WARHAMMER 40,000

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WARHAMMER 40,000 SHORT STORIES

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Warhammer 40,000

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

Yet even in his deathless state, the Emperor continues his eternal vigilance. Mighty battlefleets cross the daemon-infested miasma of the warp, the only route between distant stars, their way lit by the Astronomican, the psychic manifestation of the Emperor's will. Vast armies give battle in his name on uncounted worlds. Greatest amongst His soldiers are the Adeptus Astartes, the Space

Marines, bio-engineered super-warriors. Their comrades in arms are legion: the Imperial Guard and countless planetary defence forces, the ever-vigilant Inquisition and the tech-priests of the Adeptus Mechanicus to name only a few. But for all their multitudes, they are barely enough to hold off the ever-present threat from aliens, heretics, mutants - and worse.

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

PESTILENCE

Dan Abnett

‘The Archenemy infects this universe. If we do not pause to

fight that infection here, within our own selves,

what purpose is there in taking our fight to the stars?’

– Apothecary Engane, from his *Treatise on Imperial Medicine*

I

It is my belief that memory is the finest faculty we as a species own. Through the function of memory, we are able to gather, hone and transmit all manner of knowledge for the benefit of mankind, and the endless glory of our God-Emperor, may the golden throne endure for ever more!

To forget a mistake is to be defeated a second time, so we are taught in the sermons of Thor. How may a great leader plan his campaign without memory of those battles won and lost before? How may his soldiers absorb his teaching and improve without that gift? How may the Ecclesiarchy disseminate its enervating message to the universal populace without that populace holding the teachings in memory? What are scholars, clerks, historians or chroniclers but agencies of memory?

And what is forgetfulness but the overthrow of memory, the ruination of precious knowledge, and an abhorrence?

I have, in the service of His Exalted Majesty the Emperor of Terra, waged war upon that abhorrence all my life. I strive to locate and recover things forgotten and return them to the custody of memory. I am a scrabbler in dark places, an illuminator of shadows, a turner of long un-turned pages, an asker of questions that have lapsed, forever hunting for answers that would otherwise have remained unvoiced. I am a recollector, prizing lost secrets from the taciturn universe and returning them to the safe fold of memory, where they might again improve our lot amongst the out-flung stars.

My particular discipline is that of materia medica, for human medicine was my original calling. Our understanding of our own vital mechanisms is vast and admirable, but we can never know too much about our own biology and how to protect, repair and improve it. It is our burden as a species to exist in a galaxy riven by war, and where war goes, so flourish its hand-servants injury and disease. It may be said that as each war front advances, so medical knowledge advances too. And where armies fall back in defeat or are destroyed, so medical knowledge retreats or is forgotten. Such are the lapses I seek to redress.

Upon that very purpose, I came to Symbal Iota late in my forty-eighth year, looking for Ebhoe. To provide context, let me say that this would be the third year of the Genovingian campaign in the Obscura Segmentum, and about nine sidereal months after the first outbreak of Uhlren's Pox amongst the Guard legions stationed on Genovingia itself. Also known, colloquially, as blood-froth, Uhlren's Pox was named after the first victim it took, a colour-sergeant called Gustaf Uhlren, of the Fifteenth Mordian, if memory serves me. And I pride myself it does.

And as a student of Imperial history, and materia medica too, you will have Uhlren's Pox in your memory. A canker of body and vitality, virulently contagious, it corrupts from within, thickening circulatory fluids and wasting marrow, while embellishing the victim's skin with foul cysts and buboes. The cycle between infection and death is at most four days. In the later stages, organs rupture, blood emulsifies and bubbles through the pores of the skin, and the victim becomes violently delusional. Some have even conjectured that by this phase, the soul itself has been corroded away. Death is inescapable in almost every case.

It appeared without warning on Genovingia, and within a month, the Medicae Regimentalis were recording twenty death notices a day. No drug or procedure could be found that began to even slow its effects. No origin for the infection could be located. Worst of all, despite increasingly vigorous programs of quarantine and cleansing, no method could be found to prevent wholesale contagion. No plague carriers, or means of transmission, were

identifiable.

As an individual man weakens and sickens, so the Imperial Guard forces as a whole began to fail and falter as their best were taken by the pestilence. Within two months, Warmaster Rhyngold's staff were doubting the continued viability of the entire campaign. By the third month, Uhlren's Pox had also broken out (apparently miraculously and spontaneously, given its unknown process of dispersal) on Genovingia Minor, Lorches and Adamanaxer Delta. Four separate centres of infection, right along the leading edge of the Imperial advance through the sector. At that point, the contagion had spread to the civilian population of Genovingia itself, and the Administratum had issued a Proclamation of Pandemic. It was said the skies above the cities of that mighty world were black with carrion flies and the stench of biological pollution permeated every last acre of the planet.

I had a bureaucratic posting on Lorches at that time, and became part of the emergency body charged with researching a solution. It was weary work. I personally spent over a week in the archive without seeing daylight as I oversaw the systematic interrogation of that vast, dusty body of knowledge.

It was my friend and colleague Administrator Medica Lenid Vammel who first called our attention to Pirody and the Torment. It was an admirable piece of work on his part, a feat of study, cross-reference and memory. Vammel always had a good memory.

Under the instruction of Senior Administrator Medica Junas Malter, we diverted over sixty per cent of our staff to further research into the records of Pirody, and requests were sent out to other Genovingian worlds to look to their own archives. Vammel and I compiled the accumulating data ourselves, increasingly certain we had shone a light into the right shadow and found a useful truth.

Surviving records of the Torment incident on Pirody were painfully thin, though consistent. It was, after all, thirty-four years in the past. Survivors had been few, but we were able to trace one hundred and ninety-one possibles who might yet be alive. They were scattered to the four cosmic winds.

Reviewing our findings, Senior Malter authorised personal recollection, such was the gravity of the situation, and forty of us, all with rank higher administrator or better, were dispatched immediately. Vammel, rest his soul, was sent to Gandian Saturnalia, and was caught up in a local civil war and thereafter killed. I do not know if he ever found the man he was looking for. Memory is unkind there.

And I, I was sent to Symbal Iota.

II

Symbal Iota, where it is not covered in oceans that are the most profound mauve in colour (a consequence, so I understand, of algae growth), is a hot, verdant place. Rainforest islands ring the equatorial region in a wide belt.

I made ‘fall at Symbalopolis, a flat-topped volcanic outcrop around whose slopes hive structures cluster like barnacles, and there transferred to a trimaran which conveyed me, over a period of five days, down the length of the local island group to Saint Bastian.

I cursed the slowness of the craft, though in truth it skated across the mauve seas at better than thirty knots, and on several occasions tried to procure an ornithopter or air conveyance. But the Symbali are a nautical breed who place no faith in air travel. It was tortuous and I was impatient. It had taken ten days to cross the empyrean from Lorches to Symbal Iota aboard a navy frigate. Now it took half that time again to cross a distance infinitesimally smaller.

It was hot, and I spent my time below decks, reading data-slates. The sun and seawind of Symbal burned my skin, used as it was to years of lamp-lit libraries. I took to wearing a wide-brimmed straw hat above my Administratus robes whenever I ventured out on deck, a detail my servitor Kalibane found relentlessly humorous.

On the fifth morning, Saint Bastian rose before us out of the violet waters, a pyramidal tower volcanic flue dressed in jungle greenery. Even as we crossed the inlet from the trimaran to the shore by electric launch, turquoise seabirds mobbing over our heads, I could see no discernible sign of habitation. The thick coat of forestation came right down to the shore itself, revealing only a thin line of white beach at its hem.

The launch pulled into a cove where an ancient stone jetty jutted out from under the trees like an unfinished bridge. Kalibane, his bionic limbs whirring, carried my luggage onto the jetty and then helped me over. I stood there, sweating in my robes, leaning against my staff of office, batting away the beetles that circled in the stifling humidity of the cove.

There was no one there to greet me, though I had voxed word of my approach ahead several times en route. I glanced back at the launch pilot, a dour Symbali, but he seemed not to know anything. Kalibane shambled down to the shore-end of the jetty, and called my attention to a copper bell, verdigrised by time and the oceans, that hung from a hook on the end of the pier.

‘Ring it,’ I told him, and he did, cautiously, rapping his simian fingers against the metal dome. Then he glanced back at me, nervously, his optical implants clicking under his low brow-ridge as they refocused.

Two sisters of the Ecclesiarchy shortly appeared, their pure white robes as stiff and starched as the bicorn wimples they wore on their heads. They seemed to regard me with some amusement, and wordlessly ushered me to follow them.

I fell in step behind them and Kalibane followed, carrying the luggage.

We took a dirt path up through the jungle which rose sharply and eventually became stepped. Sunlight flickered spears of light through the canopy above and the steaming air was full of exotic bird-song and the fidget of insects.

At a turn in the path, the Hospice of Saint Bastian Apostate suddenly stood before me. A great, stone-built edifice typical of the early Imperial naïve, its ancient flying buttresses and lower walls were clogged with vines and creepers. I could discern a main building of five storeys, an adjacent chapel, which looked the oldest part of the place, as well as outbuildings, kitchens and a walled garden. Above the wrought iron lych-gate stood a weathered statue of our beloved God-Emperor smiting the Archenemy. Inside the rusty gate, a well-tended path led through a trimmed lawn punctured by tomb-stones and crypts. Stone angels and graven images of the Adeptes Astartes regarded me as I followed the sisters to the main door of the hospice.

I noticed then, fleetingly, that the windows of the two uppermost storeys were rigidly barred with iron grilles.

I left Kalibane outside with my possessions and entered the door behind the sisters. The main atrium of the hospice was a dark and deliciously cool oasis of marble, with limestone pillars that rose up into the dim spaces of the high vault. My eyes lighted on the most marvellous triptych at the altar end, beneath a stained glass oriole window, which I made observance to at once. In breadth, it was wider than a man's spread arms, and showed three aspects of the saint. On the left, he roamed the wilderness, in apostasy, renouncing the daemons of the air and fire; on the right, he performed the miracle of the maimed souls. In the centre panel, his martyred body, draped in blue cloth, the nine bolter wounds clearly countable on his pallid flesh, he lay in the arms of a luminous and suitably mournful Emperor.

I looked up from my devotions to find the sisters gone. I could feel the subliminal chorus of a psychic choir mind-singing nearby. The cool air pulsed.

A figure stood behind me. Tall, sculptural, his starched robes as white as his smooth skin was black, he seemed to regard me with the same amusement that the sisters had shown.

I realised I was still wearing my straw hat. I removed it quickly, dropping it onto a pew, and took out the pict-slate of introduction Senior Malter had given me before I left Lorches.

'I am Baptrice,' he said, his voice low and genial. 'Welcome to the saint's hospice.'

'Higher Administrator Medica Lemual Sark,' I replied. 'My dedicated function is as a recollector, posted lately to Lorches, Genovingia general group 4577 decimal, as part of the campaign auxiliary clerical archive.'

‘Welcome, Lemual,’ he said. ‘A recollector. Indeed. We’ve not had one of your breed here before.’

I was uncertain quite what he meant, though in hindsight, the detail of his misunderstanding still chills me. I said ‘You were expecting me? I voxed messages ahead.’

‘We have no vox-caster here at the hospice,’ Baptrice replied. ‘What is outside does not concern us. Our work is focussed on what is inside... inside this building, inside ourselves. But do not be alarmed. You are not intruding. We welcome all who come here. We do not need notice of an arrival.’

I smiled politely at this enigmatic response and tapped my fingers on my staff. I had hoped they would be ready for me, and have everything in place so that I could begin my work immediately. Once again, the leisurely pace of Symbal Iota was weighing me down.

‘I must, Brother Baptrice, proceed with all haste. I wish to begin my efforts at once.’

He nodded. ‘Of course. Almost all who come to Saint Bastian are eager to begin. Let me take you through and provide you with food and a place to bathe.’

‘I would rather just see Ebhoe. As soon as it is possible.’

He paused, as if mystified.

‘Ebhoe?’

‘Colonel Fege Ebhoe, late of the Twenty-third Lammark Lancers. Please tell me he is still here! That he is still alive!’

‘He... is.’ Baptrice faltered, and looked over my pict-slate properly for the first time. Some sort of realisation crossed his noble face.

‘My apologies, Higher Sark. I misconstrued your purpose. I see now that you are an *acting* recollector, sent here on official business.’

‘Of course!’ I snapped. ‘What else would I be?’

‘A supplicant, coming here to find solace. An inmate. Those that arrive on the jetty and sound the bell are always that. We get no other visitors except those who come to us for help.’

‘An... inmate?’ I repeated.

‘Don’t you know where you are?’ he asked. ‘This is the Hospice of Saint Bastian, a refuge for the insane.’

III

An asylum! Here was an inauspicious start to my mission! I had understood, from my research, that the Hospice of Saint Bastian was home to a holy order

who offered sanctuary and comfort for those brave warriors of the Emperor's legions who were too gravely wounded or disabled by war to continue in service. I knew the place took in the damaged and the lost from warzones all across the sector. But I truly had no notion that the damage they specialised in was wounds to the psyche and sanity! It was a hospice for the deranged, individuals who presented themselves at its gates voluntarily in hope of redemption.

And worst of all, Baptrice and the sisters had presumed me to be a supplicant! That damned straw hat had given me just the air of madness they were expecting! I was lucky not to have been unceremoniously strapped into a harness and placed in isolation.

On reflection, I realised I should have known. Bastian, that hallowed saint, was a madman who found sanity in the love of the Emperor, and who later cured, through miracles, the mentally infirm.

Baptrice rang a bell cord, and novitiates appeared. Kalibane was escorted inside with my luggage. We were left alone in the atrium as Baptrice went to make preparations. As we waited, a grizzled man with an old tangle of scar-tissue where his left arm had been crossed the hall. He was naked save for a weathered, empty ammunition belt strung around his torso. He looked at us dimly, his head nodding slightly, then he padded on his way and was lost from view.

Somewhere, distantly, I could hear sobbing, and an urgent voice repeating something over and over again. Hunched down at my side, his knuckles resting on the flagstones, Kalibane glanced up at me anxiously and I put a reassuring hand on his broad, hairy shoulder.

Figures appeared around us: haggard, tonsured men in long black Ecclesiarch vestments, more phantom sisters in their ice-white robes and horned cowls. They grouped in the shadows on either side of the atrium and watched us silently. One of the men rehearsed silently from long ribbons of parchment that a boy-child played out for him from a studded casket. Another scribbled in a little chapbook with his quill. Another swung a brass censer around his feet, filling the air with dry, pungent incense.

Baptrice reappeared. 'Brethren, bid welcome to Higher Administrator Sark, who has come to us on official business. You will show him every courtesy and cooperation.'

'What official business?' asked the old priest with the chapbook, looking up with gimlet eyes. Magnifying half-moon lenses were built into his nasal bone, and rosary beads hung around his dewlapped neck like a floral victory wreath.

'A matter of recollection,' I replied.

'Pertaining to what?' he pressed.

'Brother Jardone is our archivist, Higher Sark. You will forgive his

persistence.’ I nodded to Baptrice and smiled at the elderly Jardone, though no smile was returned.

‘I see we are kindred, Brother Jardone. Both of us devote ourselves to remembrance.’

He half-shrugged.

‘I am here to interview one of your... inmates. It may be that he holds within some facts that even now may save the lives of millions in the Genovingian group.’

Jardone closed his book and gazed at me, as if waiting for more. Senior Malter had charged me to say as little as I could of the pandemic, for news of such a calamity may spread unrest. But I felt I had to give them more.

‘Warmaster Rhyngold is commanding a major military excursion through the Genovingian group. A sickness, which has been named Uhlren’s Pox, is afflicting his garrisons. Study has shown it may bear comparison with a plague known as the Torment, which wasted Pirody some three decades past. One survivor of that epidemic resides here. If he can furnish me with any details of the incident, it may be productive in securing a cure.’

‘How bad is it, back on Genovingia?’ asked another old priest, the one with the censer.

‘It is... contained,’ I lied.

Jardone snorted. ‘Of course it is contained. That is why a higher administrator has come all this way. You ask the most foolish things, Brother Giraud.’

Another man now spoke. He was older than all, crooked and half-blind, his wrinkled pate dotted with liver spots. A flared ear-trumpet clung to the robes of his left shoulder with delicate mechanical legs. ‘I am concerned that questioning and a change to routine may disturb the serenity of the hospice. I do not want our residents upset in any way.’

‘Your comment is noted, Brother Niro,’ said Baptrice. ‘I’m sure Higher Sark will be discreet.’

‘Of course,’ I assured them.

It was late afternoon when Baptrice finally led me upstairs into the heart of the hospice. Kalibane followed us, lugging a few boxed items from my luggage. Ghostly, bicorned sisters watched us from every arch and shadow.

We proceeded from the stairs into a large chamber on the third floor. The air was close. Dozens of inmates lurked here, though none glanced at us. Some were clad in dingy, loose-fitting overalls, while others still wore ancient fatigues and Imperial Guard dress. All rank pins, insignia and patches had been removed, and no one had belts or bootlaces. Two were intently playing regicide on an old tin board by the window. Another sat on the bare floor planks, rolling dice. Others mumbled to themselves or gazed into the distance

blankly. The naked man we had seen in the atrium was crouched in a corner, loading spent shellcases into his ammunition belt. Many of the residents had old war wounds and scars, unsightly and grotesque.

‘Are they... safe?’ I whispered to Baptrice.

‘We allow the most stable freedom to move and use this common area. Of course, their medication is carefully monitored. But all who come here are “safe”, as all who come here come voluntarily. Some, of course, come here to escape the episodes that have made regular life impractical.’

None of this reassured me.

On the far side of the chamber, we entered a long corridor flanked by cell rooms. Some doors were shut, bolted from outside. Some had cage-bars locked over them. All had sliding spy-slits. There was a smell of disinfectant and ordure.

Someone, or something, was knocking quietly and repeatedly against one locked door we passed. From another we heard singing.

Some doors were open. I saw two novitiates sponge-bathing an ancient man who was strapped to his metal cot with fabric restraints. The old man was weeping piteously. In another room, where the door was open but the outer cage locked in place, we saw a large, heavily muscled man sitting in a ladderback chair, gazing out through the bars. He was covered in tattoos: regimental emblems, mottoes, kill-scores. His eyes glowed with the most maniacal light. He had the tusks of some feral animal implanted in his lower jaw, so they hooked up over his upper lip.

As we passed, he leaped up and tried to reach through the bars at us. His powerful arm flexed and clenched. He issued a soft growl.

‘Behave, Ioq!’ Baptrice told him.

The cell next door to Ioq’s was our destination. The door was open, and a sister and a novitiate waited for us. The room beyond them was pitch black.

Baptrice spoke for a moment with the novitiate and the sister. He turned to me. ‘Ebhoe is reluctant, but the sister has convinced him it is right that he speaks with you. But you may not go in. Please sit at the door.’

The novitiate brought up a stool, and I sat in the doorway, throwing out my robes over my knees. Kalibane dutifully opened my boxes and set up the transcribing artificer on its tripod stand.

