey, or die.

Resolutely, he began his ascent.

Up the mountain went, up too went Sedayne. The air thinned. Each breath brought less oxygen to his body, no matter how deep he gulped it in.

He knew before he got halfway up that he was running out of time. He tasted blood in his mouth with every breath. His tongue was a parched scrap of leather. His lips stung. His cheeks burned. The mountain was taking everything from him, and still it towered overhead, featureless, grey and deadly.

He rounded a boulder that forced his path into a brittle ribbon of stone. It got narrower and narrower, so that his toes stubbed on solid rock and his heels hung over empty space. The boulder was fat-bellied, swelling as the path thinned. He was forced to lean back, clinging to the boulder with fingertips rubbed raw and to the path with toes numb with pressure. His strength was giving out. He was on the verge of falling backwards, into the open air and to certain death on the tumbled stones below, when the path suddenly swung into the body of the mountain again, and the boulder's swelling blended itself back into the cliff.

He staggered towards a shadow, arms outstretched to brace himself against the wall and rest, but found himself instead falling forwards, for the shadow was not a shadow after all, but a cave cracked into the mountain's flank. It took a steep

turn downwards. His feet found no purchase, forcing him into an ungainly rush to keep pace with his toppling body.

His hand hit cold stone, bending it painfully. His elbow folded and his shoulder connected with hard rock. He stumbled sideways with the twist in the passage. Blackness shrank back to small refuges. Orange light danced on the angles of the stone.

The tunnel became a cavern. A fire burned in its centre. An old man squatted at the side, dangerously close, peering into the flames so intensely his beard and eyebrows were at risk of ignition. Despite the cold of the stone and the heat of the fire, the old man was practically naked, with only worn sandals on his feet and a cloth about his waist. There was a stone trough full of water to the side. Sedayne took a moment to refill his canteen. He drank some, washing the dust from his throat so he could speak.

Still panting with the altitude, Sedayne approached the fire.

'I have come far,' he said.

'What do you want?' said the old man. He kept his eyes on the flames, and did not blink.

'You are the one that purifies the blood of the lines?'

'I am not,' said the man. 'Is that why you are here, to plead for genomancy so your line runs true? You are young to seek to birth a child, and the next purity fair is not for six months. Go back down the mountain. Choose your mate. Wait. Come to the Master at the fair.' His eyes flicked up. 'If you survive.' He went back to looking at the fire.

'I do not wish to mate. I do not come to plead for purity of my line.'

'Oh?' said the man. 'Then tell me, why are you here?'

'To learn.' Sedayne knelt down to face the man. 'Teach me.'

'Teach you.'

'I want to be like you. I want to learn the old sciences.'

'The old sciences are not for learning, not for the likes of you,' said the old man. 'Begone.'

'I will die. Have mercy. I have searched for lost knowledge. I have learned much. I can learn more.'

'Feeble pleas for deaf ears,' said the old man. 'I shall not let you pass. The Master will not see you.'

'The world is broken. There is knowledge that can help. I'm no fool. Life hasn't always been this way. There are stories, of the old world, and of the empire of stars.'

‘There are. They are stories.’

‘They are true!’ said Sedayne through gritted teeth.

‘Are they?’ said the old man. ‘Maybe they are. That does not make your case any more compelling. You will leave now or perish. Take your chances on the mountain.’

‘I want to help people!’

Sedayne moved closer. He was a big man, and he loomed over the sentinel.

The man produced a small gun from a pool of shadow on the floor. It was better made than any Sedayne had ever seen. He looked up at Sedayne. ‘Healing was only one of the masteries of the old world. Death they also perfected. Go, or you will learn but one, final lesson.’

‘Selfishness is why the human race is dying,’ he said. ‘I sought wisdom here. It appears I was mistaken.’

The old man returned his attention to the fire.

‘Damn you by the old gods of all the ages of men,’ said Sedayne.

‘To make it this far you must have a measure of wisdom already,’ the old man said. ‘Use it well.’

Sedayne felt his way away from the fire and back up the tunnel. Another freezing night awaited him. He emerged into darkness, glanced back, and headed for the boulder, unsure if he had the energy to make it around to the other side safely.

+Wait.+ A voice spoke, a voice he heard in his mind.

He turned rapidly, almost losing balance. The path continued past the cave crack, perhaps a way worn into the stone by animals long extinct, certainly nothing more than that, but on it stood a man in rich clothes. He had long, clean, brown hair, a face that was at once youthful and old, and eyes of placid brown deeper than time. It was past twilight, and yet Sedayne saw him clearly, as if he stood in a patch of noon special to him alone.

‘Wait,’ said the man again, aloud this time.

‘Who are you?’ said Sedayne in wonder. For some ridiculous reason, he felt the urge to kneel.

‘I am the one you call the Master of the Lines, he who ensures purity of blood and genes among the peoples of this region.’

‘You do not look like him.’

‘I look different, if the need arises.’

‘Is deception necessary?’

‘Sometimes, yes. But I show myself to you truthfully.’

‘That is not all you are, I think.’ Sedayne had never been surer of anything in his life.

‘I am not. I am more.’

‘Who are you?’

‘Someone who wants to help people, like you, Ezekiel Sedayne. You were sincere when you said those same words in the cave. Do you sense the same sincerity in me?’

He did. He didn’t know how, but he did. ‘Yes,’ he said.

‘Then will you serve me? I will teach you what you wish to learn. You will be of great value to me, many times over, if you accept. You will be of great value to humanity.’

‘Tell me who you are first. I cannot serve a man who hides his identity, not unless there is good reason.’

‘There is good reason.’

‘There is good reason for my request as well,’ said Sedayne. ‘Humour me.’

‘I have many names, but in time I will be known as the Emperor of Mankind,’ the man said. As He said it, Sedayne had a brief but terrifying flash of a being who could crush him out of existence with a single thought, and that was only the least of His abilities.

Nevertheless, Sedayne stood his ground.

‘The Emperor?’

‘Yes.’ The Emperor smiled as if His title were a private joke between friends.

Sedayne’s laughter echoed from the dead mountains. ‘There is only anarchy, warlords, the carrion feeders who flock around them and the people they devour. There are no emperors and no empires, no kings or kingdoms, no governance just or cruel, not now. There is only death.’

‘There are no kingdoms yet,’ agreed the Emperor. ‘My title is for a realm yet to come. A glorious place. If you serve me, you will help to bring it into being. You will know the peace you yearn for. You will know a better world.’

‘I wish to help people,’ said Sedayne. ‘My comfort is incidental.’

‘A wish to help and a wish for safety are not mutually exclusive, Ezekiel. You need have no secrets from me. You cannot have secrets from me. Be calm, I see nothing ill in you. Will you serve me?’

‘Yes.’

The Emperor smiled. He had expected no other answer.

‘Then I have wonders to show you. The great work begins now.’

Cawl and Sedayne, Sedayne and Cawl – the two merged and fought like competing currents in a turbulent sea, both indivisible yet clearly at war, a paradox in the making. Cawl remembered. Sedayne remembered. They both saw what the other saw, and felt what the other felt. The proscribed technologies of Diacomes, so innocuously housed in the casings of the room, purred and hummed, pulling upon the hidden dimension of the warp. Cawl knew then that this was no simple merging of minds, but a blending of souls. Consequently he felt, as Sedayne felt, a growth in power alongside a diminishment of individuality. Sedayne was old. So many years had passed since he had first encountered the Master of Mankind that they ceased to have a meaning beyond marks on a calendar. Cawl had lived a fraction of that time. The depths of Sedayne's knowledge and experience were such that Cawl's brilliant but young mind was swamped by Sedayne's, swallowed up like a tear in a downpour.

'I am sorry, I am sorry,' Sedayne thought, and so Cawl thought. Sedayne meant it. His intentions were pure, after a fashion, and his sorrow hurt Cawl as if it were his own, for now it was, as were all his memories, and his knowledge, and his power. It was too much, too much, too much…

Cawl was dwindling away, absorbed by the being of Sedayne.

'I am sorry,' said Sedayne.

BANG!

Somewhere, somewhen, a sheet of metal clashed upon a rock. Like a drowning man, Cawl grasped for it, though in the raging storm of their merging souls it might well have dashed him to pieces.

BANG!

Cawl opened his eyes. Sedayne's eyes. He was on the bridge in other mountains far from the Alapi. Centuries separated the two memories. But memory is wise to time's illusion, and nothing separated them at all. One room was exited, and another entered.

'Belisarius Cawl,' said the Emperor.

Confused by the name, Sedayne looked upon his hands. They were old and veined already. Decades of war lay between this moment and the moment that saw Cawl and Sedayne inside the engines of Diacomes. Another room in time. Another door that could be opened at will by the speaker.

'My name is Ezekiel Sedayne,' said Sedayne.

'For now,' agreed the Emperor.

The Emperor was by his side at the bridge's parapet. Cawl, or was it Sedayne,

trembled as he looked upon Him, but He appeared unremarkable, as He often did. His long hair was tied back. He wore a scientist's white, crisp garb. He was not tall, and nor was He short. He was handsome, but not outrageously so. Slight but not thin. An unremarkable being were it not for the terrifying sense of power that radiated from Him, as untamed as the heart of a star.

Sedayne felt fuzzy. The working of time demands that memories of the future be hard to hold, and they slipped away. Why had he come out there?

'To rest,' he said aloud. But he did not remember what he was doing before he came to the bridge. 'You are the Emperor,' said Cawl. Or Sedayne, or both of them.

'I am,' said the Emperor.

'Am I meeting you?'

'You have met me many times, Belisarius,' said the Emperor.

'But not as…' he frowned a frown on Sedayne's face. It was a younger face, but still old. 'But not as me.'

'In a manner of speaking.' The Emperor looked at him sidelong. 'In another manner, you are Ezekiel Sedayne, and always have been, and Cawl is a fragment. An artefact left behind by a desperate man's attempt to stay alive.'

'That hasn't happened yet,' said Cawl. 'When is this?'

'Every moment, no moment, a moment gone. Nothing ever passes, not truly, but goes only beyond notice.'

'Ah,' said Cawl, or Sedayne. 'You are free of this. Is that so?'

'No one is free of time,' said the Emperor. 'Not even me. As long lived as I am, it is ironic that the one thing I lack is time.' The Emperor frowned. 'There is never enough.'

'Is this a dream within a dream, a dream remembered, or did this really happen?' asked Cawl.

The Emperor laughed. It was a sound as terrible as avalanches thundering down mountainsides.

'Is there any difference between those things?'

'Are you always this frustratingly gnomic?' said Cawl. 'Because, to be frank, it is a little disappointing.'

The Emperor laughed again, with genuine mirth. 'I do like you, Belisarius, though many do not. But it is not your duty to be popular, it is to be *important*. Every dream is a reality somewhere. Know this, Belisarius Cawl, I will need you. You will think you have betrayed me. You will not in the end.'

'What are you talking about? You are the Omnissiah! I could never betray you.'

‘You will,’ said the Emperor sadly. ‘But you will be right to. You will not again.’

‘Does Sedayne remember this conversation?’

‘Foresight is not a steady friend, Belisarius. One day it may strike with startling clarity. For centuries it is only a feeling. This is a good day.’

‘Did this really happen?’

The Emperor smiled again.

‘I am really here?’

BANG!

The metal hit the stone. Their fight was not over, and never would be.

Now

This is who you are, said the voice of the mountain. **Impure. Blended. Not one creature. Not two. Many. A poisonous slick of spirits cased in meat and clumsy technology. Pathetic.**

‘I am not unique in this regard,’ said Cawl. He was nowhere again, in a place that existed yet that had no physical domain. He was within the infosphere of the mountain, and the mind imprisoned by the machine encompassed him. ‘Mental enhancement within my subset of my species is often attained by cortical linkage. There are therefore many blended personalities. Other sections of humanity employ other methods, as do certain xenos.’

He spoke to the being over a network of quantum particles flashing in and out of existence. The tech was superior to any he had witnessed, greater in sophistication even than mankind’s at the height of its power.

Yet Cawl had a way in. Quietly, he began to exert more of his influence on the mechanisms of the Pharos.

Everything living is unique. Uniqueness of creation and experience gives them their flavour. The mountain’s presence coiled round him, threatening to constrict at any moment.

‘Then I am unique in the breadth of my knowledge. There is no other like me in all the galaxy. If you wish to be free and to see your enemies scattered, then only I can help you,’ said Cawl. His enhanced mind, now fully enwrapped about the mountain’s poly-dimensional machine-spirit, prepared its key.

We wonder what you would taste like.

‘If you devour me, how can I serve you?’

You are afraid.