I gazed into the blackness of the room, trying to make out shapes. I could see nothing.

‘Why is it dark in there?’

‘Ebhoe’s malady, his mental condition, is exacerbated by light. He demands darkness.’ Baptrice shrugged.

I nodded glumly and cleared my throat. ‘By the grace of the God-Emperor of Terra, I come here on His holy work. I identify myself as Lemual Sark, higher administrator medica, assigned to Lorches Administratum.’

I glanced over at the artificer. It chattered quietly and extruded the start of a parchment transcription tape that I hoped would soon be long and informative. ‘I seek Fege Ebhoe, once a colonel with the Twenty-Third Lammark Lancers.’

Silence.

‘Colonel Ebhoe?’

A voice, thin as a knife, cold as a corpse, whispered out of the dark room. ‘I am he. What is your business?’

I leaned forward. ‘I wish to discuss Pirody with you. The Torment you endured.’

‘I have nothing to say. I won’t remember anything.’

‘Come now, colonel. I’m sure you will if you try.’

‘You misunderstand. I didn’t say I “can’t”. I said I “won’t”.’

‘Deliberately?’

‘Just so. I refuse to.’

I wiped my mouth, and realised I was dry-tongued. ‘Why not, colonel?’

‘Pirody is why I’m here. Thirty-four years, trying to forget. I don’t want to start remembering now.’

Baptrice looked at me with a slight helpless gesture. He seemed to be suggesting that it was done, and I should give up.

‘Men are dying on Genovingia from a plague we know as Uhlren’s Pox. This pestilence bears all the hallmarks of the Torment. Anything you can tell me may help save lives.’

‘I couldn’t then. Fifty-nine thousand men died on Pirody. I couldn’t save them though I tried with every shred of my being. Why should that be different now?’

I gazed at the invisible source of the cold voice. ‘I cannot say for sure. But I believe it is worth trying.’

There was a long pause. The artificer whirred on idle. Kalibane coughed, and the machine recorded the sound with a little chatter of keys.

‘How many men?’

‘I’m sorry, colonel? What did you ask me?’

‘How many men are dying?’

I took a deep breath. ‘When I left Lorches, nine hundred were dead and another fifteen hundred infected. On Genovingia Minor, six thousand and twice that number ailing. On Adamanaxer Delta, two hundred, but it had barely begun there. On Genovingia itself... two and a half million.’

I heard Baptrice gasp in shock. I trusted he would keep this to himself.

‘Colonel?’

Nothing.

‘Colonel, please...’

Cold and cutting, the voice came again, sharper than before. ‘Pirody was a

wasted place...’

IV

Pirody was a wasted place. We didn’t want to go there. But the Archenemy had taken the eastern continent and razed the hives, and the northern cities were imperilled.

Warmaster Getus sent us in. Forty thousand Lammark Lancers, virtually the full strength of the Lammark regiments. Twenty thousand Fancho armour men and their machines. And a full company of Astartes, the Doom Eagles, shining grey and red.

The place we were at was Pirody Polar. It was god knows how old. Cyclopean towers and columns of green marble, hewn in antique times by hands I’m not convinced were human. There was a strangeness to the geometry there, the angles never seemed quite right.

It was as cold as a bastard. We had winter dress, thick white flak coats with fur hoods, but the ice got in the lasguns and dulled their charges and the damned Fancho tanks were forever refusing to start. It was day, too. Day all the time. There was no night, it was the wrong season. We were so far north. The darkest it got was dusk, when one of the two suns set briefly and the sky went flesh pink. Then it would be daylight again.

We’d been fighting on and off for two months. Mainly long range artillery duels, pounding the ice-drifts. No one could sleep because of the perpetual daylight. I know two men, one a Lammarkine, I’m not proud to say, who gouged out his eyes. The other was a Fancho.

Then they came. Black dots on the ice-floes, thousands of them, waving banners so obscene, they...

Whatever. We were in no mood to fight. Driven mad by the light, driven to distraction by the lack of sleep, unnerved by the curious geometry of the place we were defending, we were easy meat. The forces of Chaos slaughtered us, and pushed us back into the city itself. The civilians, about two million strong, were worse than useless. They were pallid, idle things, with no drive or appetite. When doom came upon them, they simply gave up.

We were besieged for five months, despite six attempts by the Doom Eagles to break the deadlock. Faith, but they were terrifying! Giants, clashing their bolters together before each fight, screaming at the foe, killing fifty for every one we picked off.

But it was like fighting the tide, and for all their power, there were only sixty of them.

We called for reinforcements. Getus had promised us, but now he was long gone aboard his warship, drawn back behind the fleet picket in case things got nasty.

The first man I saw fall to the Torment was a captain in my seventh platoon. He just collapsed one day, feverish. We took him to the Pirody Polar infirmium, where Subjunctus Valis, the apothecary of the Doom Eagles company, was running the show. An hour later, the captain was dead. His skin had blistered and bubbled. His eyes had burst. He had tried to kill Valis with a piece of the metal cot he had torn from the wall brace. Then he bled out.

You know what that means? His entire body spewed blood from every orifice, every pore. He was a husk by the time it was over.

In the day after the captain's death, sixty fell victim. Another day, two hundred. Another day, a thousand. Most died within two hours. Others lingered... for days, pustular, agonised.

Men I had known all my life turned into gristly sacks of bone before my eyes. Damn you, Sark, for making me remember this!

On the seventh day it spread to the Fancho as well. On the ninth, it reached the civilian population. Valis ordered all measure of quarantine, but it was no good. He worked all hours of the endless day, trying to find a vaccine, trying to alleviate the relentless infection.

On the tenth day, a Doom Eagle fell victim. In his Torment, blood gouting from his visor grilles, he slew two of his comrades and nineteen of my men. The disease had overcome even the Astartes purity seals.

I went to Valis, craving good news. He had set up a laboratory in the infirmium, where blood samples and tissue-scrapes boiled in alembics and separated in oil flasks. He assured me the Torment would be stopped. He explained how unlikely it was for a pestilence to be transmitted in such a cold clime, where there is no heat to incubate and spread decay. And he also believed it would not flourish in light. So he had every stretch of the city wired with lamps so that there would be no darkness.

No darkness. In a place where none came naturally, even the shadows of closed rooms were banished. Everything was bright. Perhaps you can see now why I abhor the light and cling to darkness.

The stench of blood-filth was appalling. Valis did his work, but still we fell. By the twenty-first day, I'd lost thirty-seven per cent of my force. The Fancho were all but gone. Twelve thousand Pirodian citizens were dead or dying. Nineteen Doom Eagles had succumbed.

Here are your facts if you want them. The plague persisted in a climate that should have killed it. It showed no common process of transmission. It brooked no attempt to contain or control it, despite efforts to enforce quarantine and cleanse infected areas with flamers. It was ferociously contagious. Even Marine purity seals were no protection. Its victims died in

agony.

Then one of the Doom Eagles deciphered the obscene script of one of the Chaos banners displayed outside the walls.

It said...

It said one word. One filthy word. One damned, abominable word that I have spent my life trying to forget.

V

I craned in at the dark doorway. ‘What word? What word was it, colonel?’

With great reluctance, he spoke it. It wasn’t a word at all. It was an obscene gurgle dignified by consonants. The glyph-name of the plague-daemon itself, one of the ninety-seven Blasphemies that May Not Be Written Down.

At its utterance, I fell back off my stool, nausea writhing in my belly and throat. Kalibane shrieked. The sister collapsed in a faint and the novitiate fled.

Baptrice took four steps back from the doorway, turned, and vomited spectacularly.

The temperature in the corridor dropped by fifteen degrees.

Unsteady, I attempted to straighten my overturned stool and pick up the artificer that the novitiate had knocked over. Where it had recorded the word, I saw, the machine’s parchment tape had begun to smoulder.

Screaming and wailing echoed down the hall from various cells.

And then, Ioq was out.

Just next door, he had heard it all, his scarred head pressed to the cage bars. Now that cage door splintered off its mount and crashed to the corridor floor. Berserk, the huge ex-guardsman thrashed out and turned towards us.

He was going to kill me, I’m certain, but I was slumped and my legs wouldn’t work. Then Kalibane, bless his brave heart, flew at him. My devoted servitor rose up on his stunted hind limbs, the bionics augmenting his vast forelimbs throwing them up in a warning display. From splayed foot to reaching hand, Kalibane was eleven feet tall. He peeled back his lips and screeched through bared steel canines.

Froth dribbling from his tusked mouth, Ioq smashed Kalibane aside. My servitor made a considerable dent in the wall.

Ioq was on me.

I swept my staff of office around and thumbed the recessed switch below the head.

Electric crackles blasted from the staff’s tip. Ioq convulsed and fell. Twitching, he lay on the floorboards, and evacuated involuntarily. Baptrice

was on his feet now. Alarms were ringing and novitiates were rushing frantically into the corridor with harness jackets and clench poles.

I rose and looked back at the dark doorway.

‘Colonel Ebhoe?’

The door slammed shut.

VI

There would be no further interview that afternoon, Brother Baptrice made plain, despite my protests. Novitiates escorted me to a guest chamber on the second floor. It was white-washed and plain, with a hard, wooden bed and small scriptorium table. A leaded window looked out onto the graveyard and the jungles beyond.

I felt a great perturbation of spirit, and paced the room as Kalibane unpacked my belongings. I had come so close, and had begun to draw the reluctant Ebhoe out. Now to be denied the chance to continue when the truly dark secrets were being revealed!

I paused by the window. The glaring, crimson sun was sinking into the mauve oceans, throwing the thick jungles into black, wild relief. Seabirds reeled over the bay in the dying light. Stars were coming out in the dark blue edges of the sky.

Calmer now, I reflected that whatever my internal uproar, the uproar in the place itself was greater.

From the window, I could hear all manner of screams, wails, shouts, banging doors, thundering footsteps, rattled keys. The word of blasphemy that Ebhoe had spoken had thrown all the fragile minds in this house of insanity into disarray, like red-hot metal plunged into quenching cold water. Great efforts were being made to quieten the inmates.

I sat at the teak scriptorium for a while, reviewing the transcripts while Kalibane dozed on a settle by the door. Ebhoe had made particular mention of Subjunctus Valis, the Doom Eagles’ apothecary. I looked over copies of the old Pirody debriefings I had brought with me, but Valis’s name only appeared in the muster listings. Had he survived? Only a direct request to the Doom Eagles chapter house could provide an answer, and that might take months.

The Astartes are notoriously secretive, sometimes downright blatant in their uncooperative relationship with the Administratum. At best, it might involve a series of formal approaches, delaying tactics, bargaining.

Even so, I wanted to alert my brethren on Lorches to the possible lead. I damned Saint Bastian when I remembered the place had no vox-caster! I

couldn’t even forward a message to the Astropathic enclave at Symbalopolis for transmission off world.

A sister brought me supper on a tray. Just as I was finishing, and Kalibane was lighting the lamps, Niro and Jardone came to my chamber.

‘Brothers?’

Jardone got right to it, staring at me through his half-moon lenses. ‘The brotherhood of the hospice have met, and they decided that you must leave. Tomorrow. No further audiences will be granted. We have a vessel that will take you to the fishing port at Math island. You can obtain passage to Symbalopolis from there.’

‘I am disappointed, Jardone. I do not wish to leave. My recollection is not complete.’

‘It is as complete as it’s going to be!’ he snapped.

‘The hospice has never been so troubled,’ Niro said quietly. ‘There have been brawls. Two novitiates have been injured. Three inmates have attempted suicide. Years of work have been undone in a few moments.’

I nodded. ‘I regret the disturbance, but–’

‘No buts!’ barked Jardone.

‘I’m sorry, higher sark,’ said Niro. ‘That is how it is.’

I slept badly in the cramped cot. My mind, my memory, played games, going over the details of the interview. There was shock and injury in Ebhoe, that was certain, for the event had been traumatic. But there was something else. A secret beyond anything he had told me, some profound memory. I could taste it.

I would not be deterred. Too many lives depended on it.

Kalibane was slumbering heavily when I crept from the chamber. In the darkness, I felt my way to the stairs, and up to the third floor. There was a restlessness in the close air. I moved past locked cells where men moaned in their sleep or muttered in their insomnia.

At intervals, I hugged the shadows as novitiate wardens with lamps made their patrols. It took perhaps three quarters of an hour to reach the cell block where Ebhoe resided. I stalked nervously past the bolted door of Ioq’s room.

The spy-slit opened at my touch. ‘Ebhoe? Colonel Ebhoe?’ I called softly into the darkness.

‘Who?’ his cold voice replied.

‘It is Sark. We weren’t finished.’

‘Go away.’

‘I will not, until you tell me the rest.’

‘Go away.’

I thought desperately, and eagerness made me cruel. ‘I have a torch, Ebhoe. A powerful lamp. Do you want me to shine it in through the spy-hole?’

When he spoke again, there was terror in his voice. Emperor forgive me for my manipulation.

‘What more is there?’ he asked. ‘The Torment spread. We died by the thousand. I cannot help with your cause, though I pity those men on Genovingia.’

‘You never told me how it ended.’

‘Did you not read the reports?’

I glanced up and down the dark cell-block to make sure we were still alone. ‘I read them. They were... sparse. They said Warmaster Gatus incinerated the enemy from orbit, and ships were sent to relieve you at Pirody Polar. They expressed horror at the extent of the plague-loss. Fifty-nine thousand men dead. No count was made of the civilian losses. They said that by the time the relief ships arrived, the Torment had been expunged. Four hundred men were evacuated. Of them, only one hundred and ninety-one are still alive according to the records.’

‘There’s your answer then.’

‘No, colonel. That’s no answer! How was it expunged?’

‘We located the source of infection, cleansed it. That was how.’

‘How, Ebhoe? How, in the God-Emperor’s name?’

‘It was the height of the Torment. Thousands dead...’

VII

It was the height of the Torment. Thousands dead, corpses everywhere, pus and blood running in those damnably bright halls.

I went to Valis again, begging for news. He was in his infirmium, working still. Another batch of vaccines to try, he told me. The last six had failed, and had even seemed to aggravate the contagion.

The men were fighting themselves by then, killing each other in fear and loathing. I told Valis this, and he was silent, working at a flame burner on the steel workbench. He was huge being, of course... Astartes, a head and a half taller than me, wearing a cowled red robe over his Doom Eagles armour. He lifted specimen bottles from his narthecium, and held them up to the ever-present light.

I was tired, tired like you wouldn’t believe. I hadn’t slept in days. I put down the flamer I had been using for cleansing work, and sat on a stool.

‘Are we all going to perish?’ I asked the great apothecary.

‘Dear, valiant Ebhoe,’ he said with a laugh. ‘You poor little man. Of course not. I will not allow it.’

He turned to face me, filling a long syringe from a stoppered bottle. I was in awe of him, even after the time we had spent together.

‘You are one of the lucky ones, Ebhoe. Clean so far. I’d hate to see you contract this pestilence. You have been a faithful ally to me through this dark time, helping to distribute my vaccines. I will mention you to your commanders.’

‘Thank you, apothecary.’

‘Ebhoe,’ he said, ‘I think it is fair to say we cannot save any who have been infected now. We can only hope to vaccinate the healthy against infection. I have prepared a serum for that purpose, and I will inoculate all healthy men with it. You will help me. And you will be first. So I can be sure not to lose you.’

I hesitated. He came forward with the syringe, and I started to pull up my sleeve.

‘Open your jacket and tunic. It must go through the stomach wall.’ I reached for my tunic clasps.

And saw it. The tiniest thing. Just a tiny, tiny thing.

A greenish-yellow blister just below Valis’s right ear.

VIII

Ebhoe fell silent. The air seemed electrically charged. Inmates in neighbouring cells were thrashing restless, and some were crying out. At any moment, the novitiate wardens would come.

‘Ebhoe?’ I called through the slit.

His voice had fallen to a terrified whisper, the whisper of a man who simply cannot bear to put the things haunting his mind into words.

‘Ebhoe?’

Keys clattered nearby. Lamplight flickered under a hall door. Ioq was banging at his cell door and growling. Someone was crying, someone else was wailing in a made-up language. The air was ripe with the smell of faeces, sweat and agitated fear.

‘Ebhoe!’

There was no time left. ‘Ebhoe, please!’

‘Valis had the Torment! He’d had it all along, right from the start!’ Ebhoe’s voice was strident and anguished. The words came out of the slit as hard and lethal as las-fire. ‘He had spread it! He! Through his work, his vaccines, his treatments! He had spread the plague! His mind had been corrupted by it, he didn’t know what he was doing! His many, many vaccines had failed because

they weren’t vaccines! They were new strains of the Torment bred in his infirmium! He was the carrier: a malevolent, hungry pestilence clothed in the form of a noble man, killing thousands upon thousands upon thousands!’

I went cold. Colder than I’d ever been before. The idea was monstrous. The Torment had been more than a waster of lives, it had been sentient, alive, deliberate... planning and moving through the instrument it had corrupted.

The door of Ioq’s cell was bulging and shattering. Screams welled all around, panic and fear in equal measure. The entire hospice was shaking with unleashed psychoses.

Lamps flashed at the end of the block. Novitiates yelled out and ran forward as they saw me. They would have reached me had not Ioq broken out again, rabid and slavering, throwing his hideous bulk into them, ripping at them in a frenzy.

‘Ebhoe!’ I yelled through the slit. ‘What did you do?’

He was crying, his voice ragged with gut-heaving sobs. ‘I grabbed my flamer! Emperor have mercy, I snatched it up and bathed Valis with flame! I killed him! I killed him! I slew the pride of the Doom Eagles! I burned him apart! I expunged the source of the Torment!’

A novitiate flew past me, his throat ripped out by animal tusks. His colleagues were locked in desperate struggle with Ioq.

‘You burned him.’

‘Yes. The flames touched off the chemicals in the infirmium, the sample bottles, the flasks of seething plague water. They exploded. A fireball... Oh gods... brighter than the daylight that had never gone away. Brighter than... fire everywhere... liquid fire... flames around me... all around... oh... oh...’

Bright flashes filled the hall, the loud discharge of a las-weapon.

I stepped back from Ebhoe’s cell door, shaking. Ioq lay dead amid the mangled corpses of three novitiates. Several others, wounded, whimpered on the floor.

Brother Jardone, a laspistol in his bony hand, pushed through the orderlies and ecclesiarchs gathering in the hall, and pointed the weapon at me.

‘I should kill you for this, Sark. How dare you!’

Baptrice stepped forward and took the gun from Jardone. Niro gazed at me in weary disappointment.

‘See to Ebhoe,’ Baptrice told the sisters nearby. They unlocked the cell door and went in.

‘You will leave tomorrow, Sark,’ Baptrice said. ‘I will file a complaint to your superiors.’

‘Do so,’ I said. ‘I never wanted this, but I had to reach the truth. It may be, from what Ebhoe has told me, that a way to fight Uhlren’s Pox is in our reach.’

‘I hope so,’ said Baptrice, gazing bitterly at the carnage in the hall. ‘It has

cost enough.’

The novitiates were escorting me back to my room when the sisters brought Ebhoe out. The ordeal of recollection had killed him. I will never forgive myself for that, no matter how many lives on Genovingia we saved.

And I will never forget the sight of him, revealed at last in the light.

IX

I left the next day by launch with Kalibane. No one from the hospice saw me off or even spoke to me. From Math Island, I transmitted my report to Symbalopolis, and from there, astropathically, it lanced through the warp to Lorches.

Was Uhlren’s Pox expunged? Yes, eventually. My work assisted in that. The blood-froth was like the Torment, engineered by the Archenemy, just as sentient. Fifty-two medical officers, sources just like Valis, were executed and incinerated.

I forget how many we lost altogether in the Genovingia group. I forget a lot, these days. My memory is not what it was, and I am thankful for that, at times.

I never forget Ebhoe. I never forget his corpse, wheeled out by the sisters. He had been caught in the infirmium flames on Pirody Polar. Limbless, wizened like a seed-case, he hung in a suspensor chair, kept alive by intravenous drains and sterile sprays. A ragged, revolting remnant of a man.

He had no eyes. I remember that most clearly of all. The flames had scorched them out.

He had no eyes, and yet he was terrified of the light.

I still believe that memory is the finest faculty we as a species own. But by the Golden Throne, there are things I wish I could never remember again.

WRATH OF KHARN

William King

‘Blood for the Blood God!’ bellowed Khârn the Betrayer, charging forward through the hail of bolter fire, towards the Temple of Superlative Indulgence. The bolter shells ricocheting off his breastplate did not even slow him down. The Chaos Space Marine smiled to himself. The ancient ceramite of his armour had protected him for over ten thousand years. He felt certain it would not let him down today. All around him warriors fell, clutching their wounds, crying in pain and fear.

More souls offered up on the altar of battle to the Supreme Lord of Carnage, Khârn thought and grinned maniacally. Surely the Blood God would be pleased this day.

Ahead of him, Khârn saw one of his fellow berzerkers fall, his body riddled with shells, his armour cracked and melted by plasma fire. The berzerker howled with rage and frustration, knowing that he was not going to be in at the kill, that he would give Khorne no more offerings on this or any other day. In frustration, the dying warrior set his chainsword to maximum power and took off his own head with one swift stroke. His blood rose in a red fountain to slake Khorne’s thirst.

As he passed, Khârn kicked the fallen warrior’s head, sending it flying over the defenders’ parapet. At least this way his fallen comrade would witness Khârn slaughter the Slaanesh worshippers in the few delicious moments before he died. Under the circumstances, it was the least reward Khârn could grant such a devout warrior.

The Betrayer leapt over a pile of corpses, snapping off a shot with his plasma pistol. One of the Slaanesh cultists fell, clutching the ruins of his melted face. Gorechild, Khârn’s daemonic axe, howled in his hands. Khârn

brandished it above his head and bellowed his challenge to the sick, yellow sky of the Daemon World.

‘Skulls for the skull throne!’ Khârn howled. On every side, frothing Berzerkers echoed his cry. More shells whined all around him. He ignored them the way he would ignore the buzz of annoying insects. More of his fellows fell but Khârn stood untouched, secure in the blessing of the Blood God, knowing that it would not be his turn today.

All was going according to plan. A tide of Khorne’s warriors flowed across the bomb-cratered plains towards the towering redoubt of the Slaanesh worshippers. Support fire from the Chaos Titan artillery had reduced most of the walls around the ancient temple complex to just so much rubble. The disgusting murals painted in fluorescent colours had been reduced to atoms. The obscene minarets that crowned the towers had been blasted into well-deserved oblivion. Lewd statues lay like colossal, limbless corpses, gazing at the sky with blank marble eyes.

Even as Khârn watched, missiles blazed down from the sky and smashed another section of the defensive wall to blood-covered fragments. Huge clouds of dust billowed. The ground shook. The explosions rumbled like distant thunder. Sick joy bubbled through Khârn’s veins at the prospect of imminent violence.

This was what he lived for, these moments of action where he could once again prove his superiority to all other warriors in the service of his exalted lord. In all his ten thousand year existence, Khârn had found no joy to touch the joy of battle, no lust greater than his lust for blood. Here on the field of mortal combat, he was more than in his element, he was at the site of his heart’s desire. It was the thing that had caused him to betray his oath of allegiance to the Emperor of Mankind, his genetic destiny as a Space Marine and even his old comrades in the World Eaters Legion. He had never regretted those decisions even for an instant. The bliss of battle was reward enough to stay any doubts.

He jumped the ditch before the parapet, ignoring the poisoned spikes which lined the pit bottom and promised an ecstatic death to any that fell upon them. He scrambled up the loose scree of the rock face and vaulted over the low wall, planting his boot firmly into the face of a defender as he did so. The man screamed and fell back, trying to stem the flow of blood from his broken nose. Khârn swung Gorechild and ended his whining forever.

‘Death is upon you!’ Khârn roared as he dived into a mass of depraved cultists. Gorechild lashed out. Its teeth bit into hardened ceramite, spraying sparks in all directions. The blow passed through the target’s armour, opening its victim from stomach to sternum. The wretch fell back, clutching at his ropy entrails. Khârn despatched him with a backhand swipe and fell upon his fellows, slaying right and left, killing with every blow.

Frantically the cultists' leader bellowed orders, but it was too late. Khârn was among them, and no man had ever been able to boast of facing Khârn in close combat and living.

The numbers 2243, then 2244, blinked before his eyes. The ancient gothic lettering of the digital death-counter, superimposed on Khârn's field of vision, incremented quickly. Khârn was proud of this archaic device, presented by Warmaster Horus himself in ancient times. Its like could not be made in this degenerate age. Khârn grinned proudly as his tally of offerings for this campaign continued to rise. He still had a long way to go to match his personal best but that was not going to stop him trying.

Men screamed and howled as they died. Khârn roared with pleasure, killing everything within his reach, revelling in the crunch of bone and the spray of blood. The rest of the Khornate force took advantage of the destruction the Betrayer had caused. They swarmed over the walls in a howling mass and dismembered the Slaanesh worshippers. Already demoralised by the death of their leader, not even these fanatical worshippers of the Lord of Pleasure could stand their ground. Their morale broken, they panicked and fled.

Such pathetic oafs were barely worth the killing, Khârn decided, lashing out reflexively and killing those Slaanesh worshippers who passed too to close him as they fled. 2246, 2247, 2248 went the death counter. It was time to get on with his mission. It was time to find the thing he had come here to destroy – the ancient daemonic artefact known as the Heart of Desire.

'Attack!' Khârn bellowed and charged through the gaping mouth of the leering stone head that was the entrance to the main temple building.

Inside it was quiet, as if the roar of battle could not penetrate the walls. The air stank of strange perfumes. The walls had a porous, fleshy look. The pink-tinged light was odd; it shimmered all around, coming from no discernible source. Khârn switched to the auto-sensor systems within his helm, just in case there was some trickery here.

Leather-clad priestesses, their faces domino-masked, emerged from padded doorways. They lashed at Khârn with whips that sent surges of pain and pleasure through his body. Another man, one less hardened than Khârn, might have been overwhelmed by the sensation but Khârn had spent millennia in the service of his god, and what passed through him now was but a pale shadow compared to the battle lust that mastered him. He chopped through the snake-like flesh of the living lash. Poison blood spurted forth. The woman screamed as if he had cut her. Looking closer he saw that she and the whip were one. A leering daemonic head tipped the weapon's handle and had buried its fangs into her wrist. Khârn's interest was sated. He killed the priestess with one back-handed swipe of Gorechild.

A strange, strangled cry of rage and hate warned him of a new threat. He

turned and saw that one of the other Berzerkers, less spiritually pure than himself, had been overcome by the whip's evil. The man had torn off his helmet and his face was distorted by a sick and dreamy smile that had no place on the features of one chosen by Khorne. Like a sleepwalker he advanced on Khârn and lashed out with his chainsword. Khârn laughed as he parried the blow and killed the man with his return stroke.

A quick glance told him that all the priestesses were dead and that most of his followers had slain their drugged brethren. Good, thought Khârn, but part of him was disappointed. He had hoped that more of his fellows would be overcome by treachery. It was good to measure himself against true warriors, not these decadent worshippers of an effete god. Gorechild howled with frustrated bloodlust, writhing in his hand as if it would turn on him if he did not feed it more blood and sinew soon. Khârn knew how the axe felt. He turned, gestured for his companions to follow him and raced off down the corridor.

'Follow me,' he shouted. 'To the slaughter!'

Passing through a huge arch, the former Space Marines entered the inner sanctum of the temple and Khârn knew that they had found what they had come for. Light poured in through the stained glass ceiling. As he watched, Khârn realised that the light was not coming through the glass, but from the glass itself. The illustrations glowed with an eerie internal light and they moved. A riotous assembly of men and women, mutants and daemons enacted every foul deed that the depraved followers of a debauched god could imagine. And, Khârn noted, they could imagine quite a lot.

Khârn raised his pistol and opened fire, but the glass merely absorbed the weapon's energy. Something like a faint moan of pleasure filled the chamber and mocking laughter drew Khârn's attention to the throne which dominated the far end of the huge chamber. It was carved from a single gem that pulsed and changed colour, going from amber to lavender to pink to lime and then back through a flickering, random assortment of iridescent colours that made no sense and hurt the eye. Khârn knew without having to be told that this throne was the Heart of Desire. Senses honed by thousands of years of exposure to the stuff of Chaos told him that the thing fairly radiated power. Inside was the trapped essence of a daemon prince, held forever at the whim of Slaanesh as punishment for some ancient treachery. The man sitting so regally on the throne was merely a puppet and barely worth Khârn's notice, save as something to be squashed like a bug.

The man looked down on Khârn as if he had the temerity to feel the same way about Khorne's most devoted follower. His left hand stroked the hair of the leashed and naked woman who crouched like a pet at his feet. His right hand held an obscenely shaped runesword, which glowed with a blasphemous light.

Khârn strode forward to confront his new foe. The clatter of ceramite-encased feet on marble told him that his fellow berzerkers followed. In a matter of a hundred strides, Khârn found himself at the foot of the dais, and some odd, mystical force compelled him to stop and stare.

Khârn did not doubt that he was face-to-face with the cult leader. The man had the foul, debauched look of an ancient and immortal devotee of Slaanesh. His face was pale and gaunt; make-up concealed the dark shadows under his eyes. An obscene helmet covered the top of his head. As he stood, his pink and lime cloak billowed out behind him. Tight bands of studded leather armour girdled his naked chest, revealing lurid and disturbing tattoos.

'Welcome to the Heart of Desire,' the Slaanesh worshipper said in a soft, insinuating voice which somehow carried clearly across the chamber and compelled immediate, respectful attention. Khârn was instantly on his guard, sensing the magic within that voice, the persuasive power which could twist mortals to its owner's will. He struggled to keep the fury that burned eternally in his breast from subsiding under the influence of those slyly enthralling tones. 'What do you wish?'

'Your death!' the Betrayer roared, yet he felt his bloodlust being subdued by that oddly comforting voice.

The cult leader sighed. 'You worshippers of Khorne are so drearily predictable. Always the same tedious, unimaginative retort. I suppose it comes from following that mono-maniacal deity of yours. Still, you are hardly to be blamed for your god's dullness, I suppose.'

'When Khorne has devoured your soul, you will pay for such blasphemy!' Khârn shouted. His followers shouted their approval but with less enthusiasm than Khârn would have expected. For some reason, the man on the throne did not appear to be worried by the presence of so many armed men in his sanctum.

'Somehow I doubt it, old chap. You see, my soul has long been pledged to thrice-blessed Slaanesh, so unless Khorne wants to stick his talon down Slaanesh's throat or some other orifice, he'll have a hard time getting at it.'

'Enough of this prattle!' Khârn roared. 'Death is upon you!'

'Oh! Be sensible,' the cultist said, raising his hand. Khârn felt a tide of pleasure flow over him, like that he had felt from the whip earlier but a thousand times stronger. All around him he heard his men moan and gasp.

'Think! You can spend an eternity of pleasure being caressed by the power of Lord Slaanesh, while your soul slowly rots and sinks into his comforting embrace. Anything you want, anything you have ever desired, can be yours. All you have to do is swear allegiance to Slaanesh. Believe me, it's no trouble.'

As the cult leader spoke, images flickered through Khârn's mind. He saw visions of his youth and all the joys he had known, before the rebellion of

Horus and the Battle for Terra. Somehow it all looked so clear and fresh and appealing, and it almost brought moisture to his tear ducts. He saw endless banquets of food and wine. For a moment, his palate was stimulated by all manner of strange and wonderful tastes, and his brain tingled with a myriad pleasures and stimulations. Visions of diaphanously clad maidens danced before his eyes, beckoning enticingly.

For a moment, despite of himself, Khârn felt an almost unthinkable temptation to betray his ancient oath to the Blood God. This was powerful sorcery indeed! He shook his head and bit his lip until the blood flowed. 'No true warrior of Khorne would fall for this pitiful trick!' he bellowed.

'All hail Slaanesh!' one of his followers cried.

'Praise to the great Lord of Pleasure!' shouted another.

'Let us grovel and adore him,' a third said, as the whole force cast themselves down onto their knees.

Khârn turned to look at his men, disbelief and outrage filling his mind. It seemed that they did not possess his iron-willed belief in Khorne's power, that they were prepared to betray him for a few tawdry promises of pleasure. In every face, in every posture, he saw slack-jawed worship of the posturing peacock on the throne. He knew that there was only one thing to be done under the circumstances.

The Slaanesh leader obviously felt the same. 'Kill him!' he cried. 'Offer up his soul to Slaanesh and unspeakable ecstasy shall be your reward!'

The first of Khârn's comrades raised his bolt pistol and squeezed the trigger. Khârn threw himself to one side and the shell whipped past his head. The Betrayer rewarded the traitor with a taste of Gorechild. The chain-axe screeched as it bit through armour in a mighty sweep that clove him clean in two. The warrior gave a muted whine as his Slaanesh-corrupted soul went straight to the warp.

Suddenly the rest of the berzerkers were upon him. Khârn found himself fighting for his immortal life. These were no mere Slaanesh cultists. Newly tainted though they might be, they had once been worthy followers of Khorne, fierce, deadly and full of bloodlust. Mighty maces bludgeoned Khârn. Huge chainswords threatened to tear his rune-encrusted armour. Bolter shells tore chunks from his chest-plate. Khârn fought on, undismayed, filled with the joy of battle, taking fierce pleasure every time Gorechild took another life. At last, these were worthy foes! The body count swiftly ticked on to 2460 and continued to rise.

Instinctively Khârn side-stepped a blow that tore off one of the metal skulls which dangled from his belt. The Betrayer swore he would replace it with the attacker's own skull. His return stroke made good his vow. He whirled Gorechild in a great figure-of-eight and cleared a space all around him, sending two more traitors to make their excuses to the Blood God. Insane

bloodlust surged through him, overcoming even the soporific influence of the Heart of Desire and for a moment Khârn fought with his full unfettered power. He became transformed into an unstoppable engine of destruction and nothing could stand against him.

Khârn's heart pounded. The blood sang through his veins and the desire to kill made him howl uncontrollably. Bones crunched beneath his axe. His pistol blew away the life of its targets. He stamped on the heads of the fallen, crushing them to jelly. Khârn ignored pain, ignored any idea of self-preservation, and fought for the pure love of fighting. He killed and he killed.

All too soon it was over, and Khârn stood alone in a circle of corpses. His breathing rasped from his chest. Blood seeped through a dozen small punctures in his armour. He felt like a rib might have been broken by that last blow of the mace but he was triumphant. His counter read 2485. He sensed the presence of one more victim and turned to confront the figure on the dais.

The cultists' leader stood looking down at him with a faint expression of mingled disbelief and distaste on his face. The naked girl had fled. The throne pulsed enticingly.

'It's true what they say,' the man said with a delicious sigh. 'If you want anything done properly, you have to do it yourself.'

The insinuating voice drove Khârn's fury from him, and left him feeling tired and spent. The cultist strode down from the dais. Khârn felt almost too weary to parry his blow. He knew he must throw off this enchantment quickly. The runesword bit into his armour and a wave of mingled pain and pleasure passed through Khârn like poison. Summoning his last reserves of rage, he threw himself into the attack. He would show this effete fop who was the true warrior here.

Khârn hacked. Gorechild bit into the tattoos of the man's wrist. Gobbets of flesh and droplets of blood whirled away from the axe's teeth. The rank smell of hot bone filled the air as the hand separated from the arm – and began to crawl away with a life of its own. Khârn stamped on it and a rictus of pain appeared on its owner's face, as if the hand was still attached.

Khârn swung. The cultist's head separated from its shoulders. The body swung its blade, a puppet still controlled by the strings of its master's will. It bit into Khârn and the wave of sensation almost drove him to his knees.

'Nice trick!' roared Khârn, feeling the hand squirm beneath his boot. 'But I've seen it before.'

He brought his chain-axe down on the head and cleaved it in two. The body fell to the ground, a puppet with its strings cut. 2486, Khârn thought with some satisfaction.

The Betrayer advanced upon the throne. It pulsed enticingly before him. Within its multiple facets he thought he saw the face of a beautiful woman,

the most beautiful he had ever seen – and the most evil. Her hair was long and golden, and her eyes were blue. Her lips were full and red, and the small, white fangs that protruded from her mouth in no way marred her perfection. She looked at Khârn beseechingly, and he knew at once he was face to face with the Daemon trapped within the Heart of Desire.

Welcome, Khârn, a seductive voice said within his head. *I knew you would triumph. I knew you would be the conqueror. I knew you would be my new master.*

The voice was thrilling. By comparison, the cult leader's voice had been but a pale echo. But the voice was also deceptive. Proud as he was, mighty as he knew himself to be, Khârn knew that no man could truly be the master of a daemon, not even a fallen Space Marine like himself. He knew that his soul was once more in peril, that he should do something. But yet again he found himself enthralled by the persuasiveness of a Slaanesh worshipper's voice.

Be seated! Become the new ruler of this world, then go forth and blast those meddlesome interlopers from the face of your planet.

Khârn fought to hold himself steady while the throne pulsed hypnotically before him, and the smell of heavy musk filled his nostrils. He knew that once he sat he would be trapped, just as the daemon was trapped. He would become a slave to the thing imprisoned within the throne. His will would be drained and he would become a decadent and effete shadow of the Khârn he had once been. Yet his limbs began to move almost of their own accord, his feet slowly but surely carrying him towards the throne.

Once more, visions of an eternity of corrupt pleasure danced in Khârn's mind. Once more he saw himself indulging in every excess. The daemon promised him every ecstasy imaginable and it was well within its power to grant such pleasures. He knew it would be a simple thing for him to triumph on its behalf. All he had to do was step outside and announce that he had destroyed the Heart of Desire. He was Khârn. He would be believed, and after that it would be a simple matter to lure the Khorne worshippers to ecstatic servitude or joyful destruction.