‘All men are afraid, as are gods. You fear entrapment here, forever.’

Slowly, carefully, Cawl extended his cypher coding into the outer web of xenos data. He felt a thrill of fear as he did so. These were always the escapades he enjoyed the most, the sneaking into the sleeping ogre’s castle, the stealing of his treasures.

You dare guess our mind? You know nothing! The presence reared, perturbing the chains of logic that held it within the infosphere as the beams of empyrical energy trapped it in the physical world. Cawl froze his work, but only the being’s pride was affronted. It had not detected his ploy.

We have seen your god. The waking networks of our treacherous children sing of him from one dynasty to the other. He is no god. He is nothing. There were other beings who had pretensions to divinity. They died. He will die. A being like he can cheat time. We transcend it! We are time, and space, and the bonds between. He is no god. We are.

‘Then I beg you, please, great one, reveal yourself to me. You have seen within my soul. You know that my mission here is pure, you know I can do what you require. I seek your knowledge. I pledge myself to serve you. I wish what you wish for. Together we can end the war that has corrupted space and time. We can purge the poison of Chaos and return the great work of the Machine-God to full order. That is all I desire! Order and calm and good function to all things.’

There was a long silence. A millennia’s worth of alien data raced past Cawl from hidden dimensions. The architecture of the necron infosphere was perfect in every way, and gloriously, multiply purposed. His own codings spread themselves out within the Pharos infosphere’s defences, meshing here, changing there, bringing all points of ingress under his control.

Yes. The material realm versus the psychic. The warp must be banished. We can give you such secrets.

‘Do!’ cried Cawl. ‘Who else if not I? Your children work towards this end, but they are clumsy, they have forgotten much of what you taught them. They cannot do it. You are trapped. Your siblings are broken and scattered.’

And you can repair the damage of millions of years? We think not. You are weak.

Torrents of alien data flashed around Cawl. He was so tempted to plunge into them, right then. All he needed to do was fling open the doors and jump.

The temptation was overwhelming.

He paused. Something troubled him. Multiple copies of his intellect sped around the Pharos network. What he saw made him swear, a rich biological set

of phrases long since gone from the Gothic tongue.

The systems containing the being and guarding the Pharos' trove of data were one and the same. He was going to have to let it out.

'I am strong,' he said.

The presence ceased its spiralling.

We are similar. You are not yourself, and nor are we. You are a composite. We are a fragment. Be not mistaken, we have no special affection for you, this is our sole connection. But it is enough to convince us to spare you, Cawl of the humans. You shall free us. You shall be rewarded. We are mighty enough to survive separation from the confinement of the necrodermis. We shall journey the galaxy, and join with our sundered parts. The necrontyr will rue the day they chose to betray their gods. We gave them everything they wished for and they killed us. They will pay.

The being's rage was cold, almost emotionless, expressed in the furious vibrations of atomic energies rather than through cruder, chemical reaction.

For aeons we have been imprisoned within this mountain. For aeons we have plotted our revenge. Eight fragments of eight gods were given over to slavery here. We consumed the others to survive. The necrontyr are fools. They are arrogant. They kept too large a piece of us alive to power this nodal point of theirs. They will regret it, for we remember what we were, and what we will one day be again.

The infosphere's cascades of light stuttered. A different light took its place, a brassy star shine. From the night of the nowhere realm it shone, coalescing as the mountain spoke into a figure that had no shape, forcing Cawl's mind to impose a form he could understand upon it; arms, legs, a head, a torso forged of gold.

We are the ultimate manifestation of order. No logic or illogic can bind me.

It spoke now with a mouth that blazed with stolen sunlight.

We are Zarhulash, the Potentate. We are C'tan, of the stars and the tides of time and light. We are the manifestation of this universe's form and being. We are a god, and you will serve me. Set me free.

'I require a moment!' Cawl shouted into the being's effulgence. 'I must subdue the things that hold you. I can release you no other way!' His infospherical probes poised to take control of the routines holding the C'tan. At the same time, he primed his subminds to storm the walls of the Pharos' network. Both parts were inextricably linked. If he wished to access the mountain's secrets, both gates had to be taken down simultaneously.

You attempt to deceive us!

‘Great one, I ask only to better serve you. The machines, they are attempting to prevent your release. I can help you!’

A tense moment passed.

Let it be so, said Zarhulash.

A door opened. Behind was a treasure of knowledge. But it was not his, not yet. Machine-spirits guarded it. Things watched him with jealous eyes. He needed a little more time. The C’tan could see the way out.

He didn’t have time, so he was going to have to make it.

Release us!

Points of green light fizzled into existence around Cawl’s slumped body, forming a network that grew in complication until he was completely enmeshed.

‘Step back,’ said Felix.

The mountain thrummed. The pattern sent out a burst of lines, each point sending links to dozens of others.

‘It looks like a stellar cartograph,’ said Felix. ‘Look! This is Sotha, I am sure of it.’

A ball of light occupied Sotha’s position at the centre of the map. It glowed with increasing potency as the map continued to spread, the galaxy unrolled by points of light, billions and billions of them.

‘Every star in the galaxy,’ said Primus. ‘This information…’

‘Will be incredibly valuable to Belisarius Cawl,’ said Felix. ‘There are more of these nexus points. More Pharoses. Hundreds of them.’ A network of beacons appeared in the galaxy, each one large and bright.

The mountain’s vibration became a steady rumble. The other beacons glowed brighter, initiating a third increase in luminance that spread out rays in all directions, linking beacon to beacon. The Pharos shook with building power. The growing light pushed back the dark past the sarcophagi, revealing signs of withering on the faces of the dead seven.

The light fell on a crumpled form. Metal limbs bent out of shape, a head twisted around on the neck to stare over its back. Legs part-absorbed by the stone.

‘Cawl’s servant,’ said Felix. ‘Qvo-87.’

Felix ignited the power field around his fist. Psi-fire shone behind Primus’ eye lenses.

‘Cawl has betrayed us,’ said Felix.

Belisarius Cawl came awake with a shudder. The lights of his enhancements ignited. Where before they burned cool reds and blues, now all were uniformly

green.

His feet extended, clanking on blackstone, pushing him up. He raised his arms and stretched as if awoken from a well-deserved rest.

His eyes were alive with the lurid glow of necron technology.

He grinned.

'Decimus! Primus! You made it down here.'

'What are you doing?' Felix demanded.

'All will be revealed. Do stop pointing that gun at me, Decimus. Whatever happens next, gentlemen, please refrain from firing at anything.'

The mountain shook harder. The beams of light fixed on the sarcophagus flickered out.

'What have you done?' said Felix. Primus, sensing danger to his master from the tetrarch, shifted his attention to Felix.

'In there,' said Cawl, pointing a metal finger at the sarcophagus, 'is a star god of the necron forerunner race. It's not complete, but it is the largest shard I have yet encountered.' He frowned. 'It is incredibly dangerous.'

Felix looked from priest to sarcophagus.

'The C'tan,' said Felix incredulously. 'You are releasing a C'tan!' Felix raised his gun.

'Do not threaten the archmagos,' said Primus, striding to interpose himself between Felix and Cawl.

'I am releasing him,' said Cawl. 'Right now. In fact, here he comes! Remember, no shooting, Decimus!' He held up an admonishing hand. 'This is a very delicate time. I nearly have what we came for. Some of what I am about to do will look foolish. It is not.'

'Cawl…'

Primus moved closer to Felix. 'My master knows what he is doing, be assured,' Primus said. 'He is no traitor.'

Blazing starlight speared from the sides of the coffin.

'You had better be right,' said Felix.

The sarcophagus began to open.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

THE LAST CHILD OF SOTHA

Circa 10,000 years ago

Thracian blinked, suddenly able to move. He lifted up his hands. His face was raw with fresh burns. It came as a surprise to him that he could not see from his left eye. He had the fleeting sense he should be elsewhere, in some other time. A thought quickly forgotten.

'You wish to know how we did it?'

Hannelore sat blearily in the interrogation chair, her uniform ragged. Her arms were bound behind her by heavy fetters that encased her hands completely. There was not a scrap of flesh on her unmarked by the confessor's goads. Burns, bruises, cuts, too many for her alien-tainted physiology to help. Her eyes were swollen shut, her nose broken. Squares of skin were missing from her shoulders and thighs, and yet she spoke through her broken teeth and hurts with nobility.

Thracian felt the first stirrings of sympathy. He squashed them.

'You are tainted,' said Thracian.

'I am as human as you are, my lord,' she said.

'You are not human, not any more,' said Thracian. The confessor's hands flexed around his instruments. He was one of two Chaplains left alive after the rebellion. He did his duty enthusiastically. 'You are tainted by alien influence. I should have seen it.'

Hannelore chuckled. She shook her head. A line of bloody spittle ran from her split lips. 'I am human. More human than you. Who resorts to torture? It is not I.'

'It should not be possible. There are forty-nine separate genetic and mental tests all higher servants must undergo. How did you cheat them?'

‘Thracian, I cheated nothing,’ said Hannelore. ‘I serve the Emperor.’

‘A false Emperor. An alien perversion of our master’s image!’

‘He is the true Emperor, Thracian. He loves us all. He is coming to save us. I was trying to save you.’

‘Tell me how you did it.’

Hannelore smiled sadly. ‘Do you really think it as easy as asking me? You must try harder than that.’

Thracian nodded to the confessor. The Chaplain strode forwards, pushed Hannelore’s head forwards and applied a pain spike to her neural port. Hannelore’s body locked rigid as her nervous system was turned against her. Her feet drummed on the floor. Her arms strained until they creaked. Her broken teeth ground under the pressure of her own jaw.

‘Enough,’ said Thracian.

Hannelore slumped forwards.

‘Tell me how you did it!’

Hannelore lifted her head weakly. ‘I did not do it. Do you think I could have done these things alone?’ She leaned forwards against her bonds. Her voice became a hiss. ‘It took centuries. The sky father came and planted his seed. We grew into a loyal tribe. First, the people of Sotha were shown the light, so that the truth might be spread among them. This took decades. Then, when the brothers and sisters of the sky father’s Family were high enough in the planet’s hierarchy, brothers of the Family were introduced into the fleet.’ Hannelore chuckled. ‘You held your human subjects in such high regard, you entrusted them with far too much. I was ignorant once, like you. They came to me when I was made an officer. They came from the depths of the ship, and gave me the kiss of enlightenment.’

Thracian looked to the confessor.

‘Mutational rate in her gene code suggests she was infected directly four years ago.’

‘Then how did she pass the later screenings?’

‘They were carried out on board,’ said the confessor. ‘The tests were cheated. This strain of genestealer exhibits extreme talent for psychic subjugation. They have evolved to coexist with us.’

‘So you filled our world and ships with enslaved kin to the xenos monsters?’

‘How many times must I repeat myself?’ said Hannelore. ‘We are pure. We are the chosen of the Emperor. He will come and take us, and keep us at his side! Do you not see, we do this for you!’

‘Again,’ Thracian said.

At the confessor’s command, pain coursed through Hannelore’s system. She screamed. Her altered body was failing under the strain.

Thracian raised a hand. The confessor deactivated the pain device.

Thracian crouched, and pulled back Hannelore’s head.

‘How was it done?’ said Thracian quickly. The traitor was deteriorating. ‘How did you hide yourselves from us?’

Hannelore’s teeth chattered. Snot ran from her nose.

‘Decades more. All it took was one Family member in the right position. Only when the officer cadre of the fleet and Sotharan defence forces were in hand did we attempt to influence the Chapter. Our father is mighty, more powerful even than you. We are the chosen ones. We will lead you all to the Emperor’s side. Even you. It is your destiny. Free me, let me take up my burden again. Be saved, brother! Salvation is all we have tried to achieve.’

‘No,’ said Thracian. ‘How many blasphemies against our creed were committed? How could we have been so blind?’

‘Because the Emperor willed it,’ said Hannelore.

‘You hid in plain sight. I pieced enough together myself. I thought Hadrios was trying to corrupt us. He misled us, but not deliberately; it was because of your manipulation. It was you, the people we protected. You destroyed the genestocks. All those recruits we took after the fall of Sotha, all wasted. Your elders,’ he spat the word. ‘They enslaved Thorcyra’s mind. How many are you? How long has this been going on?’ said Thracian.

‘Centuries,’ said Hannelore triumphantly. ‘The Family cannot be stopped. You know it. You saw it at the Miral Prime, didn’t you? Brothers who would not strike. Psykers who could see the glory of the true Emperor. They were enlightened. You felt it at the fall of the monastery, you felt the touch of the true Emperor yourself. We cannot be stopped!’

‘Your psychic tricks will work no more.’ Thracian stood over his captive. ‘You have been stopped. You do not take into account the will of the Emperor of Mankind, the true Emperor. I am His appointed champion, no matter what influence your vile masters sought to impose on me. You are a xenos abomination, and you have failed. Save your pity for yourself.’

‘You are so close to salvation, and you do not understand.’

‘It is you who is deluded!’ Thracian shouted. ‘Your sky fathers are predators come to feast. They run alongside the swarms. They are tyranids! Can you not throw off their influence long enough to see?’

‘Sotha was a test, to judge if we are worthy.’ She had said this many times, always with such utter, unshakeable conviction. Hannelore smiled sorrowfully. ‘You shall die with all the others who do not believe. But take heart, all will be saved. All it takes is one of them, and the gospel spreads again. The Four-Armed Emperor, the true lord of humanity, he loves you, and he is coming.’

‘You will die now. I am sorry for you. But I do this gladly.’

‘You could not shoot me before. You know in your heart what I say is true. One day, when you face one of them, you will see the glory.’ Hannelore smiled beatifically. ‘I am the last true child of Sotha, and the messiah of the Emperor.’

‘I am not going to kill you,’ said Thracian.

He gestured at the confessor. A knife flashed, and speared up into Hannelore’s brain.

The traitor died with her convictions intact, and a smile on her face.

That was more than Thracian could claim.

Past dissolved into present. Fresh wounds became old scars.

Now

The genestealer patriarch advanced on him, huge, bloated and unstoppable. Thracian raised his gun, and found again that he could not fire. The monster stopped in front of him. Blood dripped from every one of its claws. It panted lightly with the exertion of combat. If he didn’t know any better, he would have said it was smiling, but the beast was surely incapable of emotion. The upward curve of its mouth was the result of its abominable physiology. The look of triumph in its eyes was an illusion. It had to be. The xenos were inhuman. The hive mind shared nothing with mankind.

Mortis runes sang in his helm. He could not summon enough free will to deactivate them. Their reedy songs tormented him. Galerius, Keltru, Ulas, Aratus… All of them were dead.

The sky father paced around him, tread heavy and deliberate as that of the bull phantines that had inhabited the forests beyond the Pharos. It huffed hot air out, and sniffed at him. It held him in psychic thrall – why by the Emperor did it need to *smell* him?

The genestealer came back around to the front of Thracian, where he could see it again. It bent low to peer into his eyes. It extended the forefinger of its left hand, and gently ran it down the side of Thracian’s helm. The nail talon squealed on the ceramite. Its tongue poked out between black teeth. The end was hollow

where the ovipositor lurked, waiting to slide out and inject the creature's gene code into another victim and begin the process of subversion again.

'I am the last child of Sotha, and I will kill you,' said Thracian. He could barely open his teeth to speak. His muscles clenched in his jaw. His limbs ached from being locked in position.

The patriarch's smile appeared to grow wider.

'I will kill you. I will kill you. I will kill you,' he said. The patriarch looked at the gun, then it looked at Thracian. It stepped back and placed its bulbous head against the boltgun's muzzle. Such a gentle movement for such a monster. Thracian felt the contact as a soft shiver passing up his arm. It twisted its head about on the gun, pushed hard against it. Thracian still could not move, and felt himself unbalanced.

Abruptly, the genestealer turned about and strode away. It sat back in its throne.

'This is where it all began,' said Thracian. 'I am ending it now. I am ending you now.'

The genestealer steepled its fingers together, and folded its upper claw arms across its chest.

Inch by torturous inch, Thracian moved the gun away from the genestealer. It watched him, amused, as his gun came to point at one of the necron crystals penetrating the floor.

'I cannot fire on you. But I can destroy you.'

The genestealer saw Thracian's gambit and was out of its throne swift as lightning, but it was a fraction of a second too late. Its immense bulk slammed into him as Thracian finally forced his finger to contract, sending a salvo of bolts into the crystal. The first and second cracked it. The third blew it apart. The genestealer bore him down to the ground as he continued firing, spraying the full contents of his magazine out through the room, shattering ancient marble and alien crystal alike.

He tumbled over, seeing the scattered remains of his men before being pinned into place by a single, enormous hand. The bolter was wrenched from his grasp and hurled across the room. The genestealer raised its upper claw and punched down, cracking open his breastplate. The three killing talons speared into his chest cavity. He cried out with a pain too great to bear. Blood welled up from his mouth and flooded his helmet. The partriarch stared at him hatefully, cradling his hearts in the vast spread of its claws.

There was a rushing noise coming down the corridor, the buzz of grav motors, the rattle of wings, and an enraged hiss.

In a final act of defiance, Thracian lifted his head up from the floor, though the effort cost him dearly in pain.

'Ave Imperator,' he said.

A tide of silver scarab drones engulfed the patriarch, knocking it off Thracian's chest onto the ground. As it fell, it tore out his lungs and his hearts, but he lived long enough to see its writhing form become smaller and smaller until it was gone, consumed by the drones as surely as it had consumed his Chapter's world.

Having seen his task completed, Thracian allowed himself to rest.

Death claimed him, honour and all.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

SHARDS OF GREATNESS

Light poured from the opening sarcophagus, overwhelming Primus' and Felix's auto-senses. They were confronted by a sheet of white that caused their battleplate spirits to wail in pain. Then it shrank inwards, becoming a humanoid figure clad in a skin of shining silver aglow from within. It hovered over them, looking down with an imperious air. The face was hard, angles accentuated more than a human's would be, and the head long, but it was close enough in form that it could have been a child of Terra from divergent stock, falling somewhere between aeldari and human in look, though its expression was more pitiless than either species.

What are these? it said. Power crackled around it. A terrible heat pounded from its glowing core.

Cawl's limbs weaved themselves through a complicated curtsey. 'My servants, and therefore your servants.'

'I am no xenos' slave.' Felix raised his twinned bolters and pointed them at the C'tan.

Silence! boomed Zarhulash. With a thought it flipped Felix onto his back and sent him skidding across the floor towards the portal.

'Primus! Do something! These creatures are vulnerable to the warp. Use your abilities.' Felix attempted to stand.

Be silent! The C'tan's eyes flashed, and he crashed back down to the ground again. It turned its burning gaze upon Primus.

You are reckoned strong in the ways of the soul sea? It glowered at Primus, then moved its hand and lifted it, palm upwards. Primus dropped Cawl's axe as

he began to choke, and rose kicking from the ground. He clutched at his throat. **Then match yourself against us.** It glared dismissively at Primus. **Feeble. Even in our weakened state, you cannot oppose us. The power of the warp is nothing to mastery of the physical realm. We were true gods, the living embodiment of this universe. Those of the warp are pale shadows. We are the light!** it roared. Its shining body flared with the stolen power of extinct suns. The chamber trembled in response. The sarcophagi jiggled in the air. One listed, turning aside, falling down slowly.

We are Zarhulash, the Potentate. It gestured, and a bladed rod flashed into being in its left hand, and a crown blurred into existence over its head, both made of the same, silvery metal caging the C'tan's light. **We are a lord of space and time. We are a manifestation of reality's living soul.** It gestured again and Primus was flung backwards. His armour crashed against the portal housing, and he fell heavily to the floor. He, too, attempted to rise, but the C'tan flattened him with a twitch of its finger, pushing down like a man squashing an insect. Primus was crushed onto the ground. His armour began to creak under the pressure.

Cawl moved forwards. 'Master, please! I beg you not to kill Primus. He is a loyal slave, and will serve you as faithfully as he serves me.'

You can swear this?

'I swear it! He cannot disobey me.'

And this other?

'Also my creation. Spare them both. We shall need them in the chambers beyond. There are many millions of your gaolers' constructs beyond this gate.'

They will not be able to stop us. The C'tan smiled sadistically and pushed hard. A conduit in Primus' armour burst. White gas jetted out. **Witness our might.**

'They will try. Spare them!'

The C'tan pulled a sour expression. **If you insist.** Its finger curled back into its fist. Primus took in a desperate breath. He and Felix staggered to their feet.

Know this, slaves of slave Cawl, the energy that makes up your beings is ours to command. Move against us, and we shall destroy you utterly. Slave Cawl, you will escort us through the portal, and deactivate the things of the necrontyr. Beyond is the principal machine room of this facility. There you will free us from this form. We shall open a portal, and step forward into the stars to reclaim our birthright, and drive lesser beings before us into death.

Cawl bowed humbly. 'Yes, my master,' he said, and scuttled forwards to the

portal. He linked himself with it, activating its destination patterns. Glyphs ignited around the triangular aperture, and the energy it held swirled in agitation.

'I have deactivated the safety protocols against your departure. It is safe for you to pass, oh great one!' Cawl proclaimed.

Good. Zarhulash pointed the end of its staff at the portal, and with a swift tug backwards, pulled the energy field towards itself out of the gate, and into the air, where it spread and reformed into a rift wide enough to allow the C'tan out.

Tremble, oh ye nations of the galaxy, for Zarhulash the Potentate walks again amongst you!

With those words, the C'tan's form dissolved into a streak of silver-braided light, and it poured into and through the gate. The portal flexed back into its frame. All energy seemed to be sucked from the chamber with its passing. The sarcophagi fell from their station in the air with mighty crashes, and the space began to pulse, shrinking inwards. A violent strobing began at what appeared like some miles distance, but it came closer, and the bursts of light multiplied.

'Aha!' said Cawl. 'Just as I thought. The heart of the mountain is contained within a dimensional pocket.' He grinned over his mouth guard at Felix. 'I knew that! But, but,' he said. 'The contents are unravelling. Come on, my boys, we must leave this place. Now.' He went to retrieve his axe.

Felix staggered towards the gate. The flashing dazzled him. Gravity waves pounded at them, dragging them away from the portal, but he set himself against them and, with his armour systems pushed past their operating tolerances, strove for the gate. Cawl clattered past him, esoteric field projectors shielding him from the forces tearing apart the false space of the sarcophagus chamber.

'Remember what I told you,' he said to Felix. 'No shooting!'

Whatever was happening in the chamber of the sarcophagi affected the mountain far more badly. The hall containing the deep core mine was shaking. Fountains of liquid rock burst in fiery display. Chunks of blackstone plummeted to the ground, shattering like dropped glass. The temple facade trembled and cracked.

The drone swarm was agitated, buzzing loudly, swelling and shrinking in a great metallic flocks. Long tendrils composed of thousands of drones reached out to gather up the broken shards of the mountain, or squirmed over the cracks appearing in the wall, fighting a losing battle to repair them as they formed. Their mouthparts sparkled with desperate activity. The mountain quaked. Falls of stone roared down far tunnels, and the many pipes of its internal structure wailed in alarm.

The bridge between our extra-dimensional cell and this facility must be severed, Zarhulash intoned. **Following this, the canoptek devices must be brought under control,** Zarhulash said, pointing imperiously towards the swarm. **Only they have the ability to strip the necrodermis from our true energy form and free us. You have the way into the machine's mind, slave Cawl. Use it. Once we are free, we will have little time before the mountain destroys itself and this world.**

Without waiting for confirmation Zarhulash floated towards the swarm of scarabs. It let out a blazing pulse of light. The scarabs appeared blind to its presence until the light washed over the C'tan, but the moment they became aware of it, their behaviour changed utterly.

The swarm froze instantly, all its many perturbations arrested so suddenly they looked like a pict capture. Then they turned, all together, and faced the C'tan. Hundreds of thousands of dull, green, glass eyes, perhaps millions, focused on Zarhulash.

The mountain's desperate wails stopped. Then, from every aperture in the rock, a single call blared, and it did not stop.

Come to us, our gaolers, and know the time of your destruction is at hand!

As one, the swarm streamed at the C'tan, their frantic activity of a moment ago forgotten. Their primary programming impelled them. Their prisoner must not be allowed to escape.

Zarhulash met them with a wall of light. Scarabs shattered into glittering clouds, disassembled beyond the help of any self-repair ability. Thunder rolled from the god.

Felix watched helplessly.

'Don't just stand there, help it!' said Cawl. 'Or it may doubt that you really are my servant, and that would be… That would be bad.' The archmagos skittered over to the portal in the temple facade, and began the difficult task of shutting it down. Primus stood guard over him, staring defiantly at Felix.

'Are you serious?' said Felix. 'Have you any idea how much damage a freed C'tan shard can do?'

Cawl waggled his head. 'A reasonably good idea. So be glad it is currently on our side.' Cawl depressed polished glyphs of blackstone. They sank into the portal frame with soft and final clicks. 'You know that entangled supermass I told you about?'

'Yes,' said Felix, unable to stop staring at the star god. 'You mean the C'tan.'