And would they not deserve it? Already he was known as the Betrayer, when all he had done was be more loyal to his god than the spineless weaklings he had slaughtered. And with that the daemon's voice fell silent and the visions stopped, as if the thing in the throne realised its mistake, but too late.

For Khârn was loyal to Khorne and there was only room for that one thing within his savage heart. He had betrayed and killed his comrades in the World Eaters because they had not remained true to Khorne's ideals and would have fled from the field of battle without either conquering or being destroyed.

The reminder gave him the strength. He turned and looked back at the room. The reek of blood and dismembered bodies filled his nostrils like

perfume. He remembered the joy of the combat. The thrill of overcoming his former comrades. He looked out on a room filled with corpses and a floor carpeted with blood. He was the only living thing here and he had made it so. He realised that, compared to this pleasure, this sense of conquest and victory, what the daemon offered was only a pale shadow.

Khârn turned and brought Gorechild smashing down upon the foul throne. His axe howled thirstily as it drank deep of the ancient and corrupt soul imprisoned within. Once more he felt the thrill of victory, and knew no regrets for rejecting the daemon's offer.

2487. Life just doesn't get any better than this, Khârn thought.

SACRIFICE

Ben Counter

The warp tore at him.

The unearthly cold shot right through him.

He could see for a billion kilometres in every direction, through the angry ghosts of dead stars and the glowing cauls of nebulae, dark for aeons. Alaric fought it, tore his eyes away from the infinities unravelling around him. The psychic wards built into his armour were white hot against his skin, tattooing him with burns in the shape of their sacred spirals.

Alaric's lungs tried to draw breath, but there was no air there. He tried to move, but space and movement had no meaning here. And beyond his senses, far in the black heart of the universe, he could sense vast and god-like intelligences watching him as he flitted through their domain.

Man, he managed to think, was not meant to be teleported.

The air boomed out as Alaric emerged in real space again, several hundred kilometres from the teleporter array on the *Obsidian Sky* where he had started the journey. Even a Space Marine, even a Grey Knight, was not immune to the disorientation of being hurled through the warp to another part of space, and for a second his senses fought to make definition of reality around him.

The squad had been teleported onto the grand cruiser *Merciless*. The familiar architectures of an Imperial warship were everywhere, from the aquilae worked into the vault where the pillars met overhead to the prayer-algorithms stamped into the ironwork of the floor by Mechanicus shipwrights.

The air was a strange mix peculiar to spaceships. Oil and sweat, incense from the constant tech-rituals, propellant from the ship's guns. It was mixed with the tongue-furring ozone of the squad's sudden arrival.

Alaric took a couple of breaths, forcing out the supercooled air in his lungs.

‘Brothers!’ he gasped. ‘Speak unto me.’

‘I live, brother,’ came Dvorn’s reply from where he lay, a few metres away, ice flaking from his armour.

‘I too,’ said Haulvarn. Alaric’s second in the squad leaned against a wall of the corridor. His journey had been one of intense heat instead of cold and his armour hissed and spat where it met the wall.

Brother Visical coughed violently and forced himself to his feet. In reply to Alaric, he could only meet the Justicar’s eyes. Visical was inexperienced for a Grey Knight, and he had never been teleported before. It was rare enough even for a veteran like Alaric. The technology that made it possible could not be replicated, and was restricted to a handful of the oldest Imperial warships.

The whole squad had made it onto the *Merciless*. That was something to give thanks for in itself. Teleportation was not an exact science, for even the oldest machines could simply fling the occasional man into the warp to be lost forever. He could be turned inside out, merged with a wall upon re-entry or fused with one of his fellow travellers. Luckily this had not happened to any of Alaric’s squad. Fate had smiled on them so far.

‘We’re in the lower engineering decks,’ said Haulvarn, checking the data-slate built into the armour of his forearm.

‘Damnation,’ spat Dvorn. ‘We’re off course.’

‘I...’ spluttered Visical, still suffering from disorientation. ‘I am the hammer... I am the point of His spear...’

Alaric hauled Visical to his feet. ‘Our first priority is to find Hyrk,’ said Alaric. ‘If we can find a cogitator or take a prisoner, we can locate him.’

As if in reply, a monstrous howl echoed from further down the corridor. This part of the ship was ill-maintained and the patchy light did not reach that far down. The sound was composed of a hundred voices, all twisted beyond any human range.

‘First priority is survival,’ said Dvorn.

‘Where is your faith, brother?’ said Haulvarn with a reproachful smile. ‘Faith is the shield that never falters! Bear it up, brothers! Bear it up!’

Dvorn hefted his Nemesis hammer in both hands. ‘Keep the shield,’ he said. ‘I’ll stick to this.’

Alaric kicked open one of the doors leading off from the corridor. He glimpsed dusty, endless darkness beyond, an abandoned crew deck or cargo bay. He took shelter in the doorway as the howling grew closer, accompanied by the clatter of metal-shod feet on the floor. Sounds came from the other direction, too, this time the rhythmic hammering of guns or clubs on the walls.

‘Hyrk has wasted little time,’ said Alaric. ‘Barely a month ago, he took this ship. Already it is crewed by the less-than-human.’

‘Not for long,’ said Dvorn. He looked down at Visical, who was crouching

in another doorway, incinerator held ready to spray fire into the darkness. ‘You were saying?’

‘I am the hammer!’ said Visical, voice returned and competing with the growing din. ‘I am the shield! I am the mail about His fist! I am the point of His spear!’

‘I see them!’ yelled Haulvarn.

Alaric saw them, too. They had once been the crew of the *Merciless*, servants of the Emperor aboard a loyal warship. Now nothing remained of their humanity. The first glimpse Alaric had was of asymmetrical bodies, limbs moving in impossible configurations, stretched and torn naval uniforms wrapped around random tangles of bone and sinew.

He saw the stitches and the sutures. The humans they had once been had been cut up and rearranged. A torso was no more than an anchor for a random splay of limbs. Three heads were mounted on one set of shoulders, the jaws replaced with shoulder blades and ribs to form sets of bony mandibles. A nest of razor-sharp bone scrabbled along the ceiling on dozens of hands.

‘This side, too!’ shouted Dvorn, who was facing the other way down the corridor.

‘Greet them well!’ ordered Alaric.

The Grey Knights opened fire. The air was shredded by the reports of the storm bolters mounted onto the backs of their wrists. A wave of heat from Visical’s incinerator blistered the rust off the walls. Alaric’s arm jarred with that familiar recoil, his shoulder hammered back into its socket.

The mutant crewmen came apart in the first volleys. The corridor was awash with blood and torn limbs. Carried forwards on the bodies, as if riding a living tide, came a thing like a serpent of sundered flesh. Torsos were stacked on top of one another, sewn crudely together at shoulder and abdomen. Its head was composed of severed hands, fastened together with wire and metal sutures into the approximation of a massive bestial skull. Its teeth were sharpened ribs and its eyes were beating hearts. The monstrous face split open in a serpentine grin.

It moved faster than even Alaric could react. Suddenly it was over him, mouth yawning wide, revealing thousands of teeth implanted in its fleshy gullet to crush and grind.

Alaric powered to his feet, slamming a shoulder up into the underside of the thing’s jaw. He rammed his fist up into the meat of its neck and trusted that his storm bolter was aiming at some vital place, some brain or heart the thing could not live without.

Words of prayer flashed through his mind.

Alaric fired.

The light was worse than the dark.

He was bathed in it. He felt it illuminating not just his body, but his mind. All his sins, his very fears in that moment, were laid open to be read like the illuminations of a prayer book.

Up above him was the dome of the cathedral. Thousands of censers hung from it, smouldering in their clouds of pungent smoke. The dome was painted with a hundred methods of torture, each one inflicted on a famous sinner from the Imperial creed. A body, broken on a wheel, had its wounds picked out in clusters of rubies. The victim of an impaling, as he slid slowly down a spear through his stomach, wept tears of gold leaf.

The light came not from the dome, but from below. Faith was like fire – it could warm and comfort, and it could destroy, Fire, therefore, filled the cathedral floor. Hundreds of burners emitted a constant flame, so the cathedral seemed to contain an ocean of flame. The brazen walkways over the fire, where the clergy alone were permitted to tread, were so hot they glowed red and the clergy went about armoured in shielded and cooled vestments.

The man who knelt at the altar was not one of the clergy. He was not shielded, and he could barely draw breath in the scalding heat. His wrists were burned where his manacles had conducted the heat. He knelt on a prayer cushion, but even so his shins and knees were red raw. He wore only a tabard of cloth-of-gold, and his head had been shaven with much ceremony that very morning.

A silver bowl on the metal floor in front of him was there, he knew, to catch his blood.

One of the cathedral's many clergy walked up to where the man knelt. His Ecclesiarchy robes almost completely concealed him, forming a shell of ermine and silk that revealed only the clergyman's eyes. His robes opened and an arm reached out. The hand, gloved in crimson satin, held a single bullet.

The bullet was dropped into the silver bowl. The kneeling man winced at the sound.

Other clergy were watching, assembled on the metal walkways, lit from beneath by the lake of fire. The reds, purples and whites of their robes flickered with the flames. Only their eyes were visible.

One of them, in the purple and silver of a cardinal, raised his hand.

'Begin,' he said, and his words were amplified through the sweltering dome of the cathedral.

The priest in front of the sacrificial altar drew a knife from beneath his robes. It had a blade of gold, inscribed with High Gothic prayers. The prisoner – the sacrifice – flinched as the tip of the knife touched the back of his neck.

The city outside was dark and cold. It was a city of secrets and dismal hope. It was a place where for a normal man – the kind of man the sacrifice had once been – to get by, rules had to be broken. In every side street and

basement, there was someone who would break those rules. Fake identity papers, illicit deals and substances, even murder for the right price. Some of those criminals would open up a slit in a customer's abdomen and implant an internal pouch where a small item could be concealed so well that even if the carrier was stripped to the waist and forced to kneel at a sacrificial altar, it would remain hidden.

The sacrifice had also paid what little he had to have one of his fingernails replaced with a miniature blade. As the priest in front of him raised the knife into the air and looked up towards the dome, the sacrifice used this tiny blade to open up the old scar in the side of his abdomen. Pinpricks of pain flared where the nerve endings had not been properly killed in that dingy basement surgery. The sacrifice's stomach lurched as his finger slipped inside the wound and along the slippery sides of the implanted pouch.

His fingers closed on the grip of the gun.

'By this blood,' intoned the priest, 'shed by this blade, shall the weapon be consecrated! Oh Emperor on high, oh Lord of Mankind, oh Father of our futures, look upon this offering!'

The sacrifice jumped to his feet, the metal scorching his soles. With his free hand he grabbed the priest's wrist and wrenched it behind his back, spinning the man around. With the other, he put the muzzle of the miniature pistol to the back of the priest's head.

A ripple of alarm ran around the cathedral. Clergy looked from the altar to one another, as if one of them would explain that this was just another variation on the ritual they had all seen hundreds of times before.

'I am walking out of here!' shouted the sacrifice. 'Do you understand? When I am free and deep in the city, I will let him go. If you try to stop me, or follow me, I will kill him. His life is worth a lot more than one sacred bullet. Don't make me a murderer.'

The assembled clergy took a collective step backwards. Only the cardinal did not move.

Even with his face hidden, the presence and authority that had made him a cardinal filled the cathedral. Vox-casters concealed in the dome sent his voice booming over the sound of the flames.

'Do not presume to know,' said the cardinal, 'what a life is worth to me. Not when I serve an Imperium where a billion brave men die every day. Not when the Emperor alone can number those who have died in His name. Do not presume to know. Be grateful, merely, that we have given you the chance to serve Him in death.'

The sacrifice forced the priest forwards a few steps, the pistol pressed against the layers of silk between it and the priest's skull. The sacrifice held the priest in front of him as if shielding himself from something the cardinal might do. 'No one needs to know you let me go,' he said. 'The priests will do

whatever you say. They will hold their tongues. And I will simply disappear. No one will ever know.'

'The Emperor watches,' replied the cardinal. 'The Emperor knows.'

'Then cut a hundred men's throats on this altar to keep him happy!' retorted the sacrifice. 'A hundred killers. There are plenty of them out there. A hundred sinners. But not me. I am a good man. I do not deserve to die here!'

The cardinal held out his hands as if he was on the pulpit, encompassing a great congregation. 'That is why it has to be you,' he said. 'What worth is the blood of a sinner?'

'Then find someone else,' said the sacrifice, walking his prisoner forwards a few more paces. The main doors were beyond the cardinal, a set of massive bronze reliefs depicting the Emperor enthroned.

'Brother,' said the cardinal, his voice still calm. 'A thousand times this world blesses a bullet with the blood of a good man. A thousand other worlds pay the same tithe to our brethren in the Inquisition. Do you think you are the first sacrifice to try to escape us? The first to smuggle a weapon through the ritual cleansings? Remember your place. You are but one man. There is nothing you can do which another has not tried and failed before. You will not leave this place. You will kneel and die, and your blood will consecrate our offering.'

'This man will die,' hissed the sacrifice, 'or I will be free.'

The cardinal drew something from inside his robes. It was a simple silver chain, with a single red gemstone in its setting. It had none of the ostentatiousness of the cardinal's own diamonds and emeralds which encrusted the heavy golden chain around his neck. It looked out of place dangling from his silk-gloved fingers.

The sacrifice froze. Recognition flooded his face as his eyes focussed on the necklace in the cardinal's hand.

'Talaya,' he said.

'If you do not kneel and bare your throat to the Emperor's blade,' said the cardinal, 'then she will take your place. She is a good person, is she not?'

The sacrifice stepped back from his prisoner. He did not look away from the necklace as the backs of his legs touched the scalding metal of the altar.

He threw the gun off the walkway, into the flames.

He knelt down, and bowed his head over the silver bowl with its bullet.

'Continue,' said the cardinal.

The sacrifice did not have time to cry out in pain. The sacrificial knife severed his spinal cord with a practised thrust, and opened up the veins and arteries of his throat. He just had time to see the bullet immersed in his dark red blood before the darkness fell.

The consecrated bullet ripped up into the serpent's skull and detonated,

blowing clots of a dozen brains across the ceiling.

The weight of the mutant thing fell onto Alaric's shoulders. He shrugged it off, glancing behind him to the rest of the squad. Dvorn was breaking the neck of a thing with too many limbs and Haulvarn was shredding the last of the crewmen seething down the corridor with bolter fire. Fire licked along the walls and ceiling beyond, clinging to the charred remnants of the mutants Visical had burned.

'Keep moving!' yelled Alaric. 'They know we are here!'

Alaric ran down the corridor, his armoured feet skidding on the spilt blood and crunching through corpses. Up ahead were what had once been the crew decks. Upwards of thirty thousand men had lived on the *Merciless*, their lives pledged to crewing and defending the grand cruiser. Between the mutiny and disappearance of the ship and the confirmation that Bulgor Hyrk was on board, only a few weeks had passed. That was more than enough time for Hyrk to turn every single crewman on board into something else.

Some of those transformations had taken place in the crew quarters. The walls and ceiling were blistered up into cysts of translucent veiny metal, through which could be seen the fleshy forms of incubating mutants. The crewmen had been devolved into foetal forms and then reborn as something else.

Every one would be different, obscene in its own way. Hyrk considered himself, among other things, an artist.

'Would that we could burn it all,' said Visical.

'We will,' said Dvorn. 'The fleet will. This place will all burn, once we know Hyrk is dead.'

One of the cysts near Visical split open. The thing that fell out looked like two human torsos fused together at the waist end-to-end, forming something like a serpent with a lumpily deformed head at each end. For limbs it had hands attached to the sides of its length at the wrists, fingers like the legs of a centipede.

Visical immolated the mutant in a blast of flame. It shrivelled up, mewling. 'How can honest human flesh become such a thing?' he said.

'Think not of how far a human is from these abominations,' said Alaric. 'Think how close he is. Even a Grey Knight is not so far removed from Hyrk's creations. The line is thin. Do not forget that, brother.' Alaric checked his storm bolter and reloaded. Each shell was consecrated, blessed by the Ecclesiarchy. Many, many more would be fired before Alaric saw the last of the *Merciless*.

Haulvarn had ripped a panel off the wall and was examining the wiring inside. 'The cogitator data-lines run through here,' he said. He hooked one of the lines into his data-slate. 'There is a lot of power running to the astronav dome. Far beyond normal tolerances. Whatever Hyrk's doing here, it has

something to do with the dome.'

'The dome on the *Merciless* is archeotech,' said Alaric. 'It's older than anything in the fleet. It must be why Hyrk chose this ship.'

'The only thing I care about,' said Dvorn with a snarl, 'is where it is.'

The floor shook, as if the fabric of the *Merciless* was coming apart and sending quakes running through the decks. A sound ran through the ship – a howl – the sound of reality tearing. The air turned greasy and thick, and rivulets of brackish blood ran down the walls of the warped crew quarters.

'Daemons,' spat Alaric.

'Hyrk has torn the veil,' said Haulvarn.

'That is why it had to be us,' said Alaric. 'That is why no one else could kill him.'

The sound of a thousand gibbering voices filtered down from the decks above. Howling and inhuman, they were echoes of the storms that ripped through the warp. Every voice was a fragment of a god's own voice, each of the daemons now pouring into the *Merciless*.

'Upwards,' said Alaric. 'Onwards. Take the fight to them and kill every one that gets in your way! We are the tip of His spear, brothers!'

Dvorn squared up to the door at the far end of the crew quarters, hammer held ready. Though Dvorn was as skilled with the storm bolter as any Grey Knight, it was face-to-face, hammer to daemon hide, that he loved to fight. Dvorn was the strongest Adeptus Astartes Alaric had ever met. He had been born to charge through a bulkhead door and rip through whatever foe waited for him beyond.

Visical and Haulvarn stacked up against the bulkhead wall beside Dvorn.

'Now, brother!' ordered Alaric.

Dvorn kicked the bulkhead door off its hinges. The roar that replied to him was a gale, a storm of foulness that roared through the decks beyond.

Dvorn had opened the door into the wet, beating heart of the ship, a stinking mass of pulpy flesh lit by ruddy bioluminescence. Daemons, their unnatural flesh glowing, flowed along the walls and ceiling in a seething tide welling up from hell itself.

'Come closer, vomit of the warp!' yelled Dvorn. 'Let us embrace, in the fire of the Emperor's wrath!'

Knots of iridescent flesh formed a dozen new limbs and eyes every second. One-eyed, one-horned monstrosities bulged with masses of corrosive decay. Skull-faced cackling creatures with skin the colour of blood. Lithe, leaping things, with an awful seductiveness in their impossible grace.

Alaric planted his feet and braced his halberd, like a spearman ready to receive a cavalryman's charge.

The tide hit, in a storm of flesh and corruption boiling straight up from the warp.

Xanthe knelt, as if in prayer, but she was not praying.