'No, I don't!' Cawl snapped. 'I mean the supermass the gods' powers

controlled. The reason they were enslaved here. Those particles are destabilising. The C'tan were holding the mass in place. They have all gone. There is nothing to maintain equilibrium. I have to close this gateway, but doing so will only remove the weakness of the entrance from the dimensional pocket. It will buy us a little more time. Soon the dimensional pocket will collapse, the supermass inside will collapse, and the resultant singularity will spill out into real space unless, unless!' he shouted, holding up a finger, 'the Pharos is taken permanently offline. The quantum engines generate both the supermass and its containment. Destroy it and the supermass will dissipate.' Cawl moved to the other side of the portal frame. His many arms moved with rapid surety, though his voice remained calm, as if he were talking while observing someone else at work. 'Do you hear me, Decimus? When we get out of here you must level this mountain, or the planet will be sucked into a black hole, followed shortly after by the Sothan star, its other worlds and everything else within half a light year of this place, not that you'd see, because it will kill you first. Destroy it!'

'What about the C'tan?' said Felix. 'I'd rather face a black hole.'

Once more Cawl gave Felix his infuriating smile.

'All will be revealed in due course, my boy.' Cawl depressed another series of glyphs. 'You must trust me, or else we are lost, and the hopes of mankind's salvation with us. Now, I may be incommunicado for a few moments. I must interface with the machine world to collect the data I came for. I have access to it, but it must be retrieved and exloaded.'

A giant piece of blackstone fell near the humans, shattering and pelting them with glass.

'Go, Felix! Larger constructs are awakening, and they could do the C'tan harm. It must be allowed to think it is winning. I must have what I came for, or all is lost!'

The core mine hall was shaking uncontrollably. Magma no longer fountained from the hole, but was instead welling implacably. It reached the top and formed a bubble under wrinkled, black skin. Once a certain pressure was reached, the skin silently broke, and the magma crept slowly across the floor. It gave off a sense of malign intent. The world of Sotha wished them all dead, tyranids, men, necrons and C'tan, and its suffering over.

In the air, Zarhulash was periodically engulfed by swarms of scarabs. They worked around it in frenzied spirals, attempting to spin a fresh sarcophagus from the energy stored in their guts. Each time, they got no further than an outline before Zarhulash burst it asunder with a pulse of energy that played havoc with

Felix's comms system. They then began again.

'If you have betrayed us, archmagos, then I will kill you myself,' said Felix.

'You would fail, Decimus. More powerful men than you have tried.' The last glyph sank in. The gateway shut off. 'There,' he said. 'But you're not going to have to try. I give you my word. Now, I am afraid, gentlemen, that I really must go. Primus, protect me with your life.'

'As you command, master,' said Primus.

Cawl folded his arms into himself and shut down.

Felix shook his head and turned to face the battle raging above.

A seemingly endless tide of scarabs poured from the ceiling. Other things were joining them. From the larger tunnels spyders came, giant claws tracing patterns of killing energy in the air. Even larger constructs phased into being from nowhere and scuttled towards the fray, while floating, locust-like kill-drones swarmed into the chamber. All were heading for the freed god.

Felix attempted to use his vox. 'Cominus, respond,' he said. His ear beads whistled with feedback so sharp and wild it made him wince. 'Cominus!'

The vox buzzed. *'...etrarch. Y... live!'*

'Cominus, listen to me!' Felix shouted quickly. 'Evacuate the mountain. Get everyone back from here, everyone! Move as far and as fast as you can.'

'...ord. We ...ust come to you.' A loud, whistling howl cut off Cominus' next words.

'Evacuate! Evacuate now! That is a direct command, respond!'

Felix heard nothing but static.

A flying, ribbon-bodied machine horror sped overhead, metal jaws spreading wide. Needle tips generated a crackling annihilation field. It flew straight at Zarhulash. Before the star god obliterated it, it bit deep, rupturing its necrodermis and bringing a wrathful roar from the god's mouth along with a spear of blazing starlight.

You attack that which you cannot harm! We are imbued with the might of our devoured siblings! We are Zarhulash! We are a god! The construct was blasted apart by the star god's gesture. It ruptured all along its segmented body, fragmenting into dissipated clouds of ash.

Zarhulash levelled its staff at the drones, rendering them into sparking debris without any visible means. The canoptek swarm responded with a redoubling of effort, powering at the C'tan, weaving webs of fire and etheric steel around Zarhulash that hardened into another new tomb before Felix's eyes.

From the shadows giant things crawled, stings active, sensors locked on to the

C’tan.

‘Curse you, Cawl!’ Felix swore. He activated his power weapons, and threw himself into battle.

Cawl sank deep into the xenos infosphere. Technology of such sublimity it made Cawl want to weep attempted to stop him. The necron empire had existed millions of years before man had the wit to see the stars for what they were. Its scientists possessed knowledge of the most profound sort. Their expertise in the construction of independent machines extended beyond the realms of the physical. Within the infosphere, thinking, light-born predators swam.

They caught Cawl’s scent as soon as he entered. When he penetrated the upper levels of their machine world security, they attacked.

Cawl had not dared go this far before. The data was guarded by invisible fences and malign, abominable intelligences, and they required his full attention. To the Adeptus Mechanicus, the only thing worse than a thinking machine was an alien thinking machine, and the Pharos had those in abundance.

The machine world could not be described in human terms. In earlier eras, such vistas had been rendered as visual fancies, to allow the technomancers of the day to navigate the secret spaces of technology. But the Adeptus Mechanicus believed in the holiness of machines. They strove to adapt themselves to the inner world of the motive force, not it to them, to better understand their god’s plan.

Great intelligences pressed at him, outraged that he could gain access to their world. Their outrage grew as his stolen cypher keys disarmed their every defence. They employed modulated encryption technologies that drew on myriad dimensional states, and hid the truth so thoroughly it would take more than forever to find. Cawl was the match of them. They flung deadly djinn crafted from numbers and hate to hunt him down. Cawl tamed them. Down he went, further into the core, through the ur-coding of the mountain’s survival impulses, to the essence of the Pharos’ over-spirit itself. Cawl was a virus. The Pharos was his host. Rapidly, his intellect spread through its branching ways until he infested it entirely from peak to pocket world dungeons. Wrapped tightly into the being of the mountain was a gargantuan presence that guarded a hoard of knowledge. Cawl stole from it. He passed into the machine-spirit, turned it about, plunged a million hands into a million gaps, and twisted.

Keys, keys, so many keys. Cawl had spent a man’s lifetime gathering them, since Guilliman had returned from death and bade him release his Primaris

Marines on the galaxy. There was always more to learn, more to know, and Belisarius Cawl would know it all.

The keys turned.

The mountain was his.

Data speared him. He welcomed the pain. It meant success.

With steady hands, he seized control of the Pharos.

A torrent of knowledge poured into his memcore arrays.

Belisarius Cawl opened his eyes. He was weary, but exultant.

'It is done,' he said to Alpha Primus. 'Now for the next stage.'

Felix deflected the tomb guardian's phase blades with his power sword. Only disruption fields would turn the weapons away, and they did so with a raucous banging and feedback lightnings that made his power armour cogitator shrill. He was quicker than the machine, more nimble, he landed blow after blow upon its shining hide, but the living metal of its body closed over each smoking gash. When it hit him, its weapons passed through his armour as if no ceramite clad him, part-materialising within his suit to slit his skin and delve for his organs. Tyranids devoured life, necrons expunged it, Chaos corrupted it. So many enemies with so much power. Felix was the apex of Imperial might, and still it would not be enough.

Yet will in man's heart was strong. That was where victory lay.

'Soulless abomination!' he snarled. His Gravis plate was slow and heavy, but the strength it gave each blow was worth the trade off in speed. He plunged his power sword into the joints of one of the creature's many legs. It screeched mechanically, and flickered, beginning to phase out so that it could pass through the weapon and bring its own to bear upon the tetrarch. Coils whirled around Felix. Green lightning flashed from his war-plate.

'Oh no,' said Felix. 'You are staying here.'

Before the phasing process could complete, he overloaded his power sword, sending a surge of energy into the construct that burned out its circuits and made it scream again. The sword's field generator was reduced to a smoking box, but it had served its purpose.

Felix pivoted on his left foot, bringing his power fist down into the creature's insectoid head with all the might of the Emperor Himself. Metal exploded, spattering him with droplets that attempted to crawl away before dying upon his aquila. He plunged his fist deep into the thing's head, tearing out fistfuls of crystalline alien circuitry. To him it looked like nothing more than black sand,

but this mass of grains held the thing's artificial soul, and he scattered them violently.

The construct thrashed, knocking him from his feet. Felix held fast, grinding his fist deeper into the thing's innards. Green light blazed from its head as he ruptured something vital. Encouraged, he let fly with the gauntlet's attached twin bolters, hollowing the brain case, shattering the mechanisms, and blasting drops of squirming metal from the other side.

The thing rose up, its bladed legs shuddering. Its maw-weapon spasmed a final burst of fire, and it crashed down, dead.

Felix was pinned beneath. Neural aftershocks twitched the construct's legs, then it was still. He heaved up, his armour boosting his strength to godlike levels for a moment, and he rolled out, letting the machine crash back down.

He came to his feet. Scarabs were pressing inwards towards the star god, their carapaces running under the molecular manipulation beams of their fellows. Five great spyder drones directed them, pushing the smaller robots on, transforming them into a new prison quicker than the god could counter them.

Two more of the giant arthropod things approached Felix, swaying like serpents, balefire in their crystal eyes attempting to shut down his mental processes by sensory overload.

Felix braced. His power sword was gone. His in-display armour schematic showed several pieces of his plate in amber. His power feed was erratic. Half a dozen bolts were left in his ammo hopper, enough for a short burst. There was no way he could survive the coming onslaught.

The constructs froze. They moved unsurely, as if waking.

The spyders collapsed in on themselves, dropping hundreds of feet before their engines reengaged. Scarabs rained down, then they too righted themselves and, wings rattling, flew in docile order to hover over Belisarius Cawl.

'Well well!' the archmagos said. 'I could do it after all. To control a swarm was quite a feat, but this!' He raised many arms. 'Taking control of an entire mountain's worth of canoptek constructs is the work of genius.' He took a modest bow. 'Make note, tetrarch, that my deeds be remembered.'

Silence fell on the mountain. The wailing alarm stopped. Soft notes, gentle as breathing, sounded in the tubes of the Pharos. The slow, crackling spread of lava provided the main source of noise in the chamber. From their high wall, the statues of dead gods stared blindly on.

You impress us, slave Cawl, said Zarhulash, **but we are not done yet.** It pointed to the second portal, leading from the mine chamber to the machine hall.

We must proceed. There you shall find us a way to our other splinters, resurrection, and true power.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

A BEACON SILENCED

The tunnel over the void flickered. Each time it cut out, the space between the deep core mine and the quantum engine hall was replaced by solid rock. Cawl, Zarhulash and their attendant swarm of machines were enfolded by a golden nimbus which faded out, taking them with it, and leaving Felix and Primus behind.

'We are going to have to jump, tetrarch,' said Primus.

The tunnel blinked on. Through it, they saw Zarhulash and Cawl phasing back into existence above the thundering machines. The mountain shook savagely, and the corridor cut out again. Huge sections of the ceiling were coming down. The lava crept closer, its great heat beating against their backs. Temperature gauges in Felix's retinal displays slid dangerously up. Another tremor rocked the chamber, followed by a loud grinding. Felix looked back to the temple facade at the end of the hall. Cracks ran all across the glyphs. Blackstone fell in tinkling showers. One of the gods tumbled from its pedestal, legs shattered on the floor, head landing in the lava, where it bubbled and collapsed into itself.

'We are losing the passage,' said Primus. 'We go the next time it manifests, or we will be trapped.'

Felix nodded. Fizzles of energy wormed over the rock. They waited, tense, for the portal to reopen. The lava was moving faster over the featureless floor. The shaft of the mine was completely hidden by the growing lake of molten rock. Another tremor brought a wide section of the temple facade down in a rumbling avalanche.

'There is a strong probability that we are going to perish here,' said Primus.

‘Have faith,’ said Felix. ‘Now.’

The portal crackled back into being. The two Space Marines hurled themselves through it. The void encasing the energy tube, dark before, blazed with bursts of deadly light. Radiation alarms clanged in Felix’s ears. Then they were through, finishing their leap in the quantum engine hall, boots clashing down, sparks raked up from the blackstone by ceramite.

Cawl worked at a console made entirely of light. Shifting displays of glyphs hung over him. His servo-skulls had come out of their hiding places in his body and hovered still in the air, data pulse beams linking Imperial technology with that of the ancient dynasties. Violent tremors were bringing the ceiling down. A shield of constructs hovered over the hall, protecting the engines, Cawl and the C’tan from falling debris.

‘The archmagos handles this equipment as if he were born to it,’ said Felix.

‘I assume that is a jibe,’ said Primus, striding forwards. ‘The archmagos works for our betterment.’

‘By consorting with xenos daemons,’ Felix said to himself, following after Primus.

The time is now, Zarhulash said. It rose higher into the cloud of drones. **We are ready. Begin removal of my necrodermis. Order the constructs to build a translation stage so we might seek out the first of our splinters.**

‘As you command, great one,’ said Cawl.

His hands danced through floating icons, triggering new responses from the drones. A large part of them peeled away, diving down to the floor where they began to weave raised blackstone platforms with their jaws.

Zarhulash raised its arms. Its refulgence blazed through the metallic skin cloaking it, as if it were becoming thinner, more translucent. Four whirling strands of drones spun around the star god, and encased it in their glistening bodies, until only Zarhulash’s face was free of them.

In their greed they allowed us to retain something of ourselves. That is their mistake. We remember! We remember what we were. We will gather ourself, and we will have our vengeance! Quickly, slave. Release us from this form and you shall have all that you desire!

The drones covered its face, sealing it in a living sarcophagus, this time not to entrap, but to free.

Cawl continued his work, calling a flood of constructs from all parts of the mountain. He moved one of his left hands up and down like a conductor of music, and a great star map filled the space above them. Debris from the

mountain fell through it in a steady rain.

'Enough!' cried Felix.

'I would leave, if I were you,' said Cawl. He pointed at one of the platforms being constructed by the drones. It was nearing completion. 'Upon that platform a rift will shortly open. It will take you back to your ship.'

The swarm boiled around the C'tan. Slices of light cut through them. The C'tan howled in pain.

'Quickly, now, it will be free in a moment, and then it will know I have betrayed it. I really do not think Zarhulash is going to be happy.'

'Then you are true,' said Felix.

'Decimus, I am true,' said Cawl in exasperation. 'Zarhulash is going for a very long, one way trip. We don't want it coming back.'

'You knew this was going to happen!'

'Knew, no – I am no psychic. Accurately predicted?' He smiled modestly. 'But of course.'

'How are you going to get out? And you, Primus?'

'So you do care!' said Cawl. 'I knew you did. Don't worry about me. I am Belisarius Cawl. I can do anything.'

The drones withdrew from the ground. Five fresh, floating platforms glinted over the quantum engines. Steps held up by contra-gravity fields led to one of the smaller four. The largest, that in the centre, was directly below the C'tan.

Felix was frozen by indecision, then he made his choice.

'Very well,' he said, and ran for the platform Cawl had pointed out to him.

The mountain was dying. The quantum machines were failing. One exploded in a dazzling crash of green sparks, stabbing lightning into those nearest and causing them to detonate. The swarms of constructs were thinning. Giant lumps of blackstone rained down, narrowly missing the tetrarch, as he bounded up the floating stair to the platform. When he gained the top he slowed in astonishment. There appeared to be a gap in the air where part of the world had been excised. On the far side was the command deck of the *Lord of Vespator*. His crew stared at him.

'Go through now!' Cawl yelled over the growing clamour. 'Or your ship will be destroyed!'

Felix marched to the edge of the rift. He looked at his crew. They looked back.

'Tetrarch!' one shouted, forgetting completely all protocol in his amazement.

'I will destroy this mountain when I am aboard!' Felix shouted.

Cawl spared him a quick smile. 'I am rather counting on that, my dear

Decimus.'

Felix took one last look at the quantum engine hall, which was now shaking itself to pieces. The swarms were failing; the green light dying in their eyes, they sank to the floor and moved no more. Dead necron constructs littered the place. The floor cracked as more lava welled up beneath it and spilled into the room.

The last sight Felix had was of Cawl framed by a rising tide of molten rock, and then the necron transit portal took the tetrarch, and threw him through time and space.

Cawl shut the rift behind him.

The distance between the ship and the Pharos seemed to be but a few feet. In reality, it was over five thousand miles. To Felix, it felt considerably more.

As he stepped through a force grabbed him and hurled him from the platform. He tumbled down corridors of moulded blackness shining with motes of light. Every point had a voice. They all screamed at him.

It seemed to go on for years, that sense of falling forwards, as stars and worlds and epochs sped by.

And then his foot clanged on metal as if he had taken but a single stride. He was on the command deck of his ship, stepping through as easily as if he had walked through a door. He turned around. The rift was closed.

'Tetrarch,' said Shipmaster Mirunus, with admirable cool. 'Welcome back aboard.'

It took Felix a moment to steady himself. Reality seemed thin and strange, and he had to bend all his effort to force his mind back into the present. All his crew saw of his internal struggle was a moment of blankness, a setting of his lips, and then him heading straight to his podium. 'Where are Cominus and the Chosen?'

'They are coming in to docking bay six, my lord. The rest of the expedition is moving away from the Pharos,' responded his master of operations.

'The Pharos,' Felix said. 'Do you have firing solutions on the mountain?' Serfs were hurrying forwards, seeing to his battlegear. His gun and power fist were taken from his arm. His helm was removed from his head. Cool ship air dried his sweat.

'All weapons are locked and ready to fire, as per your order, my lord,' reported the gunnery chief.

'Broadcast these codes to the *Zar Quaesitor*,' Felix said. 'Inform their gunnery command to take aim on the mountain.' He datapulsed Cawl's digital seal to the relevant crew member and looked towards the oculus. The Pharos was erupting

plumes of burning rock.

'Open emergency vox-channel, all Imperial frequencies,' he commanded. 'Full power gain.'

'Yes, my lord,' a vox-operator said. 'Open now.'

'Tetrarch Felix to all forces on Sotha. Evacuate the mountain! All personnel to withdraw immediately to one hundred miles safe distance. Abandon Odessa Port. Withdraw. Gunnery,' he said. 'Stand by to unleash full firepower of this fleet.'

'Weapons primed and ready to fire. Do you wish to give the command?' his gunnery chief said.

Felix stared at the mountain.

'My lord?' the gunnery chief asked.

'Hold until we have word of Cawl,' said Felix.

'We are reading a rapid increase in energy,' his mistress of the augurs reported. 'The mountain is becoming unstable. It will explode within ten minutes.'

A jet of fire burst from the side of the peak.

'The Scythes of the Emperor's fortress-monastery has collapsed, my lord,' she said. 'Readings are exceeding expected parameters. At this increase the device in the mountain will destroy the planet. I recommend we strike now.'

'Hold,' said Felix, his face set. 'Await my command.'

'About there, I think,' Cawl said. He picked out a star in the green firmament projected by the Pharos. 'And just in time.'

The drones around Zarhulash were sucked inwards, then exploded outwards in a shower of broken metal. Shrapnel whirred towards Cawl and Primus. His energy sheath turned them into flashes of bright light.

The humanoid form of Zarhulash was gone. In its stead blazed an orb of light. It touched Cawl and Primus, and they felt their souls shrivel.

You are trying to betray us, said Zarhulash. **We see it!**

'In a word, yes,' said Cawl, working feverishly over the alien console.

Disappointing. You have promise, said the ball of light. **But expected. You will have nothing. You will die.**

Cawl laughed. 'I already have all I desire! I've inloaded it. All of it! The problem with entities like you is that you always leave the details to lesser beings. The secrets of the mountain are mine.' He depressed a final glyph. A discordant chime sounded, and the console winked off. 'You shall never be free.'

A lash of starlight whipped across the space between them. Cawl's conversion

field flashed brightly.

We will destroy you a thousand times over.

'Getting testy won't solve anything,' he said. 'Your technology may look more advanced than mine, but I have the Machine-God on my side.'

A portal opened over the largest translation platform directly into a distant patch of the void. A decompression hurricane sprang up. Immense gravity tugged through the gap. Through the portal a giant, yellow sun blazed. Everything in the room was dragged towards it. Necron constructs flew helplessly through. The C'tan was pulled slowly towards the hole.

'It's nothing personal!' Cawl shouted. 'I quite liked you, really!'

Cawl's feet clamped to the floor, shattering the rock to hold him in place. Mechadendrites speared into the ground and the machines around him. Anti-grav arrays arranged themselves against the pull of the star. Primus punched a hole into the side of a shrieking quantum engine and clung on grimly.

Fool, said the C'tan. It tore itself away from the portal, hanging unperturbed amid the storm of debris flying out of the mountain. **We are the master of the physical realm. Nothing can destroy us. Nothing can restrain us. A little gravity is nothing to us, we who devoured stars.** It advanced on Cawl, growing writhing tentacles of light from its disc. Lightning lashed around the hole in space.

'Well, not nothing,' said Cawl, upping the volume of the voxmitter built into his face piece to maximum to be heard over the tumult.

Prepare to die! Zarhulash reached for the magos with its tendrils of light.

'I control the Pharos! The portal there is keyed into my brainwaves. If they cease, it will vanish.'

That is a fine piece of news. It came closer, grew larger. **When you are dead, this reach of space will be our plaything.**

'You're forgetting the small matter of the singularity!' Cawl shouted. 'If that portal closes, you will have no escape. The quantum engines are unstable. The entanglement of particles that powered this facility will soon slip its bonds. Not even you can flee a black hole. No power in this universe can!' Cawl cackled in triumph. 'So you either fly out of that hole and eat that delicious star I've found for you, or you can stay here and die with me.'

Zarhulash stopped. The orb of its being pulsed angrily. Then, with a frustrated roar, it pulled in its limbs.

Know this, slave, roared the C'tan, **that you have earned the undying wrath of Zarhulash. We will meet again, and you shall know the true cost of**

defying a living god.

‘I still won though, didn’t I?’ said Cawl.

The C’tan bellowed, swelled to twice its previous size, then shrank into a small, bright dot that flew up and out of the portal.

‘About time!’ Cawl said. ‘Primus, aid me!’ he wailed, wheeling his arms. The distant sun pulled at him.

Primus grabbed Cawl’s arm.

‘I cannot use my psychic gifts, master. The blackstone still blocks me.’

‘Yes, yes, never mind that!’ said Cawl. With a thought he called the console of light back into being. ‘This and this and this and there!’ he said, his hand moving over the glyphs in a blur.

Over one of the lesser platforms, a slit grew in space, opening up on a starship interior they both knew well.

‘The *Zar Quaesitor*!’ Primus said.

‘Alas, I cannot shut the larger portal. Too much of the Pharos is damaged. It will fail in moments. We will have to launch ourselves towards our ship.’ He pulsed a command through the rift to his vessel. ‘I’ve amplified the grav-plating in that section of the ship. If we time this right, and leap past the larger portal, we should be able to surf the gravity waves and end up at home safely, so long as Decimus does his duty and destroys the mountain, else it won’t really matter whether we escape or not, because we shall be consumed by a hole in space and time.’

‘If we miss, then we are both dead anyway,’ said Primus.

‘Primus, my first-born son, danger only makes life more exciting!’

They jumped into a maelstrom of light, debris and noise.

<Warning. Warning. Gravitic anomaly detected. Warning. Warning.> As was the way, the direst tidings were delivered in the most droning of machine voices. <Warning. Warning.>

Combat lighting flooded the bridge. Tocsins blared from every quarter.

‘My lord!’ the mistress of the augurs shouted. ‘Energetic emissions from the mountain are reaching critical point. Augurs are reading a massive increase in gravity at the xenos site. We must destroy it now! We are already affected. Our orbit is perturbed.’

Felix hesitated. The crust of Sotha was rupturing around the mountain, sucked in, tectonic plates rippling like a disturbed blanket being pulled through a hole. The tactical hololiths showed this greatly magnified. Cracks in the surface

glowed red with the planet's molten blood.

'My lord, if we do not open fire now, all is lost,' the mistress of the augurs said.

'I am ready, tetrarch!' the gunnery chief reported.

'Cawl?' said Felix.

'No word,' said the master of the vox.

Felix bit his lip. He had wished Cawl dead many times. To think the monster's death was here at last, right now. It did not seem real, and he did not want it to happen.

'Open fire. All weapons.'

It was with visible relief that the gunnery chief passed on Felix's command. First the ship's forward lance array scored the void with painful light. Then the ventral and dorsal batteries opened up, hurling solid shot munitions after the lasers. The *Zar Quaesitor* joined in, and suddenly the void between the ships and the planet was filled with noiseless fury.