In the pitch-black hangar, she could pretend she was alone. A hundred more souls were locked in there with her, manacled to the floor or the walls, but they were silent. They had been silent for weeks now. At the start of the voyage, when they had been herded from the holding cells into the ship's hangar, they had screamed and sobbed and begged for mercy. They had learned by now that the crew did not listen. The crew, who went about the ship masked and robed, had never once spoken to any of the prisoners, no matter how the prisoners pleaded to know where they were going, or what would happen to them. Even the children had given up asking.

Xanthe knew why they were all there. They were witches. Some of them were wise women or medicine men, healers and sages on primitive worlds who had been rounded up and handed over to the men from the sky in return for guns, or just to make the spacecraft leave. Others were killers and spies for hire whose skills had made them valuable to noble houses and underhive gangs, but had also made them targets for the planetary authorities. Xanthe was one of them, a spy, and though she had scrupulously avoided making any deadly enemies among the cutthroat nobles of her home world, her pains had not helped her when the Arbites with their riot shields and shotguns had purged the hive of its psykers.

Psykers. Witches. Heretics. Just by existing, they were committing the foulest of sins. Where they were going, none of them knew, except that punishment would be waiting for them when they got there.

Xanthe let her mind sink down deeper. Her senses rippled out from her. She could perceive the bright minds of the other psykers in the hold. Some of them winked feebly, for they were the most dangerous ones who had been sedated for the whole trip. Others were still twinkling with hope. Most were dull with the acceptance of fate.

She could taste the wards built into the ship, too. They were complex geometric designs, pentagrams and interlocking spirals etched with psychoactive compounds and inked with sacred blood. They covered every surface of the hold, forming a shield blocking all psychic power. Xanthe's own powers, far greater than the ship's crew suspected, were barely a glimmer in the back of her mind.

On one wall was a rivulet of water, trickling down the wall. Xanthe had noticed it four months before, when the prisoners had first been shackled. Some imperfection in the wall was allowing condensation from the breathing of the prisoners to collect and pool, and then run down the wall. Over the months it had eroded the metal in a tiny channel of rust, to the naked eye little more than a reddish stain. Xanthe had not seen it – not with her normal senses – for many weeks, since the last time there had been light in the hangar.

The sacred oils, with which the wards had been inked, were washed away.

The pattern was broken. The single rivulet had erased a channel far too small for all but the most powerful minds to exploit.

Xanthe's mind was very powerful indeed.

Xanthe let her mind slither out of her body. It was an insane risk, and in any other situation she would never have dared do it. If she was trapped outside her body she would die, with her spirit withering away and her body shutting down. If the wards were strengthened during her time outside her body, she would be cut off from her body entirely and would be at the mercy of the predators that lurked at the edges of reality waiting for unharnessed minds.

But these circumstances were different. It was worth the risk.

Xanthe's mind slipped out of her and through the tiny gap in the wards. The patterns scraped at her, lines of psychic pain across her soul. The fire passed and she was through.

The Black Ship stretched out around her. Impenetrable barriers were everywhere and Xanthe realised that there were many hangars, each presumably full of psykers. Thousands of them, perhaps, all alone and afraid.

The corridors and decks were tinged with suffering and arrogance. The crew were blank spots, their minds shielded from psychic interference so thoroughly that they were black holes in Xanthe's perceptions.

The Black Ship was far larger than Xanthe had expected. It stretched off into the distance in both directions, as big as a city. Xanthe stumbled blindly through the structure, slipping through walls and between decks, trying to keep moving while steering clear of the banks of wards blocking her path.

Cells stretched off in a long row. The minds inside them were broken and smouldering, little more than embers. The cells were drenched in pain and Xanthe had the sensation of being bathed in blood, the coppery taste and smell filling her.

Xanthe hurried away from the cells, but a worse sensation greeted her. A circular anatomy theatre, walls hung with diagrams of dissected brains and spinal columns, was layered in such intense pain and hate that Xanthe recoiled from it and flitted away like an insect.

Xanthe knew she was losing her mind. Losing it literally – the connection between her mind and the brain that still controlled it might snap and her mind would be trapped outside her, circling around the Black Ship until some anti-psychic ward snuffed it out. Perhaps there were other ghosts here, other orphaned minds wandering the decks.

She forced herself to concentrate. She would not end that way. In desperation she located one of the black holes, one of the mind-shielded crew, and followed it. Candles were everywhere, miniature wax-caked shrines built into every alcove and iron chandeliers hanging from every ceiling. Relics – painted icons, mouldering bones, scraps of armour, inscribed bullet casings –

lay in glass-fronted cabinets to flood the ship's decks with holiness and keep the taint of the thousands of psykers out of the crew's minds.

They were gathering in a chapel. The holiness of it was tainted with a cynicism and cruelty that clashed with the taste of the altar, which was consecrated to the Emperor as Protector. The blank minds gathered there were kneeling in prayer, with one of them sermonising them atop a pulpit hung with manacles. More candles abounded, many of them cramped in masses of wax and wicks behind stained glass windows. Each crewman held a candle, too, and their shoulders were hunched with the symbolic weight of the light they carried.

Xanthe sent her mind in close to one of the crewmen. She could make out none of his features, for the cowl of his uniform contained an inhibitor unit that kept his thoughts and his face from her. But the echoes of his perception just got through, enough for Xanthe to make out the words he could hear.

The crewman on the pulpit was an officer. Xanthe could make out a medallion around his neck in the shape of the letter 'I'. His uniform of red and black had a collar so high he could not turn his head, and he wore ruby-studded laurels on his brow. His voice was deep and dark, enhanced by an amplifier unit in his throat.

'And so let us pray,' he was saying, 'that our sacred duty might go unimpeded. Though we near our destination, let us not allow our attention to waver. A scant few days remain, and no doubt we give thanks that our proximity to our cargo will soon be over. Yet until the last second, we must remain vigilant! Our duty is greater than any of us. In its fulfilment, our purpose as servants of the Emperor is fulfilled. Be not content, be not lax. Be suspicious of all, at all times!'

The words continued but Xanthe let them go. She could taste the meaning of them, and they went on in the same vein. She slipped away through the chapel, following the concentrations of crewmen up through the bewildering structures of the ship's upper decks. She made out the soaring arches and sweeping stage of an opera house, a cluster of tiny buildings forming a mock village under a ceiling painted to resemble a summer sky – things that had no place on a spaceship. In her bewilderment she almost lost her way but she glimpsed a collection of black voids where more crew were gathered.

Xanthe soared along a corridor lined with statues and portraits, each one of a subject with his face covered. She emerged in a map room where several crew were gathered around an enormous map table. A servitor clung to the ceiling, scribbling annotations on a stellar map with autoquills – Xanthe could taste the tiny flicker of life inside it, for like all servitors it was controlled by a crudely reprogrammed human brain.

In the back of the room was another servitor. A holo-device, it projected a huge image that took up most of the map room, shimmering above the heads

of the blank-minded crew. Xanthe perceived it through the echo of their eyes.

It was a vast furnace, its every dimension picked out in shimmering lines of light. The sight of it filled Xanthe with revulsion, turning the stomach in her body several decks below. The image was so detailed that Xanthe could shrink her perception and enter it, flitting through its vast vaulted rooms and side chapels. She was drawn to it as if by some appalling gravity of fascination. The pediments of Imperial saints and enormous pipe organ chambers enthralled her, and the yawning maw of the furnace entrance reeled her in as if hooks were latched into her soul.

The cavern of the furnace billowed around her, pure darkness harnessed in the holo-unit's bands of light. Above the furnace, suspended over the place where the flames would rage, was a circular platform on which a single suit of armour was mounted on a rack. The armour was beautiful, ornate and massive, too large for a normally-proportioned human. Cables and coils hung everywhere, and servo-skulls hovered ready to manipulate the armour as it was forged.

Xanthe withdrew her mind from the sight. She did not understand why it was at once fascinating and repellent to her. It held meaning, this place, so powerful and concentrated that it affected her even though she did not know anything about it.

The crewmen were talking. Their faces were still cowled by their psychic protection, but their words echoed. Xanthe could not help but listen, even though some cruel precognition told her that she would not like what she heard. Xanthe could not match the voices to the shadowy figures grouped around the map table, but their meaning was clear to her, as if some force wanted her to understand.

'Do they know?'

'Of course they do not.'

'What if they did? It is of no concern anyway. Without them to fuel the forge, the armour's wards will not be imbued with their power. The only concern we have is that the armour is forged and the Grey Knights receive their tithe.'

'The witches are vermin. The galaxy is better off without them.'

'It is a duty we do to mankind. That one Grey Knight fights on is worth a million of these sinners.'

Xanthe felt her stomach turn again, and her heart flutter in her chest. The link between body and mind shuddered and she was flying, hurtling backwards through the decks of the Black Ship towards where her body lay. White pain shrieked through her soul as she was torn back through the tiny gap in the hangar's wards, and she slammed into her body with such force that her first physical sensation was the metal floor cracking into her head as she fell onto her side.

Hands were on her. Gnarled and cracked, the hands of her fellow prisoners.

'Xanthe?' said one. It was the old woman, one of the few prisoners who had been willing to speak with Xanthe, for some of them suspected what she really was. 'Did you do it? Did you venture out of this place?'

'I... I did,' gasped Xanthe. She tasted blood in her mouth.

'Where are we? Where are we going?'

Xanthe opened her eyes. The other prisoners were gathered around, their eyes glinting in the only light – a flame cast from the old woman's palm. It was the only power she could manifest in the psychically dampened hangar. The old woman was powerful, too.

We are going to a furnace, *thought Xanthe.* We are going to be incinerated so that our power will be transferred into a suit of armour, that its wearer might be protected from people like us.

The faces looked at her, waiting for her answer. The children wanted to know even more than the adults.

'They are taking us to camps,' said Xanthe. 'We will be studied by their scientists. It will be a hard life, I think, and we will never go back. But we will live there, at least. We will live.'

'You have seen this?' said the old woman.

'I have,' said Xanthe. 'I saw it all.'

'Then let us place ourselves in the hand of fate,' said the old woman. She bowed her head, and the other prisoners did the same. 'Let us give thanks. Even in this place, the Emperor is with us.'

Xanthe almost choked back her lie and told the truth. But it would do no good.

She stayed silent as the old woman let the flame die out.

The wards built into Alaric's armour flared up, white-hot as they absorbed the force of the sorcery cast at the Grey Knights. Without that armour and its coils of psychically impregnated wards he and his fellow Grey Knights would have been stripped to the bone by the purple flame that washed over them. They would have been shredded by the razor-sharp wind shrieking around the astronav dome of the *Merciless.*

Alaric crouched behind a shard of the dome, fallen from above and speared into the wind-scoured floor. The storm shrieked around him and he fought to keep from being thrown off his feet. The others of his squad were taking cover too, hammering fire up at the daemons that rode the storm overhead and left contrails of spinning knives.

Alaric could not worry about the eel-like daemons flying above him. He had to trust his squad to deal with them. His only concern was Bulgor Hyrk.

Hyrk flew on wings of steel in the centre of the astronav dome, suspended,

unaffected by the storm of power around him. Hyrk had once been a man but now he looked more like a primitive vision of a god, some daemon worshipped by savages on a far-flung world. His six arms were held open in gestures of benediction and prayer. Instead of legs he had long plumes of iridescent feathers, crawling with imp-like familiars that cackled and leered. Hyrk's face was still that of a man, albeit with blank skin where his eyes should be. Those eyes had migrated to his bare chest, from which two large yellow orbs stared unblinking.

Rows of vestigial limbs ran down the sides of his abdomen, carrying scrolls with glowing letters. A crown of horns ringed his head, tipped with gold and inlaid with diamonds. The sacred implements of the rites through which he communed with his gods – chains, brass-plated skulls, sacred daggers, a lash of purple sinew – orbited around him, dripping silvery filaments of power.

'Brother,' said Hyrk, the lipless mouths in his palms speaking in unison with him. 'Grey Knight. Son of the Emperor. Child of the universe. Thank you. Thank you for being my witness. My glory is nothing without the greatest of men to behold it.'

'I spit on your glory!' shouted back Alaric, his own voice almost lost in the screaming wind.

A daemon fell from above, snaking torso torn open by bolter fire. In his peripheral vision Alaric saw Brother Visical dragging another daemon down to the floor and scorching it to corrupted bones with his incinerator.

'You do now,' replied Hyrk, his voice impossibly loud and yet possessing an awful calm and reason, for the mind had long since given up the sanity required to harbour doubt. 'But you will kneel.'

Alaric looked beyond Bulgor Hyrk. The astronav dome had shattered. Shards of its transparent dome littered what remained of the dome's holomap projectors and command pulpit. Normally, the broken dome would expose the place to hard vacuum, for the dome blistered up from the hull of the *Merciless* and looked out on the void. But nothing on the *Merciless* was obeying the rules of normality.

Through the shattered dome was a vortex of power, a vision of madness mixed with the raw stuff of reality. At its heart was a glimpse through the veil to the warp. A man without the mental training of a Grey Knight might have been transfixed by that shard of insanity, condemned to stare at it until his body gave out on him or he was drawn by it through to the warp itself. As Alaric looked on the shard of the warp split and opened; a silvery eye looked down at him.

It was from that vortex that Hyrk drew his power. That power coalesced into sights from Hyrk's depraved life, churning randomly as the vortex echoed the seething pit of Hyrk's mind. A million bodies writhed in joy, smiles on their faces, as they were burned in the golden flame that Hyrk

taught them to summon down upon themselves. The blasphemies in the Library of Absalaam tore themselves free of their pages, flocking like ravens around the figure of Hyrk. A hive city's population wept with such sorrow at the heretic's crimes that their tears rose up in a flood and drowned them.

Alaric tore his eyes away. Hyrk's many arms were making the gestures with which he channelled his own form of witchcraft. Pulses of golden fire, like miniatures comets, rained down. Alaric broke cover and ran forwards, powering through the storm. Hyrk's face broke into a faint smile, as if amused by some trifle, and another gesture hurled a spear of ice into Alaric's chest. The spear splintered against his breastplate, the armour's wards discharging purple spirals of power away from the impact.

Alaric was knocked onto one knee. He forced himself another step forwards, planting the haft of his Nemesis halberd in the dome's floor to give him purchase against the storm.

'I have seen a thousand like you, Hyrk!' shouted Alaric. 'A thousand gods. A thousand vessels of the warp's glory. And I know what you cannot.'

'And what,' said Hyrk, 'is that?'

'You all die,' replied Alaric, forcing himself another step closer.

Hyrk conjured a shield of energy the colour of moonlight, covered in runes of invulnerability taught to him by his patrons in the warp. 'I am immortal,' he said simply.

'Then your masters will have forever to punish you for your failure,' said Alaric.

'You cannot hurt me,' replied Hyrk, one of his hands waving dismissively, as if he was bored of Alaric's presence at his court and was commanding him to leave.

Alaric did not reply to that.

He drew back his arm, the head of the halberd hovering beside his head. Hyrk's eyes glimmered with amusement at the motion, for he knew that even a Nemesis weapon hurled by a Grey Knight could not get through the magics he commanded.

Alaric's gaze went upwards. He focussed on the eye in the heart of the vortex overhead, the eye that stared directly from the warp.

He was strong. He would have to be. It was not an easy shot.

Alaric hurled the Nemesis halberd straight up. The force of his throw kept it flying true even through the storm. It seemed to take an hour for it to spin upwards through the vortex, past the endless atrocities pulled from Hyrk's mind.

Hyrk realised, a split second before it hit, what Alaric was trying to do.

The blade of the halberd speared the eye through the centre of its pupil. The eye recoiled, folds of timespace rippling around it, and a bolt of iridescent blood squirted from the ruined pupil.

The vortex went dark. The power drained away. The daemons and the victims in Hyrk's visions dissolved away to skeletons, then darkness.

The storm died down. Alaric could hear the gunfire from his battle-brothers now, he could stand at full height without being swept aside by the storm. The gods who watched Hyrk and granted him his power were blinded for a moment, and turned away from their champion. Hyrk could not call on them now.

Hyrk was stunned. Alaric was too quick for him. Alaric dived forwards and grabbed a handful of Hyrk's feathered tail. He dragged Hyrk down to the floor, fighting against the psychic force keeping him aloft.

'I can hurt you now,' said Alaric. He wrapped an elbow around Hyrk's jaw and twisted. Bulgor Hyrk's neck snapped in his grasp.

The first time, Thorne was ready.

The room into which they wheeled him was of polished steel, so harshly lit that the reflection of the glowstrips in the mirror-like walls turned it into a cube of light. Thorne was strapped into a wheelchair, for the nerve stimulation had rendered him malcoordinated and unable to walk without fear of falling. His hands shook and he sweated constantly, his body still geared up for the next tide of bafflement and pain.

Instructor Gravenholm sat in the room, a thick file on the table in front of him. He was haloed in the light, as if he was a bureaucrat sorting through sins and virtues in the Emperor's own court. Gravenholm was an old man, too old to live were it not for the juvenat machine sighing on the floor by his feet. Gravenholm was important enough for the Ordo Malleus to keep alive through arcane technology. Once, long ago, he had been a lowly trainee like Thorne. That was one of the thoughts that kept Thorne going.

'Trainee,' said Gravenholm, his words accompanied by the stuttering of the juvenat machine hooked up to his ancient lungs. 'Speak your name.'

'Explicator-Cadet Ascelan Thorne,' replied Thorne, forcing the strength into his voice.

'Good,' said Gravenholm. 'What process have you just undergone?'

Thorne swallowed. 'Direct-pattern nerve stimulation.'

'Why?'

'Part of my training as an interrogator. We must resist interrogation techniques ourselves.'

'I see.' Gravenholm leafed through the file. 'Prior to this process you were given data to memorise. Describe to me the content of that data.'

'No.'

Gravenholm looked Thorne in the eye. 'Tell me, Cadet Thorne.'

'I will not do so.'

'I see. That will be all.'

The orderlies returned to the room to wheel Thorne away. ‘Did I pass, sir?’ he said. The words came unbidden, blurted out. In reply Gravenholm merely gave him a last look, before turning a page in the file and starting to make notes with a quill.

The second time, Thorne was not ready.

He knew there had been nerve stimulation again. But there had been more, too. He had watched pict-grabs of destruction and death, cities burning, murders and mutilations spliced with images taken of himself doing things he couldn’t remember. In a dark room, men had screamed at him to confess his treachery with witches and aliens. He had woken up on an examining table with doctors describing the mutations they said he possessed. He did not know where the nerve stimulation ended and his own thoughts began.

He had seen Gravenholm many times. Perhaps it had been one of the pict-grabs, perhaps a nightmare. Perhaps he had actually been there. But now he was in the cube of light again, this time lying on a medical gurney with intravenous lines in the backs of his hands.

‘What is your name?’ asked Gravenholm.

Thorne coughed, and arched his back in pain. The nerve stimulation had been applied this time along his spine, and the points of pain remained where the probes had punctured between his vertebrae. ‘Thorne,’ he said. ‘Thorne. Explicator-cadet.’

‘I see. What processes have you undergone?’

‘I don’t... I’m not sure.’

Gravenholm made a few notes. He had not changed since the first bout of resistance training. The juvenat machine still did his breathing for him and his bald, lined face still tilted oddly so he could look over his spectacles at Thorne.

‘You were given data to remember. Tell it to me.’

‘No.’

Gravenholm made another note. ‘If you do not, further processes will be performed on you. They will include further nerve stimulation.’

‘No. I won’t tell you.’

‘I see.’

Thorne smiled. It was the first time he had done so in a long time. ‘I did well, right?’ he said. ‘I didn’t break. Have I done it? Will you make me an interrogator?’

Gravenholm didn’t bother to look up this time. He waved a hand, and the orderlies took Thorne away again.

The third time, Thorne barely recognised the room at all. The cube of light had been there before, but he did not know if it was in his mind or whether he

had really been there. The inside of his mind was full of half-truths and random fragments. Faces loomed at him, and gloved hands holding medical implements. He saw hideous creatures, many-eyed beasts squatting in pits of rotting bodies and swarms of tiny things devouring his arms and body. He saw his hands become charred skeletal limbs and his face bloated and decaying in a mirror.

Maybe there had been nerve stimulation. Maybe not. Maybe a key word brought back the pain without any need for attaching the probes to his spine. It all ran together. There had been no passing of the days – just an infinite ribbon of time, a few loops illuminated in memory, most of it in darkness.

Thorne was again on the gurney. He had been lying on it for some time. His limbs were too weak to support him. Orderlies had to turn him onto his side so Gravenholm could speak to his face.

'What is your name?' said Gravenholm, the juvenat machine sighing in unison.

Thorne took a long time to answer.

'I don't know,' he said. 'Throne alive. Oh... merciful Emperor! I don't know any more...'

Gravenholm smiled, made a final annotation, and closed the file.

'Then you are ready,' he said. 'I have no use for an interrogator with his own personality. With his own name. Only when the vessel is empty can it be refilled with something the Ordo Malleus can use. Your training can begin, explicator-cadet. You shall be an interrogator.'

Alaric watched the interrogator at work through the one-way window that looked onto the explicator suite. Like the rest of the Obsidian Sky it was dressed with stone, more like the inside of a sepulchre than a spacecraft. The interrogator, wearing the plain uniform of an Ordo Malleus functionary, was speaking to Bulgor Hyrk. Hyrk was bracketed to the wall of the explicator suite, with his neck braced so his head did not loll on his useless neck. His spine was severed and his body paralysed, and it had been quick work by the ship's medicae to save the heretic's life when Alaric brought the dying body back to the *Obsidian Sky.*

'Thorne is good,' said Inquisitor Nyxos. The *Obsidian Sky* was Nyxos's ship for the duration of the mission to capture Hyrk. He was an old, bleak-humoured man who seemed ancient enough to have seen everything the life of a daemon hunter could throw at him. He looked frail, but Alaric knew this was an illusion Nyxos cultivated with his bent body and ragged black robes. 'He is already getting answers from Hyrk. Hyrk thinks his gods have abandoned him so he is telling all out of spite more than anything. Much of what he has told us is rather interesting.'

'How so?' said Alaric. He had spent many hours cleaning the filth off his

armour and reconsecrating it, and now it gleamed in the dim light coming through the window.

‘It seems he took over the *Merciless* because he had somewhere to go in a hurry,’ replied Nyxos. ‘Nothing to do with the crew or the Imperial Navy. He just needed a spaceship. Everything he did to the crew was for his own amusement, as far as we can tell.’

‘Where was he going?’

‘To the Eye.’

Alaric shook his head. The Eye of Terror had opened and the forces of Chaos had poured through. Billions of Imperial Guardsmen and whole Chapters of Space Marines were fighting there to stem the tide, which threatened to break through into the Imperial heartlands of the Segmentum Solar. Heretics like Hyrk were flocking there, too, to pledge themselves to the cause of the Chaos lords.

‘Specifically,’ Nyxos was saying, ‘a planet named Sarthis Majoris. A call has gone out to filth like Hyrk and Throne knows how many have answered already. It seems that Hyrk was summoned by a creature there called Duke Venalitor. I have sent to the Eye for confirmation, but either way, I intend to see your squad reinforced and sent to Sarthis Majoris as soon as we have gotten everything we can out of Hyrk.’

‘I see. Could Hyrk be lying?’

‘Perhaps. But as I said, Thorne is really very good.’ Nyxos said this with a telling smile that told Alaric all he needed to know about what would happen to the paralysed Hyrk.

‘Look at this ship,’ said Alaric. ‘At the crew and the resources we have spent. How much did it take to put my squad on the *Merciless*? What sacrifices are made so we can do what we must do?’

‘Indeed, even I cannot count them all,’ said Nyxos. ‘We must take more from our Imperium than any of us can understand. This thought troubles you?’

‘I can allow nothing to trouble me,’ said Alaric. ‘If we turn our thoughts to these things, we lose our focus. Our sense of duty is eroded. If our task is not worth sacrifice, then no task is.’

‘Good.’ Nyxos’s face darkened. ‘But speak not these thoughts too freely, Justicar. To some, they might sound like moral weakness. Like the thoughts of one who harbours doubt. Would that you were an inquisitor, Alaric, that you could speak freely and unveil the inquisitor’s seal to anyone who dared question you! But you are not.’

‘I know,’ said Alaric. ‘But someone must think of them. Otherwise, what are we? It is the Imperium we are supposed to be protecting, and yet it must suffer for our efforts to protect it. How far can we go before all become madness? Someone must watch over what we do.’

‘Leave that to us. And in the meantime, prepare your men. Sarthis Majoris will not be easy, and we are thin on the ground in the Eye. You and your squad will be on your own, whatever you might encounter there.’

‘I shall lead their prayers,’ said Alaric.

For a while after Nyxos left, Alaric watched Thorne work. Even without eyes, the expression on Hyrk’s face was that of a broken man.

It had taken untold sacrifices to break him. But Nyxos was right – that was a dangerous thing to think of. Alaric closed his eyes and meditated, and soon the thoughts were gone.

RED REWARD

Mitchel Scanlon

They had come upon the body by chance. Buried in frozen mud, it had been found by two Guardsmen as they hurried to resurrect the fallen wall of a firing trench in the lull between ork attacks. But for the man whose remains now lay at their feet there would be no such resurrection, only reburial in some less vigorously contested section of the city, with just a battered set of dog-tags to give name to the dead.

‘It’s Rakale, sergeant,’ Trooper Davir had said, standing over the body that was still half-concealed in the mud of the trench floor. ‘Or that’s what his tags say at least. Now his own mother wouldn’t recognise him.’

Even from the lip of the trench wall above them, Chelkar could see what Davir meant. Rakale’s face was only a memory now, his features reduced to a gruesome flattened smear marked with the striated imprint of the thing that had killed him.

‘It could only have been an ork tank,’ ventured the hulking Guardsman to Davir’s side. ‘An ork battle truck. Look, you can see the marks of its tracks on his face. Or what’s left of it. It must have rolled over the trench while Rakale lay underneath. Then the trench wall collapsed and the poor bastard was crushed. He would have seen it coming, too. A bad way to die.’

‘Bad way to die, my arse,’ Davir spat, flat ugly features alive with sudden anger. ‘You know a good way, Bulaven? We’re all poor bastards. And whether we die with throats cut, heads blown off, or crushed like Rakale here is beside the point. It‘s all the same in the end.’

‘Phh. If you feel that way about it, why don’t you end it all now, you stunted idiot?’ Bulaven rumbled back. ‘Put yourself out of all our miseries.’

‘Because, my fat friend, it is a well-known fact that the average ork

couldn’t hit its own arse with both hands and a guided missile. While I – as you so charmingly put it – am a “stunted idiot”, a small target. One who confidently expects to outlive you all, I might add. Especially you, Bulaven. A blind man with a thrown rock and the palsy would be hard-pressed to miss your broad and capacious backside.’

‘Enough,’ Chelkar said, with just enough quiet force to let the squabbling pair know he meant it. ‘I want a four-man detail to move the body and bury it by the old plasteel works. Davir, Bulaven: you have both just volunteered. You may choose the others yourselves. And before I hear anyone complain about how hard the ground is, I want you to remember something: Rakale was one of our own.’

Without another word, two more Guardsmen jumped into the trench to join those already there. Then, with as much reverence as was practicable given the conditions, all four set about the delicate task of extricating Rakale’s remains from the mud. Occasionally a spade-head would strike a particularly hard-packed knot of earth, the impact shivering painfully up the handle to the hands of the digger. Then there might come a muffled curse, but for the most part they worked in silence. Four men, mindful of their duty to a fallen comrade and the code between all the defenders of this battle-scarred city: *We bury our dead.*

But by then Chelkar had already turned away to supervise repairs to another part of the company’s defences. The last attack had been a bad one. Twelve men dead – thirteen counting Rakale. And, with the remorseless logic of this place, Chelkar fully expected the next attack to be harder and more ferocious still. It was the way of things here. In the city of Broucheroc a man could rely on one thing at least: each new day would be worse than the last.

For a moment, casting tired eyes over the wearingly familiar landscape around him, Chelkar found himself distracted. Before him lay no-man’s-land: a great grey expanse of frozen mud and mounds of rubble, punctuated here and there by the fire-blackened silhouettes of dead ork vehicles. Behind him lay Broucheroc itself: an endless, seemingly all but abandoned cityscape of ruined and burned-out buildings. A ghost town, thought Chelkar, and we are its ghosts.

‘Sergeant?’

Turning, Chelkar saw Corporal Grishen hurrying towards him from the comms-dugout, four unfamiliar Guardsmen trailing in his wake like black-coated vultures. He did not need to see the crossed-swords-and-prayer-beads insignia at their collars to know who they were: Kessrian Guard. Or to know their arrival here could only mean trouble.

‘What is it, Grishen?’

Plainly discomfited, as though struggling to find the words, Grishen paused before answering. Behind him, the Kessrians stood in a rigid line with

hellguns held at waist-level, safeties off. Though not normally given to nerves, Chelkar could not help but feel a certain unease to see the muzzles of their guns pointing his way.

'We have received a message from Sector Command, sergeant,' Grishen said, fidgeting as he spoke. 'Well, two messages actually. The first is a communiqué forwarded from General Headquarters, a thought for the day, to improve the morale of the troops. The message reads: "It is better to die for the Emperor than to live for yourself".'

'I am sure the men will find that very comforting, Grishen,' Chelkar said, doing his best to keep any trace of sarcasm from creeping into his voice. 'And the second message?'

'The second message is from Commissar Valk at Sector Command,' Grishen replied, lowering his eyes as though suddenly noticing something of interest in the mud. 'It instructs that you are to be disarmed and placed under arrest on charges of heresy and treason. These men have been sent to escort you to Sector Command for interrogation. And sergeant? They have orders to shoot to kill should you try to resist.'

Yes. The guns were pointed his way all right.

Here, in the rubble-strewn streets behind the front lines, amid the warrens of ruined tenements that once used to house the city's workers, Chelkar could see some signs of life at least. No, life was too strong a word. There was movement: weary Guardsmen huddled round braziers for warmth, militia auxiliaries dispiritedly hauling supplies, even the occasional feral child hunting rats. But it was all no more than the last twitching spasms of a vast and dying corpse. Had every man, woman and child still alive in Broucheroc gathered in the central square, no one could have mistaken it for anything other than what it was. A gathering of the dead, like grimy-faced shades, who refused to face reality.

They were ghosts, these people. Ghosts with pulses perhaps, still able to love and laugh – even bear children – but ghosts just the same. They, and their city, lived only through some quirk of borrowed time. One day the big push would come and Broucheroc would fall. Then, whether by the orks or at their own leaders' decree, these people would join all those who had gone to their deaths from this city before them. Although Chelkar was forced to admit that even these ghosts probably had one advantage over him. They, at least, might live to see tomorrow.

His captors had stopped short of putting his legs in irons. That was something. But Chelkar knew better than to see it as any great cause for hope. It was a practical matter, they would have to walk to Sector Command. And, if his escorts did not want to carry him, his legs would need to be left unfettered.

Not his hands, though. There, the Kessrians had followed regulations to the letter. It was a new experience, walking these debris-choked alleyways with hands manacled behind him. Already he had suffered several bruisingly abrupt encounters with what the propagandists liked to call ‘the sacred ground of Broucheroc’. Enough to learn that the frozen soil was every bit as impregnable to the sudden impact of a human face as to the blade of an entrenching tool. But even the taste of his own blood, and the painful awareness that he had probably broken his nose three falls back, was not the worst of it.

Chelkar felt naked. He had been a Guardsmen seventeen years, the last ten spent bottled up in this damned city by the orks. Long enough to know there was no easier way to get killed than to be wandering around unarmed in the middle of a war zone. Your gun is your life; lose one and you’ll soon lose the other. It was a lesson every Guardsman lived or died by. A lesson Chelkar had learned as a snot-nosed recruit on his first day of training, courtesy of a kick up the arse from his drill instructor’s boot by way of emphasis. A kick that had probably saved his life a hundred times since. In the last seventeen years, whether he ate, slept, washed – even in the latrines – his shotgun, hellpistol and knife had been his constant companions. Now, without them, Chelkar knew what it was to lose a limb. He felt a sense of incompleteness, a phantom itch, impossible to scratch.

‘Get up, damn you!’ one of the Kessrians barked, hauling Chelkar painfully up by the arms in the wake of yet another fall. ‘And next time, be more careful where you put your feet,’ he added, apparently convinced this constant headbutting of the ground could only be some act of ill-conceived defiance.

Other than that, and the occasional sharp dig of a gun muzzle against his back, his escorts seemed disinclined to converse. What contact Chelkar had had with Kessrians in the past convinced him this was more blessing than curse. They were humourless fanatics, dour even by the standards of Broucheroc – where to live at all was to live with the threatening weight of despair constantly at your shoulder. Some men succumbed to it, ending their days with the barrel of their own lasguns clenched between their teeth. Others sought refuge in false hopes, gallows humour, or a simple dogged refusal to die. But not the Kessrians. They were devoted to the Imperial creed, and lived with all the mean smugness of men who believed they need only follow orders and, come death, they would sit with their Emperor in paradise.

Though perhaps there was a subtle wisdom in their piety. Counted the most loyal troops in all Broucheroc, they had been detached to the permanent service of the city’s commissars, while more ‘suspect’ troops, like Chelkar and his men, suffered the brunt of the fighting. Still, their silence was a mercy. He might have to endure the Kessrians taking him to the gallows, but he saw no good reason why they should be allowed to try and bore him to death first.

‘Keep close,’ one of the Kessrians said. ‘If you run, we will shoot.’

For a moment Chelkar wondered why the man thought it necessary to state the obvious. Then, even with his nose broken, he could smell the stench of burning ork flesh and knew the corpse-pyres were close. They turned a corner, heading up towards a low hill whose summit was shrouded in an acrid haze of smoke. He did not need to see through it to know what they would find at the top. The corpse-pyres: great burning mounds of dead greenskin bodies dragged here from every corner of the city. Through the smog Chelkar could see the outlines of perhaps half-a-dozen such pyres, each containing a hundred alien corpses or more. And for every mound he could see, a dozen other pyres would be hidden in the smoke. As many as ten thousand orks might lie burning here, but they were no more than drops in the ocean. For every ork on that hill, a thousand more waited outside the city.

Once this would have smelled like victory to me, Chelkar thought. I am past such delusions now.

It was a tradition started in the first days of the siege. Every morning Guardsmen armed with long hooks would collect the orks killed in the previous day’s fighting, drag them up the hill, stack them in great mounds, douse them in promethium, then set them alight. At first, it had been done to prevent disease: this city manufactured so many corpses that they could not all be left to rot in the streets. Then someone – a commissar, most likely – had proclaimed the corpse-pyres were more than just an act of hygiene. Broucheroc was sacred ground, he said, sanctified by the blood of all the heroes who had died defending it. And to bury even a single alien here would be to dishonour that sacrifice. Only heroes were worthy to be buried in Broucheroc; the bodies of the alien scum must always be burned, both to preserve this sacred soil from their taint, and so the orks outside the city would see the smoke rising on the wind and know what awaited them.

So went the dogma, anyway. Chelkar could not help but reflect how ten years of corpse-burnings had done little to dissuade the orks thus far. But there was a certain symmetry to it. Broucheroc had once been one huge refinery, where crude from the oilfields further south was brought to be refined into fuel. Even now, the city sat on billions of barrels’ worth of promethium in massive underground storage tanks. That was why the orks were here: without fuel to feed their armour, their assault elsewhere on the planet had been brought grinding to a halt. They were here for the promethium. And, thanks to the inspiration of some long-dead commissar, every ork that died here got some small taste of the stuff.

They were at the summit now, the air about them thick with smoke and drifting fragments of ash. Eyes watering, almost retching from the stench, Chelkar could see ghostly figures moving through the haze, as masked Guardsmen worked to add more orks to the fires. The heat was stifling; he

was sweating under his greatcoat. Here, in the warmest spot in all of Broucheroc, the city seemed even more like hell. Then he felt a stern hand suddenly grip his shoulder, as though his escorts were afraid they might lose him. But they were wrong to think he might run. Where could he go? Between Broucheroc and the orks, there was no escape.

For better or for worse, Chelkar would have to put his faith in Imperial justice.

He was covered in bruises and every part of his body ached. On arrival at Sector Command, Chelkar had been delivered to the custody of two new Guardsmen who had promptly taken him to a cell, stripped him naked, then beaten him bloody with fist and club. Softening him up, they had called it. Groin, stomach, kidneys – especially his kidneys – they had done their work so well Chelkar had no doubt he would be in tremendous pain for a week. Always assuming that they let him live that long.

Now, he lay prone on the stone floor of another room, waiting for Commissar Valk to acknowledge his existence. A thin man, with thin lips and nose, the commissar sat at a desk at the other end of the room, eyes glued to the display screen of the data-slate he held in his long thin hands. Silent minutes passed as the commissar kept reading. Then, without raising his eyes from the screen, he spoke in a voice every bit as thin as his lips and nose and hands.

‘Bring the prisoner a chair.’

The guards complied, dragging a chair to the middle of the room, propping Chelkar up in it with a hand on each shoulder. But still, the commissar did not so much as glance his way. Instead, keeping his eyes on the data-slate, he leaned back in his chair and began to read aloud.

‘Eugin Chelkar. Sergeant, 902nd Vardan Rifles, with service in the Mursk Campaign, Bandar Majoris, the Solnar Restoration and, most recently, Broucheroc. Decorated six times, including the Emperor’s Star with Galaxy Cluster, presented for extraordinary bravery in the face of the enemy. Though never convicted, you have also faced disciplinary proceedings six times in the past on charges ranging from insubordination to failure to salute an officer. You would seem a remarkable study in contrasts, sergeant. I wonder, which is the real Eugin Chelkar: the hero or the malcontent?’

With that, Valk finally looked his way. But Chelkar stayed silent. The time for expressions of love and loyalty to the Emperor would come later. For now, better to hold his peace until he knew the substance of the charges against him.