The lances hit instantly, cutting the smoking peak of the mountain down and across. The last remains of the Emperor's Watch slipped down the mountain face. The *Zar Quaesitor*'s gargantuan plasma arrays burned liquid furrows across the stone. Plumes of evaporated rock burst upwards.

It was not enough.

'Gravitic anomaly growing in strength! We're being pulled in.'

'Full reverse, all thrusters!' bellowed Mirunus.

The ship rumbled. Its frontal thruster arrays burned hot. Metal groaned as the planet's soaring gravity pulled back. More alarms rang, warning of failing integrity fields and physical collapse.

Slowly, slowly, the *Lord of Vespator* turned.

Felix kept his eyes on the mountain. The lances fired again. And again.

'We're too late!' shouted the master of the watch. 'Maximum burn insufficient to drag us out!'

The ship shook. Felix felt the pull of the Pharos anomaly dragging at him.

Then the shells hit.

The Pharos disappeared in a flash of atomic light. A cloud of vaporised stone rose from the mountain's location.

The ship was released, and immediately veered hard to port. A period of shouting followed as the crew righted the vessel and brought it back into line with Sotha. Then silence fell. The crew stood, eyes fixed on the world.

'Report,' said Felix.

'Anomaly gone,' said the mistress of the augurs. 'The Pharos is destroyed.' She

watched screens bearing data only she could read. ‘The mountain has collapsed into itself.’

The fiery cloud dissipated. A great wen of burning magma marked the site of Sothopolis and Mount Pharos. What had survived for millions of years was destroyed for all time.

‘Vox-master,’ said Felix. ‘Find me Cawl.’

‘My lord.’

The vox hummed with pure function. No interference marred the carrier wave. The Pharos had been silenced. But no matter how many channels the vox-master tried, no return signal came from the archmagos. Reports came in from the planet and the rest of the small fleet. Of Cawl, there was no sign.

For half an hour Felix remained on the command deck, gathering in the expedition, which had been scattered over a large area of the planet.

He was deep in conversation with Cominus when a priority vox chime drew his attention to the comms centre.

‘Message from the *Zar Quaesitor*,’ said the vox-master. He looked up in surprise. ‘It is the archmagos, my lord.’

‘Respond. Put him on command deck voxmitters.’

The vox crackled. There was a soft chuckle.

‘I’d say that went rather well, wouldn’t you, Decimus?’ said Belisarius Cawl.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN

IN MEMORIAM

Felix occupied the throne in the audience chamber of the *Lord of Vespator*. His armour was burnished to a high shine. He wore his cloak and chain of office. His weapons and helm were displayed on a stand to his right, the staff of the tetrarchy of Vespator to his left. All around him were expressions of Macraggian art at its finest: friezes in marble surrounds, carved, translucent stone of every hue, statues in metal and marble. A high dome roofed over the hall. The ceiling bore a star map of Greater Ultramar made of jewels; the polished black floor was inset with a gold map in mirror image of the ceiling. A vast rose window looked down on Sotha and Cawl's *Zar Quaesitor* floating over the planet, large as a moon. All in the stateroom was perfect, pure, glorious. The order of the star realm of Ultramar was replicated in miniature, an example of what the Imperium could be.

It was a dream. Ultramar was in ruins. The Imperium split asunder. Felix was a hollow ideal in a throneroom of lies. He despised the trappings of power.

'That is why you must bear this burden, Decimus Felix,' the primarch had said to him. *'Because you have no wish for it.'*

Felix doubted the primarch knew Cawl had said something similar to him. He wondered if their words were true, or just common platitude. He could never know. He could never really know if he wanted power or not, for he had power, and had had since he was a boy. Ancient genotech made him physically strong and mentally astute. The best weapons the Imperium had were his to use. A swathe of the Imperium was under his governorship. If he had none of those things, would he have yearned for them? Would he fight to attain them? No one

could ever know how they would react under different circumstances. He had been torn from his family, but he had wished to join the Ultramarines. That was an attempt to gain power, no matter that he wished to serve. He served now, in this awful era. There was little difference between what he had wanted and what he had got.

He understood Belisarius Cawl, even if he could never condone his actions.

Cawl's embassy of lesser priests stood by the doors. His chief ambassador knelt before Felix's throne, waiting for permission to rise. Felix withheld it while he thought.

'Stand, Qvo-87,' said Felix, eventually.

The tech-priest stood. 'I am not Qvo-87, my lord,' he said. 'My designation is Qvo-88.'

'I should have guessed. The one who died within the Pharos was your clone-predecessor. Is there no carry over of personality?'

'Not quite,' said Qvo. 'We share a common origin, but we are individuals.'

'Then Qvo-87 is truly dead.'

'Everything can only live once,' said Qvo-88.

'Tell me where Cawl is.'

'You can appreciate that the archmagos is occupied at the time being with data retrieved from the Pharos,' said Qvo-88.

Felix leaned forwards. His armour growled in the quiet of the audience chamber. 'Then tell me what the nature of that data is,' he said.

'Navigational data. The Pharos was a beacon, a star road and a communications array.'

'To what end does the archmagos require this data?'

'My lord! I feel as if I and my master are being subject to inquisition,' protested Qvo.

'You are correct to think so. Belisarius Cawl is a hero to many. Yet he concealed the motives for his actions on Sotha, and the presence of a potent enemy of the Imperium, and the results of what he uncovered.'

'He conceals nothing that does not need concealing, my lord.'

'He conceals everything,' said Felix. 'He knew the C'tan was there.'

Qvo-88 did not deny it. 'The ends he will put this information to are the ends the great Belisarius Cawl works to without fail, my lord – the salvation of humanity.'

Felix laughed. 'I assume you cannot be more specific.'

Qvo bowed. 'Alas, no. A priest of the Cult Mechanicus must be allowed some

secrets.'

'Then I proclaim myself dissatisfied. The primarch will also be dissatisfied.'

'Why, my lord? Cawl has removed the C'tan shard to a far distant part of the galaxy, and should it return it will surely turn its attentions against the necrons. He has deactivated the xenos device while salvaging all information it had to offer. This will have dealt a blow to some of our greatest foes. There is nothing more I can tell you, my lord. His quest to understand blackstone could save us all. Perhaps it is better that few are aware of what he is doing?'

'I am sure he would be happy for us to accept that, and allow him to work unobserved. I cannot accept such feeble assurances. I do not trust him.'

'Everyone has something to hide. The Scythes of the Emperor, for example.'

'The population they watched over so closely was corrupted by the tyranids, was it not?' said Felix. 'That was the source of their shame. They kept their oaths. They listened to their human charges, and they were damned because of it.'

'Yes. It was so,' said Qvo.

Felix frowned. 'I have no idea how such a thing is even possible. Xenos infiltration under a Chapter's nose.'

'All things are possible, in the infinity of time and space.'

'Did Cawl know this as well?' said Felix.

'Yes,' admitted Qvo-88.

Felix sighed. All the Emperor's gifts could not raise the burden of weariness from his shoulders. 'Tell me he will at least keep his promise to Chapter Master Thracian.'

At that, Qvo smiled. 'Observe, my lord,' he said.

A thousand lights flashed all over the *Zar Quaesitor*. A swarm of pods detached from the bulk of the ship and flew towards the barren planet.

'Can he never resist the temptation to theatricality?' said Felix.

'You know what he is like,' said Qvo, who had the good grace to appear embarrassed.

Large amounts of materiel were descending to the surface of Sotha. The ships flew past the scar where the mountain and Sothopolis had been, and which still glowed dull ruby with cooling rock.

'Cawl has released four hundred thousand servitors for this task, an entire temple of magos geologicum, magos biologians and others. His vaults have given up genetic templates and samples of the world's lost biospheres. The first cometary mining fleet has already been despatched. He will keep his promise. In

a few hundred years, Sotha will be fit for human habitation again. One day, perhaps, you might never know that it was stripped at all.'

'That is good. But it is not sufficient. I am displeased, and I will make my report to this effect.'

'For that purpose, here also I have the data Lord Guilliman requested.' Qvo beckoned a servant forwards, who held out an open wooden chest full of neatly stacked crystal discs. 'I trust it will satisfy him and you. For now, the archmagos has business elsewhere, but when he returns to Ultramar, which he will, he will seek out the Imperial regent personally. He gives you his word.'

'He could have given me his word himself,' said Felix.

'He is regretfully busy. Besides, between you and I, he thinks you might have decided to detain him.'

'I wonder where he got that idea from,' said Felix.

'Quite, my lord.' Qvo bowed again. 'If there is nothing else, I must return to the *Zar Quaesitor*. If you need anything further, the archmagos has left Hierophant Particular Ix Trenth in command of the geoforming efforts and Grand Archimage Triplex-Edic-0-1011 to oversee the reconstruction of the orbital. They are fine priests, irreproachably loyal to the Machine-God and to He of Terra. They will serve you well.'

'They are fully autonomous?'

Qvo gave an apologetic smile. 'As much as the archmagos is comfortable with. Those who follow the archmagos must sacrifice only some of their self-determination for a share of his knowledge,' he added hastily.

'I do not understand Cawl. He surrounds himself with puppet creatures.'

Qvo's smile broadened. 'He does. Like me. He can't help himself. I am allowed enough insight to see that it does not make him happy. It is why he is so fond of you, Decimus Androdinus Felix. You are nobody's pawn. You are like a son to him.'

Felix stared at Qvo-88.

'We are done. I will report to the primarch.'

'Then I beg your leave.'

'Take it,' said Felix tersely.

Felix watched Qvo all the way out of the door. His lackeys followed, mumbling cant and emitting plumes of scented smoke. Cominus and Ixen shut the gilded doors behind them, leaving the tetrarch alone with his thoughts.

The window drew his attention. More vessels were detaching themselves from the *Zar Quaesitor*. Light sparkled on the grey, dead face of Sotha. Work had

already begun.

'If you can bring life back to this world, Cawl,' Felix said to himself, 'maybe I shall forgive you some of your methods.'

He called down a vox-horn from the ceiling. Two servo-skulls fashioned from the remains of dead Primaris warriors – the first martyrs of Sothara – bore the apparatus to his lips.

'Brother Cadmus,' he said. Machines within read his voice print and instantly connected him to the Scythe of the Emperor.

'My lord,' said Cadmus. He had been withdrawn since the Pharos had been destroyed, but spoke proudly. *'What is your command?'*

'Contact your Chapter, Cadmus. With my full authority, tell the sons of Sotha that their lord and master Thracian is dead in glorious combat, and that their world is returned to them. There are duties they must attend to. Let the Aegida orbital be their fortress-monastery from henceforth, so that they might watch the eastern marches of Greater Ultramar for all threats, and fulfil their ancient obligations with honour.

'It is time for the Scythes of the Emperor to return home.'

Circa 10,000 years ago

Sedayne came around to the Altrix slapping his face.

'Director?' she said. 'Director, are you with us? Was the procedure a success?'

Sedayne's eyes focused on her concerned expression.

'You are fussing,' he said. Cawl's voice was strange in Sedayne's ears. His robes and hands were damp with blood. 'Stop slapping me.'

'Yes, my lord,' she said, backing away instantly. She signalled the guards. They saluted and lowered their weapons.

Groggily, Sedayne sat up, and patted himself down. 'This body is weak. It is small. It is poorly nourished. Summon my chefs, I desire to eat. A lot. And get me my weapon. It is precious to me.'

The Altrix's face lit up; evidently she had feared the worst. Her hair swung in front of her face as she enthusiastically bowed. Sedayne's appetite had been dwindling for years. 'Yes, my lord.' She retrieved his gun from the guard, and held it out to him in both hands. 'There is no mistaking your manner, my lord. It is you.'

'What else did you expect?' Sedayne said gruffly. It took him two attempts to take the gun from her hands. He swung his legs off the table to stand. He

stumbled. The Altrix Herminia rushed to help, but he pushed her away.

'Dismiss those fools!' he snapped, waving at the guards. 'I do not wish to be observed while I am weak.'

'Get out!' shouted the Altrix, amplifying Sedayne's anger.

The guards departed, leaving them alone. Sedayne staggered over to the second bed. His old body lay slack as an emptied bag.

'I look so old,' he said.

'You are young again, my lord,' said the Altrix.

Sedayne closed his old body's eyes with the flat of his hand, and shut the open jaw tenderly.

'I am,' he said. He rested a moment, holding his weight on his hands, his knuckles tight around the handle of his gun. 'I can feel Cawl inside my mind. He lives in part. I regret what had to be done.'

'Yes, my lord director.'

'I made a promise. I will keep it before he fades away.' Sedayne made his tottering way towards the door. 'The other tech-priest, does he yet live?'

'Do you really wish to save him, my lord? He will soon be dead.'

'He cannot be saved?'

'No, director. My bolt obliterated most of his internal organs. It is a marvel he still lives. There is not time for vat organs or augmetics to be fitted.'

'Then get a cryo-flask for his head!' Sedayne snarled. 'Save at least some of him.' He blundered through the doors, and staggered down the corridor, back to the chamber where the dying Friedisch lay.

'Perhaps a memory exload will be successful,' the Altrix said as she followed him. 'But why attempt it? You have what you want.'

Sedayne gave her a cold look. 'Because I gave Cawl my word.'

The guards had retreated to the outer door. They stood watching Friedisch bleed to death with complete detachment.

Sedayne went to his side, and fell to his knees in the pool of red around him. Friedisch stirred weakly. His remaining human eye opened in a face grey with loss of blood.

'Cawl?' he whispered.

Sedayne took his hand. 'Where is the damn cryo-flask? Get it in here now!' he shouted. The Altrix ushered out the guards.

Friedisch's hand was limp. Blood flowed slowly from the crater in his stomach.

'The procedure was a success. I am Director Sedayne, servant and confidante of the Emperor. I have come to you as I gave my word to save you.'

‘Then you killed my friend,’ moaned Friedisch. His eye closed. ‘I want nothing from you.’

‘He was truly your friend?’ Sedayne asked. He gripped Friedisch’s bloody hand tighter.

Friedisch looked at him again. ‘Yes. Yes, he was my friend.’

‘An infuriating, egotistical, self-centred, arrogant friend who always thought he was right?’

A sleepy frown crossed Friedisch’s face. ‘Yes. All of those things. But he was still my friend.’

Sedayne grinned sadly and winked at Friedisch. ‘He sounds like a terrible fellow. Perhaps I should have chosen someone less pompous.’

‘Cawl?’ said Friedisch, recovering a little.

The Altrix stepped forwards. ‘Director Sedayne, is everything all right?’

‘Yes, yes,’ said Sedayne imperiously. He sat back on the balls of his feet. ‘Well, actually. No. There is quite a lot that is not all right, if we’re going to be totally honest with each other.’

‘Sir?’

Sedayne held up his gun and pointed it at her head.

‘The thing is, Herminia, I’m not Director Sedayne. My name is Belisarius Cawl. Do you think Sedayne’s insipid personality could overwrite mine?’

She went for her own gun, but Cawl was quicker.

‘I don’t take kindly to those who kill my friends, madam.’

His shot took the whole of her head off, cauterising her neck. Her body fell to the ground with a thump.

‘Cawl,’ said Friedisch. ‘You survived. I am… so… glad…’

‘Don’t you die on me!’ Cawl snapped. ‘Wake up! No dying! I forbid it!’

Friedisch’s hand slipped from his.

‘Friedisch, dear Friedisch, no, wait, hang on, please!’ Cawl turned to the door in a panic and shouted as loud as he could. ‘Bring me the cryo-flask! Bring it now!’

<MEMCORDING SUSPENDED>

Cawl opened channels to multiple ocular organs. It was strange, to go from that long-ago version of himself, with its laughable reliance on native human senses, to his present exalted being replete with dozens of prosthetic enhancements. To think once he had eschewed divine enhancement.

The feeling would not last long. The memories were already fading.

Locking clamps disengaged, releasing him into a laboratory full of necron

technology stolen from a hundred worlds. Pale green light ran in channels in the floor, linking the machine-spirits of the artefacts together and keeping them alive. He had shucked off his more belligerent apparatus, becoming sleeker as a result. Currently his appendages all sported testing equipment.

Primus and Qvo-88 awaited him.

'You are ready, my lord?' Qvo-88 asked.

'I am, I am,' said Cawl distractedly. 'You know,' he said, as he ran his hand along the surface of a glowing obelisk, 'I can feel Sedayne buried in me still. And Hester Aspertia, and a few others I have absorbed over the millennia. It is strange to be reminded of them.' He moved on to the next artefact. 'I had totally forgotten. I wonder if I will remember them for long this time, or if I will slip once more into ignorance. Maybe I will be periodically jolted out of forgetfulness every time we encounter another beacon?' He shuddered. 'I do not think I could stand that.'

He moved to the centre of the room. A compressed version of the Pharos star map rotated in the air, green necron data superimposed over grainy Imperial stellar cartography.

'The galaxy has changed a great deal, master,' said Primus. 'Can you find what you seek? Tens of millions of years have passed since this map was created.'

'That is so,' said Cawl. He gazed at the ancient overlay, taking in the simple purity of the galaxy as it was aeons before mankind evolved. 'The great work as it should be. No stains of psychic energy, no monsters unleashed from the mind, but the perfect function of stars, worlds, life and peoples in accord with the sacred laws of the Machine-God.' He smiled. His pale lips were clearly visible, for he wore no facial prosthetic. 'How much better things were then. It is up to us, up to *me*, to put it back the way it was.' He moved around the maps, noting in minute detail the many differences between them. 'If one listens to the legends of the aeldari, one would think the Old Ones to be perfect angels. In truth they have a lot to answer for.'

He turned to his servants.

'The necron star map will take some months to fully comprehend. The Pharos is gone, but there are other beacons hidden upon the worlds of their ancient empire.' He sighed at the map. 'Every deposit of blackstone in the galaxy,' he said. 'And so much more besides.' He drew himself up a little. 'To business. Activate the Cawl Inferior. I had better send Guilliman another message before he loses patience and hunts me down. And you, Friedisch, begin an audit on all my memory stores across the galaxy. After the revelations given to me by the

Pharos, I can only ponder what other secrets I might uncover in my scattered memory banks. It is time,' he said to them, 'that I got to know myself a little better.'

'It shall be done, archmagos.' Qvo bowed and looked to be about to leave, but he hesitated. 'Please, archmagos, I am not Friedisch. He is dead. I am Qvo-88.'

Cawl continued to peer into the wonders of the necron map. Other data, more precious still, coursed through his mind, exhilarating in its alienness.

'I know, Qvo,' he said distractedly, 'I know.'

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Guy Haley is the author of the Siege of Terra novel *The Lost and the Damned*, as well as the Horus Heresy novels *Titandeath, Wolfsbane* and *Pharos*, and the Primarchs novels *Konrad Curze: The Night Haunter, Corax: Lord of Shadows* and *Perturabo: The Hammer of Olympia*. He has also written the Warhammer 40,000 novels *Dark Imperium, Dark Imperium: Plague War, The Devastation of Baal, Dante, Baneblade, Shadowsword, Valedor* and *Death of Integrity*. For the Beast Arises series he has written *Throneworld* and *The Beheading*. His enthusiasm for all things greenskin has also led him to pen the eponymous Warhammer novel *Skarsnik*, as well as the End Times novel *The Rise of the Horned Rat*. He has also written stories set in the Age of Sigmar, included in *War Storm, Ghal Maraz* and *Call of Archaon*. He lives in Yorkshire with his wife and son.

An extract from *Rites of Passage*.

They were forty-seven hours out of Necromunda when the warp shock took hold.

Chettamandey Vula Brobantis jerked awake from cloying dreams of roaring giants and blood-flecked axes as the *Solarox* shuddered violently, the entire starship spasming like some mighty aquatic beast impaled by a hunter's harpoon. She rolled to her right, ignoring the pain in her shoulder, and reached out with her left hand to slap the lumens on. Pale light sprang up at the gesture, as torches held aloft by bronze images of Terran saints illuminated her private chambers. The rays glinted dully off the gilded surfaces of her dressing table – built of wood from a planet liberated from the savage aeldari – reflected from the gilt-edged mirror presented to her as a gift by Admiral Venuza of the 19th Pacificum Sector Fleet, and got tangled in the folds of black Azantian lace that hung around her huge, pillar-cornered bed. The bed that until a matter of days ago, she'd shared with her husband of forty-three Terran years.

But then there had been that unpleasantness with the rogue House Goliath pit fighter on Necromunda, and the life-voyage of Azariel, Novator of Navigator House Brobantis, had been abruptly and quite dramatically truncated, courtesy of an extremely large edged weapon. Chetta actually missed him a little, despite the fact that she'd orchestrated the whole thing. She'd had to kill the fighter concerned to ensure her involvement didn't come to light, but no one seemed to doubt that she'd opened her warp eye and blasted his mind into fragments in self-defence.

Well, it had been self-defence, after a fashion. There was no question that Chetta would have died, if he'd been allowed to live and had suffered from loose lips.

The *Solarox* bucked again, and Chetta frowned. The Navigator for this segment of the voyage was Vora, a scion of one of the minor branches of House Brobantis. He wasn't scintillating conversation, but he *was* highly competent at

the business of guiding starships through the screaming, roiling mass of malignant energy that constituted the warp, else he'd have never been selected to pilot his Novator's personal ship. For the *Solarox* to be acting like this either meant that Vora had steered them extremely carelessly into a warp storm an order of magnitude worse than any Chetta had ever experienced first-hand, or…

She keyed her bedside vox-set. 'Captain Arqueba.'

There was nothing but the faintest of crackles of an open line for a few seconds, and then Anja Arqueba's voice replied.

'Lady Chettamandey.'

'What's going on?' Chetta demanded bluntly. 'I haven't been tossed around this badly since taking fire from an ork cruiser in Tennyson's Reach.'

'We're… not certain, my lady.' Anja's voice was as clipped and professional as always, but Chetta had known her for over a decade, and could hear the tension in it. *'We're still in the warp, and the Geller field is holding, but we've lost all communication with Lord Vora. We're steering blind.'*

Chetta swore, and rolled out of bed. 'Have you got a reading on his vitals?'

'No, my lady. As I said, we've lost all communication.'

'Either that, or the links are working just fine, and he's dead.' Chetta sighed, running through the possible scenarios in her mind. The ravages of the empyrean could scour a Navigator's skull clean of sanity, but one of her kind actually dropping dead mid-voyage was less common, although not unheard of. Heart failure, perhaps? Or possibly a fit, or some other madness that had caused him to tear himself from his throne and the machines that monitored him? 'I'm heading up there. Prepare a team.'

There was of course one other possibility: that something unholy had manifested out of the shifting currents of the warp and was even now eating Vora's soul. It was unlikely, but possible. However, leaving the ship blind in the immaterium was as good as a death sentence for everyone on board anyway. Chetta had calculated the mathematics of risk in her head and come to the same conclusion that she had so many times in the past.

If you wanted something done right, it was best to do it yourself.

'Yes, my lady,' Anja acknowledged her, and that was an end to the conversation. Chetta shrugged her way into a heavy robe and belted it securely, then eased on the diamond-encrusted slippers Azariel had gifted her for their tenth wedding anniversary.

The *Solarox* rocked again, and spilled Chetta sideways into her dressing table. She steadied herself on it, wincing at the jolt to her knee and ankle joints, and

made a mental note to dispose of it as soon as she could get away with doing so. Collecting relics linked to the aeldari had been one of her husband's few real vices, and the damned things made her decidedly uncomfortable.

The next jolt nearly sent Chetta tumbling backwards onto her bed again. She gritted her teeth, and took up her cane of blackened tachydon ivory from its resting place. She needed it some days more than others, but she'd be damned if she was going to try to make her way through a warp-tossed starship without it.

'I cannot,' she muttered, stumping towards her cabin door, 'be having with this *foolishness*.'

The *Solarox* was not a large ship by the standards of the Imperial Navy vessels Chetta had served on, but nor was it a tug. Even using the express elevators, it took her several minutes to get to the forecastle, by which point her joints were protesting bitterly and her mood had worsened significantly. She'd been met along the way by the team Captain Arqueba had assembled at her instruction: a dozen Brobantis armsmen and women in midnight carapace, armed with suppression shields and combat shotguns. Thus flanked, Chetta approached the Navigator's chamber: a heavily shielded, ingrowing barnacle in the ship's structure, its external walls encrusted with pipes and power cables, and dotted here and there with readouts attended to by the *Solarox*'s crimson-robed tech-adepts. One of them looked up at the tap-tap-tapping of Chetta's steel-shod cane on the deck.

'High lady,' the adept buzzed in greeting through the voice-synth that had replaced their vocal cords. It was an alteration most likely made by choice rather than necessity, but Chetta didn't regard the Adeptus Mechanicus' habit of replacing their body parts with machines with the same distrust or disgust as many humans did. There were many days when she'd have given her right hand for artificial hips, knees and ankles, but for the moment she was still stubbornly determined to stick with her natural body, despite her regular disagreements with it.

Besides, Chetta knew well what it was like to be regarded as a disgusting aberration. Navigators might be essential to the functioning of the Imperium, but that didn't prevent the ill-informed and overly superstitious from regarding her and her kin as heretical mutants, rather than the finely tuned results of countless centuries of jealously guarded gene-lore.