For a moment, the commissar stared at him with cold piercing eyes, the smallest touch of a graveyard smile twitching at the corners of his lips. Valk turned away then pulled open the bottom drawer of his desk. He lifted out a

vox-recorder. Setting it on his desk, Valk fussed for long seconds, ensuring the recording spools were aligned and the long wire of the vox-receiver properly connected. Then, pressing a stud to set the device working, he turned back to Chelkar once more.

'There now, sergeant, I see no reason to delay the start of these proceedings any further. Speaking clearly, and being careful not to leave anything out, I want you to tell me all about your dealings with one Lieutenant Lorannus...'

Chelkar slept a deep and even sleep. A sleep untouched by dream or nightmare. He slept, cocooned in blessed moments of peace. Then, he heard Corporal Grishen's urgent voice in his ear and knew his sleep was done.

'Sergeant! A message from Sector Command! Auspex has picked up an object falling to earth in the north-west quadrant of the sky. A drop-pod, sir!'

With a start Chelkar awoke to the darkness of the barracks dugout, Grishen's voice buzzing insistently in his comm-link's earpiece. He dragged himself from his bunk, then, after grabbing his shotgun, helmet and greatcoat, he stepped blinking into the grey light of dawn outside.

Although still half-asleep, what came next was second nature. Half-crouched, keeping to cover as best he could, he ran zig-zag across the open ground between the dugout and the forwardmost trench. Upon reaching the safety of the trench, he found Davir and Bulaven waiting within.

'I don't see anything,' Bulaven said, squinting up at the sky.

'The pod is still too far away, pigbrain,' Davir replied, perched on a stack of empty ammunition boxes. 'And anyway, the corporal said north-west quadrant: you are looking at the wrong part of the sky.'

Bulaven made some unpleasant comment about Davir's parentage, but Chelkar ignored them. Had he even wanted to follow the progress of yet another of their endless disputes, now was not the time. Not with Grishen's excited tones still pulsing in his ear.

'It is one of ours, sergeant – Command is sure of it! We are awaiting verification as to its contents, but auspex has it on a vertical bearing of forty-nine degrees – I say four nine degrees. You should be able to see it soon.'

Raising his field glasses, Chelkar scanned the foreboding heavens. There, he saw it. A black speck, haloed by flame. A drop-pod, all right, and it was headed their way.

'Perhaps it is a relief force,' Bulaven said, his usually booming voice now an awed whisper. 'A space-borne assault, to destroy the orks and break the siege.'

'With a single drop-pod?' Davir sneered. 'I find such stupidity surprising even from you, Bulaven. Most likely some distant bureaucrat has decided to send us a supply pod to reassure us we have not been forgotten. Something remarkably useless no doubt: insect repellent, or paperclips. Remember when

they sent us a whole drop-pod full of prophylactics? I never could decide whether they wanted us to use them as barrage balloons, or simply thought the orks must have a morbid fear of rubber. Still, whatever is inside this one, I shall be content so long as the bastards have aimed it right and it doesn't land on top of us.'

The pod was closer now and visible to the naked eye. With a tail of fire streaming behind it, it looked like a comet. Glancing at the network of trenches and foxholes around him, Chelkar could see dozens of fur-shrouded helmets peering over parapets as every man in the company craned their heads up towards the sky, every one seeing in this man-made comet some different portent, whether for good or ill. All but Chelkar. He had lost his faith in portents some time back.

'You are an evil runt, Davir,' Bulaven growled petulantly. 'It would kill you, wouldn't it, to leave a man's hopes intact?'

'I'm doing you a favour, Bulaven,' Davir shrugged. 'Hope is a bitch with bloody claws. Still, if you must hope for something, hope the greenskins never develop a fatseeking missile. If they do, you're f–'

'Sergeant! We have verification!' screeched Grishen in his ear, so excited now that the top end of his voice became a squealing squall of static. 'They're reinforcements! Command says the drop-pod is full of troops!'

'Thank Command for the good news, Grishen,' Chelkar said into his comm-link mouthpiece. 'But advise them they may wish to post more men on gravedigging detail. The pod looks set to land smack in the middle of no-man's-land.'

The pod fell closer, and with every metre a roar grew louder. It was big now, so big Chelkar could pick out the design of the Imperial Eagle embossed on its side. An eagle wreathed in flames, and about to land right under the ork guns.

'Take cover!' he screamed.

There came a deafening boom and the whoosh of air as the shockwave passed overhead. The ground quaked. As the tremors subsided, Chelkar stuck his head back over the parapet. He saw no sign of casualties amongst his men. The pod had landed so far away the tidal wave of uprooted earth and stone had fallen short of their lines. Ahead, Chelkar could see it half-buried in a newly-created crater, steam rising from the rapidly cooling hull. For a moment there was silence, the air itself seemingly as frozen as the ground underfoot. Then, the orks opened up with everything they had, and the apocalypse began.

Bullets, rockets, shells – even the occasional energy beam – fell roaring all about the pod, turning the ground around it into a churning sea of leaping soil. As ever, ork marksmanship was appalling, so far they had not even come close to hitting their target. But given the sheer volume of fire, it was only a

matter of time.

‘Sergeant!’ Grishen screamed through the static. ‘I have Battery Command on the line. Permission to request artillery counter-fire?’

‘Negative, Grishen. Their marksmanship is every bit as bad as the orks’. We must give those poor bastards out there a chance at least. I want you to take a range estimation on the centre of no-man’s-land and await my instructions.’

Out in no-man’s-land, the pod doors opened, disgorging shaken Guardsmen. Seemingly leaderless, confused to find themselves delivered into the middle of a firefight, they milled uncertainly in the shadow of the pod, heads moving as hundreds of eyes scanned hopelessly in search of more permanent refuge. Though Chelkar had long since come to believe the absurdities of this city could no longer surprise him, even he was taken aback by the sight of the new arrivals’ uniforms.

‘There must be a shortage of paperclips and prophylactics,’ Davir said. ‘Now they are sending us painted lambs to the slaughter.’

They looked like toy soldiers. Several hundred Guardsmen standing all but doomed in the middle of no-man’s-land, each wearing a powder-blue monstrosity of a uniform, festooned with a dazzling array of gold braids and epaulettes, and topped with a tall pillbox hat bearing what appeared to be a feather. Toy soldiers, delivered into the most coverless section of no-man’s-land: an empty wasteland that, for them, might as well have been in hell. Still, toy soldiers or not, Chelkar could only hope they knew how to run.

‘Targeteer makes the range six hundred metres, sergeant. Awaiting your instructions.’

‘Keep the line to Battery Command open, Grishen. At the command mark I want you to give them that range and tell them to hit it with everything they’ve got. Confirm.’

‘Six hundred metres, sergeant. With everything they’ve got. At the command mark.’

‘All other troops: at the command “fire” I want suppression fire aimed at the ork lines. You have my command. Fire!’

From every foxhole and trench, the company opened up with lasgun, missile and mortar. At this range the chances of hitting anything were slim, but all Chelkar wanted was to encourage the orks to keep their heads down long enough for the new arrivals to escape. The only problem was that, so far, the toy soldiers showed no sign of moving.

A shell rebounded off the hull of the pod as the ork gunners finally found their range. Seeing two of their own cut down by shrapnel, the toy soldiers finally seemed to get the message. They began to run towards the human lines, legs carrying them with a speed born of desperation as bullets and shells flew all around them. Six hundred metres to go, and men fell and died in great

waves, bodies pierced by shrapnel and bullets, or else just ripped to bloody pieces by blasts. Four hundred metres now, and already more than half were dead.

‘Give me smoke!’ Chelkar yelled into his comm-link. ‘I want smoke now!’

In answer there came a flurry of grenades and mortar fire, and in seconds all Chelkar could see before him was a drifting white wall of smoke. A desperate gambit. If the toy soldiers could reach the cover of the smoke they might survive. But the same smoke cloud could offer cover to the orks as well.

‘Sergeant, auspex reads movement in the ork lines. They are advancing into no-man’s-land! The line to Battery Command is open and ready, sergeant, let me give the order!’

‘You have your instructions, Grishen. Wait.’

There. Finally. He could see human figures emerging through the fog of smoke. Five. Six. Eight. Perhaps no more than two-dozen men left from hundreds, stumbling gratefully to safety at last.

‘Sergeant! Auspex reads a large ork force moving towards us on foot! You must let me order the bombardment! There are thousands–’

Chelkar was about to give the order, his lips moving to frame the words, when he saw something that set him cursing in disbelief. There, amid the smoke, he saw the figure of a single remaining soldier. A last straggler who, spurning the chance to run for cover, turned instead to fire his laspistol towards the unseen horde of approaching orks hidden somewhere in the smoke cloud behind him. A fool, who probably deserved everything that was coming.

‘You have my command, Grishen!’ Chelkar yelled, already out of the trench and running. ‘Mark!’

Half a dozen footsteps, and already in the distant air above him the scream of falling shells could be heard. A dozen, two-dozen steps, and the screaming grew louder. Reaching the man, Chelkar grabbed him by the scruff of the neck, giving him a swift kick in the backside by way of persuasion. Then, dragging his gasping catch back to the parapet, Chelkar threw him into the trench and leapt down on top of him just as the first of the screaming shells began its final deathdive shriek. A shriek that reached its crescendo in a sudden cacophony of explosions that set the ground shaking.

Now, thought Chelkar, hugging the straggler to him at the floor of the trench, assuming the barrage does not fall short, we may just survive this. And, if we do, it will be my great pleasure to kick this stupid bastard in the arse again.

For long minutes the bombardment continued, close enough to send clods of frozen earth falling into the trench. An eternity of ragged heartbeats and racing pulses. Then, abruptly, the explosions stopped.

Within an instant, Chelkar was on his feet, scanning no-man's-land for orks. The barrage had blown away the last of the smoke and he saw the normally grey landscape was now painted with dark green blood and body parts. It made a pleasing contrast. Their luck had held and the artillery had seen off the attack.

'Sergeant, it's Corporal Grishen,' Davir said, stubby fingers fiddling at the comm-link in his ear as Chelkar realised he had lost his own comm-link somewhere in no-man's-land. 'Lookouts report the ork survivors have returned to their lines. Also, we have received orders from Sector Command as to the disposition of the new troops – they are to be attached to our company. And, sergeant? Grishen says according to Command we should find our new company commander among the reinforcements – a Lieutenant Lorannus.'

'Thank Grishen for the news, Davir,' said Chelkar. 'But tell him he may want to advise Sector Command our new company commander is probably lying dead with the majority of his men out there in no-man's-land.'

'Not at all, sergeant,' said a new voice from behind him. 'I assure you: your new company commander is still very much alive.'

Turning, Chelkar saw the straggler getting to his feet. Now he had the chance to see the man clearly, he saw that he wore a single gold bar insignia at his collar. Lieutenant's bars.

It looked like kicking him in the arse again was out of the question.

One big line, sergeant,' the lieutenant said, jabbing an unbending finger into the map before him. 'That is the best way to defend our position. One big line, and we will break the orks like waves against the rocks.'

Two days had passed, and Chelkar stood with Grishen and Lieutenant Lorannus in the command dugout, around a map of the company's defences. Two days, and now the unveiling of Lorannus's grand design had forced Chelkar to a re-evaluation. His new lieutenant was not just a fool, he was a madman.

'Of course, a great deal of work is required,' Lorannus continued. 'But the failings of the present system – this array of trenches and foxholes in which our men hide like so many rats – should be self-evident. If we are to break the ork resolve, we need a show of strength. We must concentrate our forces in a single great trench running the length of the sector, protected by minefields and barbed wire.'

Perhaps the lieutenant was simple-minded. It was the only explanation Chelkar could think of which made any sense. Already, two days under Lorannus's command had been enough to turn Chelkar's initial dislike of the man into a deep loathing. Lorannus was a by-the-book soldier, a shrill martinet who, Chelkar was sure, would probably soil his uniform if he ever

saw an ork. And that damned uniform, that was another thing again. Despite repeated urgings, Lorannus had refused to dispense with his sniper-bait uniform or even to wear a greatcoat to cover it.

‘Well, sergeant? You have an opinion?’

‘We don’t use mines any more, sir. It only encouraged the orks to take prisoners and drive them across the minefields to clear them. Then, when they ran out of prisoners, they’d use gretchin instead. Either way, minefields don’t work.’

‘We will use punji sticks then, sergeant. Or pitfall traps. These are just details. There is a bigger picture here.’

‘Yes, sir, there is. With your permission, lieutenant, I think it is time Corporal Grishen went to see if comms has received any new messages.’

Lorannus paused, looking at Chelkar’s weather-beaten face with searching eyes. Then, with a nod, he indicated Grishen should go, waiting until the corporal was out of earshot before he spoke once more.

‘All right then, sergeant. We are alone. What is it you have to say?’

‘Permission to speak frankly, sir?’ Chelkar asked. At Lorannus’s gesture he continued, choosing his words carefully. ‘With all due respect, sir, wouldn’t it be wiser if you waited to acclimatise yourself fully to conditions here before making wholesale changes to our defences?’

‘I believe I am “acclimatised” as you put it, sergeant,’ Lorannus said, looking Chelkar squarely in the eye now. ‘And it is my intention these changes should be made without further delay. Should I take it you find some fault in my plans?’

‘Yes, sir. Our firing trenches and foxholes are spread out for a reason, same as they are in every other sector of the city. We do it that way to catch the orks in multiple fields of fire and cut them down before they can get close. At the same time, because there isn’t any one single strong point, if a trench is about to be overrun the men in it can pull back without fear of the whole line collapsing.’

‘Are you telling me it is deliberate policy to give ground to the enemy?’

‘We don’t give them anything, lieutenant. We lend it to them just long enough for the men in the other trenches to shoot them down. Then we take it back.’

‘No matter how you dress it up, sergeant, it is retreat. And retreat smacks of cowardice.’

‘Call it what you want, lieutenant. This is Broucheroc, and war here is not like what they tell you about in the scholarium.’

‘I am well acquainted with the realities of warfare, sergeant,’ Lorannus said, his face flushed and his lips tight. ‘My homeworld has a martial tradition that dates back centuries. And for generations my family has committed its sons to the service of the Emperor.’

‘And you have personal experience of fighting orks, sir?’

‘I do not see how that is relevant,’ Lorannus said. A dangerous edge had entered his voice, but this was too important for Chelkar to back down.

‘You talked about “a show of strength” and “breaking the ork resolve”, lieutenant? Well, there’s only one way I know to break an ork’s resolve and that’s to kill him. As for “a show of strength”, take it from me: they’re stronger than we are. The one thing you don’t want is to end up going hand-to-hand with an ork. Let them shoot at you all day – chances are they’ll miss. But go hand-to-hand and you’ll end up being fed your own liver. That’s what this is all about, lieutenant. Put our men in “one big line”, without multiple fields of fire and with nowhere to retreat to, and you’re giving the orks the chance to get close by sheer weight of numbers. And, if you do that, you might as well give them the keys to the city right now.’

‘You sound as though you are frightened of the orks, sergeant,’ Lorannus said, his expression dark.

‘Yes I am, lieutenant. I’ve always made it a policy to be terrified of anything that outnumbers me five-hundred-to-one.’

For a moment, struggling visibly to control his temper, Lorannus was silent. But Chelkar knew it was only the lull before the storm. Any second now, Lorannus would either dress him down or tell him to shut up and follow orders. Worse, he might even summon Grishen back and order Chelkar to be put under arrest for insubordination. Whatever the result, the lieutenant would have his way. Their defences would be relocated to one big line and, within a day at most, everyone in this sector would be dead. All because Command had decided to shackle them with a madman. But, no matter the folly of his plans, in the end Lorannus was the officer and Chelkar the sergeant. The lieutenant could send the whole company skipping naked towards the orks and no one would stop him. Unless…

‘Sergeant! Lieutenant! You must come quickly! There’s something going on over in the ork lines!’

It was Grishen, his voice over the comm-link shrill to the point of panic. An unlikely guardian angel, but for now Chelkar would take whatever he could get.

‘It seems we are needed elsewhere, sergeant,’ Lorannus said, placing his pillbox hat on his head and adjusting the strap under his chin. ‘We shall have to postpone this matter until later. But understand: this does not end here.’

‘As you say, sir,’ Chelkar replied, picking up his shotgun and shucking a shell into the breech. ‘This is not over.’

Lorannus turned away, moving towards the dugout exit with Chelkar two steps behind him. Then, stepping outside, Chelkar saw something which only confirmed his doubts as to the lieutenant’s sanity. Incredibly, instead of running or crouching, Lorannus went marching across the open ground

towards the trenches as though it were a parade ground. Bad enough to be wearing that sniper-bait uniform, thought Chelkar. But the fool doesn't even have the sense to run or keep his head down.

Not that the thought of some gretchin sniper blowing the lieutenant's fool head off caused him any great concern. But there was always the danger the damned gretch would miss and hit someone else…

'You hear it?' Grishen's voice was a dry whisper. 'That noise from the ork lines. Engines.'

The sound could be heard clearly now, drifting across no-man's-land from behind the barricades on the ork side. A growing cacophony of revving motors, grinding gears and rumbling exhausts. The sound of engines. And engines meant only one thing. Armour.

'I don't understand,' Lorannus said, staring towards the sound in utter confusion. 'Intelligence reports stated categorically that the orks had exhausted their last reserves of fuel.'

'Could be they found an old promethium cache somewhere,' Chelkar said. 'Either way, it doesn't matter. The reports were wrong, lieutenant. And, from the sounds of those engines, we don't have much time to get ready.'

'Yes,' Lorannus said, 'you are right of course, sergeant. We need to make preparations.' Looking into the lieutenant's eyes, Chelkar realised the man had no idea how to proceed. Confronted with an unforeseen situation, Lorannus was floundering.

'Artillery, lieutenant,' Chelkar prompted.

'Of course,' Lorannus said, his imperious facade abruptly restored as though somewhere a distant general had flicked a switch. 'Artillery fire. Grishen, contact Battery Command and tell them I want an immediate carpet bombardment of the area directly in front of the ork lines.'

Then, as Grishen hurried towards the comms-dugout, the lieutenant turned towards Chelkar once more.

'I'm sure, like me, you believe in leading from the front, sergeant. I suggest you take up position on the east of the line, while I take the west. It would be a tragedy, after all, if either of us were to wander inadvertently into the other's "field of fire".'

Without a word, Chelkar turned and ran crouching towards the forward firing trench on his side of the defences. Inside, Davir and Bulaven were already preparing for the assault; the big man was checking the pump pressure of the heavy flamer before him, while Davir flicked the safety off his lasgun and sighted in on no-man's-land.

'I am pleased to announce we are open for business, sergeant,' Davir said, glancing over his shoulder as Chelkar jumped into the trench. 'Just in time, too. From the sounds of it, we have a busy day ahead of us.'

‘Yes we have, Davir. But for now I want you both to put the camo-cover back on the flamer and keep your heads down.’