'What is the Navigator's status?' she asked, eyeing the chamber warily. The walls weren't coated in frost, which was something – the very worst

manifestations of the warp tended to drop the local temperature to something approaching a Valhallan summer.

'Insufficient data to be certain,' the adept replied simply.

'Your best estimate?' Chetta said. She'd learned long ago never to use the word 'guess' around the initiates of the Martian priesthood, since it tended to upset them.

'There are no indications of abnormal atmospheric conditions within the chamber,' the adept told her. 'Readouts suggest a steady temperature of nineteen point two five degrees Celsius, with humidity at thirty-two per cent. However, we have no readings for pulse, respiration or brain activity. The probability of these monitoring mechanisms all failing at once while others are unaffected is approximately seven per cent. Ergo, I believe it is reasonable to assume that Lord Vora has expired.'

'Marvellous,' Chetta muttered. 'The viewing shields?'

'Still open, high lady.'

'Whatever happened must have happened fast, then,' Chetta said, more for the benefit of the others around her than anything else. She looked sideways at the sergeant and pointed at the outer blast door in front of them. It appeared ludicrously solid, but it wasn't a Navigator's frail frame that it was intended to contain. 'Remain here, and shoot anything that comes out of that door unless you're *absolutely certain* that it's me.'

'And if we think it's Lord Vora, high lady?' the sergeant asked.

'Shoot it anyway,' Chetta grunted, walking forwards. 'It's the only way to be sure.' That had happened once, on one of her first voyages. Old Scara had ridden them through a warp storm, then when the time came to hand over to the next shift and he'd emerged from the chamber, something – some *thing* – made of torn flesh and jagged bone spurs had started to claw its way free from his skin. Three ratings had died before someone had managed to turn a heavy bolter on it, and even then it had nearly got to Chetta to open her throat with its teeth before it had finally been brought down.

She barely thought about it, these days. She'd seen far worse *inside* the chamber.

The first blast door slid aside and Chetta stepped through it, then gathered her robe around her as it slid shut behind her. She'd never yet had an item of clothing get caught, but it remained a tiny, irrational fear of hers, one that not even all her years of starfaring could shake.

The blast door in front of her opened, and Chetta took a cautious step into the

Navigator's chamber.

It wasn't a large space, for a Navigator was required to do very little in there that involved any form of physical activity. It was dominated by the throne: an imposing seat of metal and animal leather, utilitarian yet menacing. Chetta absent-mindedly tugged her robe well clear of the closing second door and scanned the walls and ceiling. They were largely bare metal, and she could see nothing out of place there, no gibbering creature of malice and shadow waiting to spring the moment her attention was diverted. With that precaution taken, she stepped forwards cautiously to inspect the throne's occupant.

Vora Brobantis was slumped in the seat, and quite definitely dead, if the trails of blood leaking from his nose and ears were anything to go by. Chetta prodded him suspiciously with her cane, but he didn't spring up and try to murder her while screaming warp-riddled heresy.

'Thank the Emperor for small mercies,' Chetta muttered. Vora was dead, sure enough, but at least it looked like he might *stay* dead. Such things were never entirely certain, when the warp was involved.

With those details taken care of, Chetta turned to the side of the chamber she'd studiously been ignoring so far, and opened her third eye to gaze upon the warp.

The warp; the immaterium; the empyrean – all names that humanity had conjured and tried to apply to the roiling, boiling, raw energy that lay over and under and around the material universe in which the flesh and blood and bone of their species existed. It was a lexical effort to apply order and definition where there was none, the notion that by naming something it could be understood, perhaps even tamed and mastered.

The problem with that was that regular humans were blind and blunt, little more than mewling infants adrift in a hostile universe that would swallow them without mercy or compunction should they trail so much as a toe in the waters that bore them. Only Chetta and her three-eyed kin could look into the face of the warp and see anything of meaning; only a Navigator could hope to do such a thing and survive with their mind intact, and even then it wasn't certain. The key to Chetta's genetics lay many millennia in the dim and distant past, even further back than the rise of the Emperor and the formation of the Imperium itself. Perhaps, somewhere on Holy Terra in the most secure vaults of the Paternova, the most senior of her people, lay the true nature of the Navigators' history. Then again, perhaps the knowledge was lost, along with so many other secrets.

Chetta frowned at the warp, trying as ever to make sense of what she was experiencing. Colours without name exploded and whirled, then died in

starbursts of melting hues. Sounds chased each other past the viewport, then returned to sink their claws into it. The shifting, kaleidoscopic light momentarily turned every shadow in the chamber into a face, familiar but unplaceable, screaming in agony. She winced as a stabbing pain assaulted her forehead, seeming to reach right through her third eye and into her brain, twisting at its substance with ephemeral claws.

'All quiet, then,' Chetta snorted. She reached behind her, and her grasping fingers encountered Vora: still dead, she was delighted to find. She hauled him out of the throne and onto the floor with a grunt of effort, then forced her knees to raise her up so she could take his position. The throne, recognising that it had a new and living occupant, subtly extended its biometric devices to begin monitoring her vital signs.

'Captain Arqueba?' Chetta called, activating the vox.

'High lady?'

'Vora is dead,' Chetta said, 'but I'm a jokaero if I can work out why. The warp isn't exactly calm, but this wouldn't have bent the mind of a green acolyte.' She frowned, drumming her fingers on the throne's arm. 'You'll have to cope without direction for a little while longer. Something took a swipe at us, and I'd like to know what it was.'

'As you wish, high lady.'

Chetta gripped the armrests of the throne, gritted her teeth and concentrated.

The fact that the throne room only had a narrow field of vision was of no consequence. The warp was not the material universe, where light travelled in straight lines. There were very few rules that applied to it. A skilled Navigator could gaze out and perceive a threat that might affect the rear or underside of the craft, or something which could engulf it entirely. Distance and direction were subjective at best in the warp, as was time, and that was something Chetta could use.

She wrestled with the immaterium's presentation into her mind, hardening her will into the psychic equivalent of an adamantium-tipped drill. In the same way as a warp-blind human might concentrate on focusing their eyes to see the finest detail at very close range, or their ears on detecting a single sound amidst others, Chetta chased down the thread of time in the white noise of images and sensations she was being barraged with, and followed it backwards.

There. A series of shock waves, ripping through the warp and buffeting the *Solarox*, lines of what she could only internally verbalise as a glistening dark brown against the shifting yellow background. She fought against the feeling of

her skin itching on the inside, and clung on to the images in her head. That was no warp storm; it was like no natural phenomenon of the empyrean she'd ever witnessed, if 'natural' was a term that could even be applied to this place. The shock waves were radiating outwards from another event; something else had birthed them. But what?

She forced her third eye to follow the ripples back to their origin, rolling back her subjective notion of time through sheer bloody-mindedness coupled with long practice. It was like trying to get a grip on a bubble in a hurricane, but…

'High lady, are you well? Your pulse is accelerating rapidly.'

'Not now, Anja!' Chetta snapped, trying not to lose the thread. Talking to someone in the present while peering into the past was not unlike trying to juggle with one hand while fencing with the other. She was nearly there; she could feel the shock waves converging on a single point.

They met, and formed a distinct image in Chetta's mind, one of uncommon focus and clarity for someone used to wrestling with the warp's abstracts. It was almost as though the trigger event didn't exactly involve the warp at all…

'Oh *crap*,' Chetta breathed. She took a quick check on the position of the Astronomican, that great beacon of psychic light and noise radiating out from Terra to guide the Imperium's starships through the shifting morass of the immaterium. The *Solarox* had been knocked off course from its planned route to Vorlese, where House Brobantis had its primary holdings, but not far. It wouldn't take much time to get them back into the most favourable currents, on course to return home as quickly as possible. After all, she had a husband to bury, and important decisions to make. There was little point in going to all the trouble of arranging Azariel's death in order to carefully steer her adopted house away from his plotted route, only to then not capitalise on it.

And yet, despite it all, Chetta was still a dutiful citizen of the Imperium. Some things were more important.

'This is Lady Chetta Brobantis,' she said, relaxing her grip on the past. Now she knew where she was looking, she could see the ugly wound that still pulsed in the warp's fabric. It wasn't near, as she comprehended such things, but it wasn't far either. In fact, she was fairly sure she knew where it was in relation to the material universe, and that unnerved her. 'We have a new heading. Prepare to alter course on my mark.'

'Are we far off course, my lady?' Anja replied.

'I said we have a *new* heading, captain,' Chetta said firmly, rolling her neck in an attempt to loosen some of the tension in it. 'Vorlese is going to have to wait.

Unless I miss my guess completely, something has just sucked an entire planet into the warp. I rather think we should go and find out what's occurring.'

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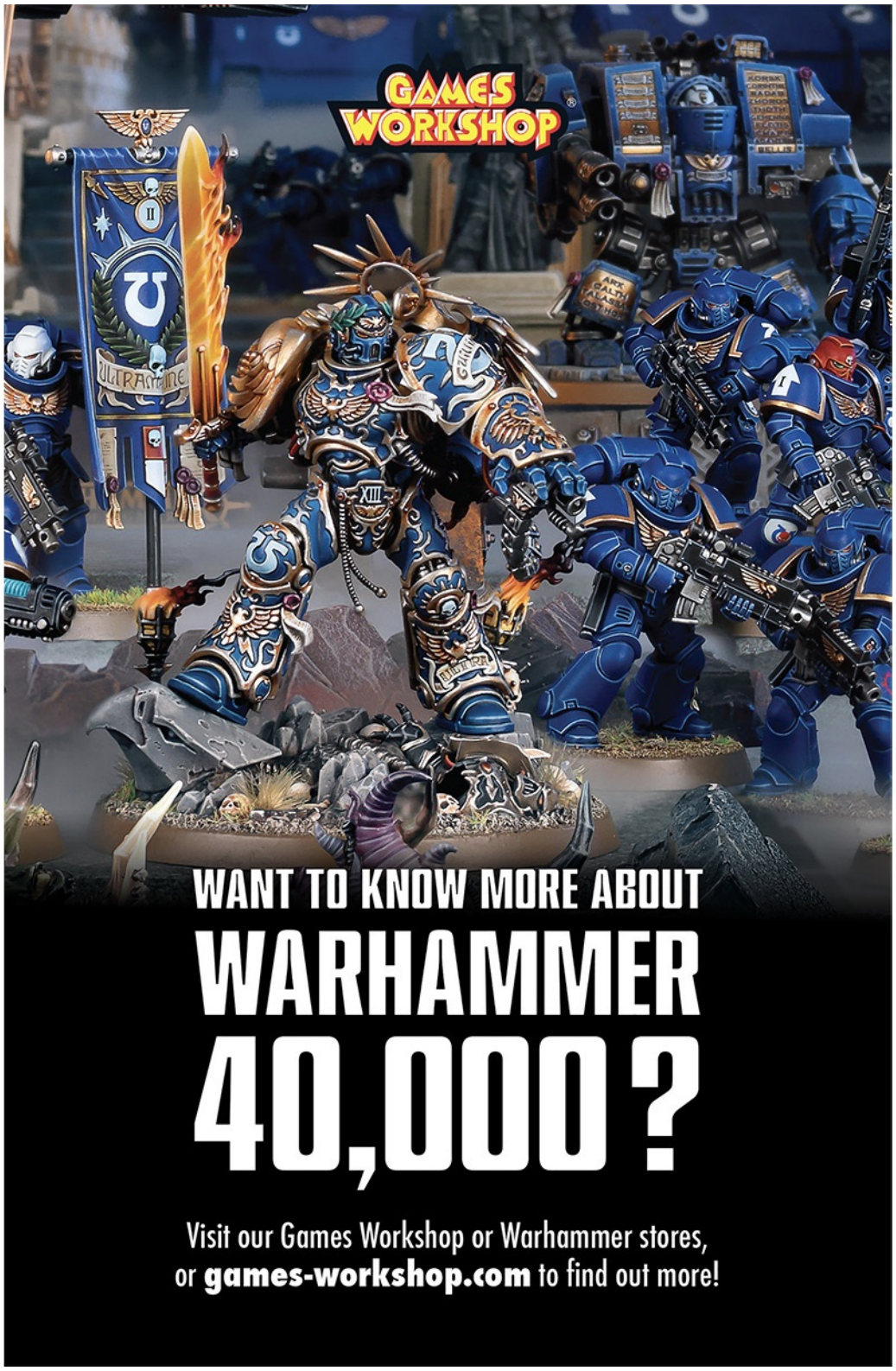
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