‘No offence, sergeant,’ Davir said as, beside him, Bulaven stared dumbly at Chelkar, ‘but I have found orks rarely drop dead of their own accord. You have to shoot them first.’

‘Perhaps in your close study of the orks you have also noticed they rarely do much in the way of reconnaissance before an assault,’ Chelkar replied. ‘If we don’t shoot at them, they are likely to think this trench is empty. And, if they do, they will concentrate their attack here. Then, once they get close enough, we will spring a surprise.’

‘Not much of a surprise, sergeant,’ Davir said, his tigerish smile revealing a mouthful of stained and crooked teeth. ‘Three men with only a shotgun, lasgun and heavy flamer between them. Still, if the orks get too close, we can always try having Bulaven fart them to death.’

Overhead, the air began to scream with the sound of shells. Grishen had called in the barrage; shrapnel and explosives were turning the area in front of the ork lines into a quagmire. But it would take more than that to stop the orks from coming. The best the bombardment could do was thin out their numbers.

‘Confirmation from all lookouts,’ Grishen said, ‘the orks are coming!’

No one with eyes or ears could miss them. From the ork lines the engine noises reached a crescendo, momentarily drowning out even the artillery barrage as dozens of ork vehicles smashed through their own barricades and sped into no-man’s-land. A motley, mechanised army of scratch-built vehicles and buggies gunned their engines forward to come roaring across the frozen mud. In seconds they were past the limits of the bombardment, leaving a third of their number burning behind them. A third already gone, but it mattered not at all. The other two-thirds just kept on coming.

‘All troops, upon my command,’ Lorannus said, calm and even over the comm-link. ‘Fire!’

A fusillade of missiles, lasbeams and mortar rounds hurtled into no-man’s-land. Some found their marks, and more vehicles exploded. But many beams glanced off armour, missiles failed, mortar rounds fell short. The motorised horde kept coming.

With grim satisfaction, Chelkar saw the bulk of them were headed his way.

‘Wait,’ he told the others. ‘I want them close.’

The death toll mounted as the other Guardsmen continued to fire. But the remaining orks kept coming in a mad dash to be first to the slaughter. One hundred metres. Eighty. Fifty. Twenty fire metres now and closing. Twenty...

‘Now,’ said Chelkar.

Before the sound of the order was gone Bulaven was on his feet. Moving with a speed that belied his size, he pulled the camo-cover away, his finger already on the trigger of the flamer. He fired, and an oncoming tracked

vehicle suddenly disappeared in an expanding cone of fire. It exploded, but Bulaven was already onto another target. And another, and another. One by one, speeding vehicles became fiery deathtraps for their crews, screaming orks leaping overboard as around them their comrades crashed and burned. And still Bulaven kept working the flamer, a bright finger of fire turning vehicle after vehicle into an inferno. And all the time, beside him, Chelkar and Davir worked the triggers of their own guns like madman, trying to make up for lack of numbers with sheer volume of fire. Before long, all Chelkar could see in front of the trench was a rising curtain of flame, all he could hear was the screams of orks, all he could smell was the stench of burning flesh.

He kept on firing.

'Reloading!' Bulaven yelled, as the flamer suddenly sputtered and died, his fat hands already working to attach the fuel-line to a new canister. With a machine-like efficiency born of long practice, Chelkar and Davir sent half a dozen frag grenades into the flames to buy Bulaven the seconds he needed.

But then, they were machines: machines made for the killing of orks.

The flamer sputtered once more, then spat fire again, sending more orks screaming to their gods. And, even through the haze of battle, Chelkar could see his plan was working. Having concentrated their attack here, the orks had become log-jammed. Already, their assault elsewhere in the sector was faltering and Guardsmen from other trenches were able to add their fire to back up Chelkar and Davir. It was the oldest tactic in Broucheroc: offer the orks an open door then slam it shut in their faces. The oldest tactic, and yet it worked every time.

Then, just as Chelkar began to think he might have survived yet another battle, he heard a message over the comm-link that made him think perhaps the orks were not so gullible after all.

'Lieutenant!' Grishen's voice crackled through the static. 'Lookouts report more orks advancing towards us on foot through no-man's-land. Sweet Emperor – their armour was only the first wave!'

For a moment there was only silence over the comm-link, then Chelkar heard Lorannus give an order of stark, staring madness.

'All troops: fix bayonets and advance into no-man's-land! You hear me? Forward, for the Emperor!'

In the trench, no one moved. Chelkar, Davir and Bulaven stood, staring at each other in disbelief. Turning to look at the other trenches, Chelkar could see they were not alone. Out of the whole company, only one man had left the safety of his trench. One man, who now charged forward single-handedly towards the army of orks hidden somewhere in the smoke. The only man who had followed the order was the man who had given it.

Lieutenant Lorannus.

Alone, while the troops he commanded stood watching him with total

incomprehension, Lorannus leapt out of his trench and charged into no-man's-land with bullets flying all around him. Coming to a burning tracked vehicle, he vaulted on to its hull, pushing a dead gretchin out of the way, then grabbed the vehicle's twin stubbers and turned them screaming on a horde of approaching orks. One man, compelled by some unknown inner daemon to an act of suicidal madness.

It was the bravest thing Chelkar had ever seen.

'What are you waiting for?' Chelkar heard himself yell over the comm-link. 'Are you going to leave him to fight the orks on his own? That's your company commander out there! Charge!'

Before he even knew what he was doing, Chelkar was on his feet with Davir and Bulaven beside him. Together, they charged into no-man's-land with guns blazing, every other man in the company close behind them. A hundred men, inspired to the same madness as their commander, charging screaming to certain death.

Then, for the second time in a day, Chelkar saw something incredible.

The orks broke and ran.

Barely believing they were still alive, Chelkar and the others halted, looking at the backs of the retreating orks in dumb disbelief. Then, there came the sound of a single voice, soon joined by another, and another, until every man in the company – Chelkar included – was cheering Lieutenant Lorannus's name. And, from his vantage point above them on the burning hull of the ork vehicle, Lorannus smiled and raised his laspistol above his head in a salute of triumph.

Then the bullet struck.

Somewhere out in no-man's-land a gretchin sniper found his spiteful mark, the impact pitching Lorannus forward off the vehicle as a fist-sized spray of red gore erupted from the right side of his chest. Chelkar was by his side in seconds, his hands desperately trying to stem the flow of blood from the lieutenant's chest as he screamed for a medic.

'Tell them…' Lorannus gasped, blood bubbling from his mouth with every ragged breath. 'Tell them… it wasn't true. My family… we were loyal… tell them…'

'You will tell them yourself, lieutenant,' Chelkar said, not realising he was shouting. 'And you can show them the medal you're going to get for this. And not posthumously, lieutenant. You hear me? This is no more than a scratch – in a couple of weeks you'll be saluting when they pin that medal on you! Do you hear me, lieutenant?'

But his only answer came with a bloody-lipped and enigmatic smile.

Lorannus was already dead.

He had expected questions, or another beating, but having finished his story

Chelkar found himself left in silence as the commissar's attention returned to his data-slate once more. Minutes passed, the only sound in the room the quiet whirring of the vox-recorder and the scratching of a stylus as the commissar began to write something on the screen of the data-slate. Or perhaps it was hours: Chelkar could not be sure. He could only sit there, wondering. Surely, there must be more to it than this? If the commissar only wanted to ask him about Lorannus's heroism, why put him through this torment? Why the arrest? The beating? Why bring him here at all?

Then, Valk switched off the vox-recorder, the sudden click sounding like a gunshot after so long a silence.

'You may go, sergeant,' the commissar said. Then, seeing Chelkar staring blankly at him, he continued. 'Having read your most recent battle-report, I was understandably concerned to see you had recommended a traitor for posthumous commendation. But having heard your account first-hand, I can see you had no sinister motive. It was simply a regrettable lack of judgement. I am satisfied you were an innocent in this affair. As I said, sergeant, you may go.'

In shock, Chelkar stood and turned to leave, still half-expecting the guards to drag him back into the chair at any moment. Then, as he reached the door, he could not help but give one last look at the commissar sitting at his desk.

'Is there something else, sergeant?'

'Forgive my asking, commissar. But when you said "a traitor", did you mean Lieutenant Lorannus?'

'Yes. Some months ago a member of the lieutenant's family – a distant cousin, I believe – was denounced as a traitor to the Imperium. Of course, as is usual in these cases, his relatives were also purged. All except your lieutenant. Apparently some administrative oversight led to the order for his execution being delayed long enough for him to seek refuge among troops bound for this planet. No doubt he hoped to spread heresy and dissent here, but on this occasion it would seem the orks have actually done us a service. If nothing else, they have saved us a bullet...'

They had given him his clothes back. And his weapons. But all the same, as he limped alone back to the front lines, Chelkar felt little sense of triumph. Even cheating the gallows seemed no great victory. This was Broucheroc. At best he had lived to die another day.

Still, he had received better than Lieutenant Lorannus. It seemed strange, how he had gone so quickly from loathing the man to respecting him. And now, now they said the lieutenant was a traitor? Chelkar was too tired to think about it. Perhaps he would consider it tomorrow.

He smelled a familiar stench on the wind and Chelkar realised he was approaching the corpse-pyres once more. For a moment he contemplated

going the long way round, but his body ached and it would have added another two kilometres to his journey. Besides, the pyres seemed to have burned down now, most of them little more than smouldering piles of ash. Of course new pyres were already being built; in Broucheroc, corpses were never in short supply. But for now, the smoke and stink had lessened.

It was then, as he made his way past a newly-constructed mound of unburned corpses, that Chelkar caught a glimpse of something. A flash of gold and blue amidst a mountain of green flesh. In a split second it was gone as a masked Guardsman put a torch to the pyre, the whole mound disappearing in a scarlet haze of fire. But Chelkar did not need to see it twice. He knew what it was already: a golden epaulette on the shoulder of the ridiculous powder-blue uniform of Lieutenant Lorannus. Consigned to the flames with its owner, no doubt at the order of Commissar Valk. It did not matter that the lieutenant had given his life defending this city. Broucheroc was sacred soil. There could be no final resting place here for a man condemned as traitor. No hero’s burial for him.

Only a red reward.

THE LAST DETAIL

Paul Kearney

The monsoon rains came early that year, as if the planet itself were tugging down a veil to hide its broken face. Even cowering in the bunker, the boy and his father could hear them, thunderous, massive, a roar of noise. But the rainstorm was nothing to that which had gone before – in fact even the bellowing of the monsoon seemed almost like a kind of silence.

‘It stopped,’ the boy said. ‘All the noise. Perhaps they went away.’

The man squeezed his son’s shoulder but said nothing. He had the wiry, etched face of a farmer, old before his time, but as hard as steel wire. Both he and his son had the sunken, hollow look of folk who have not eaten or drunk in days. He passed a dry tongue over his cracked lips at the sound of the rain, then looked at the flickering digits of the comms bench.

‘It’ll be dawn soon. When it comes, I’m going to look outside.’

The boy clenched him tighter. ‘Pa!’

‘It’ll be all right. We need water, or we won’t make it. I think they’ve gone, son.’ He ruffled his boy’s hair. ‘I think it’s over, whatever it was.’

‘They might be waiting.’

‘We need the water. It’ll be all right, you’ll see.’

‘I’m coming with you.’

The man hesitated a second, and then nodded. ‘All right then – whatever we find out there, we’ll meet it together.’

A summer dawn came early in the planet’s northern hemisphere. When the man set his shoulder to the bunker door only a few hours had passed. The heavy steel and plascrete door usually swung light and noiseless on its hinges, but now he had to throw himself at it to grind it open centimetre by

centimetre. When the opening was wide enough for a man's bicep, he stopped, and sniffed the air.

'Get the respirators,' he snapped to his son. 'Now!'

They tugged on the cumbersome masks, and immediately their already enclosed world became tinier and darker still. They breathed heavily. The man coughed, took deep breaths.

'Some kind of gas out there, a chemical agent – but it's heavy. It's seeped down the stairs and pooled there. We've got to go up.' He looked round himself at the interior of the bunker with its discarded blankets, the dying battery-fed lights and useless comms unit. A pale mist was pouring in through the opened door almost like a kind of liquid, and with it, the gurgling rainwater of the passing monsoon.

'This place is compromised,' he said. 'We have to get out now, or we'll die here.'

They pushed together at the door. It squealed open angrily, until at last there was a kind of light filtering down on them from above. The man looked up. 'Well, the house is gone,' he said calmly.

They clambered over wet piles of debris which choked the stone stairs, until at last they stood at the top.

Inside a ruin. Two walls still stood, constructed out of the sturdy local stone, but that was all. The rest was blasted rubble. The clay tiles of the roof lay everywhere, and the boy saw his favourite toy, a wooden rifle his father had carved for him, lying splintered by what had been their front door. The rain was easing now, but he still had to rub the eyepieces of his respirator clear every few seconds.

'Stay here,' the man said. He walked forward, out of the shadows of their ruined home, his boots crunching and clinking on broken glass and plastic, splashing through puddles. Around them, the pale mist was receding. A wind was blowing, and on it the rain came down, washing everything clean. The man hesitated, then pulled off his respirator. He raised his face to the sky and opened his mouth, feeling the rain on his tongue.

'It's all right,' he said to his son. 'The air is clean now. Take it off, boy, but don't touch anything. We don't know what's contaminated.'

All around them for as far as the eye could see, the countryside which had once been their farm, a green and pleasant place, was now a stinking marsh of shell-holes. The trunks of trees stood up like black sword-blades, their branches stripped away, the bark burnt from their boles. Here and there, one of their cattle, or a piece of one, lay bloated and green and putrid. Smoke rose in black pillars along the horizon.

Such was their thirst that they had nothing to say, but stood with their tongues out trying to soak up the rain. It streamed into the boy's mouth, reinvigorating him. Nothing in his life had ever felt so good as that cold water

sinking into his parched mouth. He opened his eyes at last, and frowned, then pointed skywards, at the broken wrack of clouds which the wind was lashing across the sky.

'Pa, look,' he said, eyes wide with wonder. 'Look at that– it's like a cathedral up-ended in the clouds.'

His father looked skywards, narrowed his eyes, and curled a protective arm about the boy's shoulders. Many kilometres away, but still dominating the heavens, a vast angular shape hung shining above the earth, all jagged with steeples and adornments and improbable spikes. It broke out in a white flash as the sun caught it turning, and then began to recede, in a bright flare of afterburners. After a few seconds they caught the distant roar of its massive engines. As the sun rose higher, so they lost sight of it in the gathering brightness of the morning.

'It's moving out of orbit,' the man said.

'What is it – is the God-Emperor inside it, Pa?'

'No, son.' The father's arm curled tighter about his son's shoulders. 'It is the vessel of those who know His face. It is the Emperor's Angels, here in our sky.'

The man looked around him. At the reeking desolation, the craters, the puddled steaming meres of chemicals.

'We were their battleground,' he said.

They ranged over what was left of the farm during the next few days, setting out containers to catch rainwater, gathering up what remained of their canned goods, and throwing away anything which the man's rad-counter began creaking at. At night they made camp in the ruins of the farmhouse and coaxed fire out of the soaked timbers which had once upheld its roof.

'Is the whole world like this?' the boy asked, gazing into the firelight one night, huddled under an old canvas tarp that the rain beat upon.

'Could be,' his father said. 'Perreken is a small place, not much more than a moon. Wouldn't take much to trash the whole thing.'

'Why would the Emperor's Angels do this to us?' the boy asked.

'They do things for reasons we can't fathom,' his father told him. 'They are the Wrath of the Emperor made real, and when their anger sweeps a world, no-one escapes it, not even those they are sworn to save. They are our protectors, boy, but also, they are the Angels of Death.'

'What are they like – have you ever seen one, Pa?'

The man shook his head. 'Not I. I did my spell in the militia same as most, and that's as far as my knowledge of things warlike goes. I don't think they ever even came close to this system before. But that was a big Imperial ship in the sky the other morning, I'm sure of it – I seen pictures when I was your age. Only they ride in ships like that – the *Astartes* – the Angels of the God-

Emperor.’

Three days later the boy and his father were trudging through the black shattered crag north of their farm which had once been a wooded hillside, looking to see if any of their stock had by some chance survived the holocaust. Here, there had been a rocky knoll some two hundred metres in height, which gave a good view down the valley beyond to the city and its spaceport. It seemed the hill had been bombed heavily, its conical head now flattened. Smoke still hissed out of cracks in the hillside, as molten rocks cooled underground. Out towards the horizon, the city smoked and flickered with pinpoints of flame.

‘Pa! Pa!’ the boy shouted, running and tumbling among the rocks – ‘Look here!’

‘Don’t touch it!’

‘It’s – it’s – I don’t know what it is.’

Looming over them was a hulk of massive, shattered metal, a box of steel and ceramite broken open and still sparking and glowing in places. It had legs like those of a crab, great pincers, and the barrels of autocannon on its shoulders. Atop it was what might once have been a man’s head, grotesquely attached, snarling in death. It was a machine which was almost an animal, or an animal which had become a machine. Carved onto the bullet-pocked carcass of the thing were unspeakable scenes of slaughter and perversity, and it was hung with rotting skulls, festooned with spikes and chains.

‘Come away,’ the man told his son hoarsely. ‘Get away from it.’

They backed away, and were suddenly aware that all down the slope below them were other remnants of battle. Bodies, everywhere, most of them shaven-headed, snarling, mutilated men, many with a pointed star cut into their foreheads. Here and there a bulkier figure in heavy armour, horned helmets, dismembered limbs, entrails underfoot about which the flies buzzed in black clouds.

‘They fought here,’ the man said. ‘They fought here for the high ground.’

The boy, with the curiosity of youth, seemed less afraid than his father. He had found a large firearm, almost as long as himself, and was trying to lift it out of its glutinous glue of mud and blood.

‘Leave that alone!’

‘But Pa!’

‘That’s an Astartes weapon.’ The man knelt and peered at it, wiping the metal gingerly with one gloved hand. ‘Look – see the double-headed eagle on the barrel – that’s the badge of the Imperium. The Space Marines fought here, on this hill. These are the dead of the great enemy lying around us, heretics cursed by the Emperor. The Astartes saved us from them.’

‘Saved us,’ the boy repeated grumpily. He pointed at the burning city down

in the valley. ‘Look at Dendrekken. It’s all burnt and blown up.’

‘Better that than under the fist of the Dark Powers, believe me,’ the man said, straightening. ‘It’s getting dark. We’ve come far enough for one day. Tomorrow we’ll try and get down to the city, and see who else is left.’

That night, shivering beside their campfire amid the bodies of the dead, the boy lay awake staring at the night sky. The clouds had cleared, and he was able to see the familiar constellations overhead. Now and again he saw a shooting star, and now and again he was sure he saw other things gliding in the dark between the stars. New constellations glittered, moving in formation. He found himself wondering about those who lived out there in that blackness, travelling in their city-sized ships from system to system, bearing the eagle of the Imperium, carrying weapons like the massive bolter he had found upon the battlefield. What must it be like, to live like that?

He got up in the middle hours of the night, too restless and hungry for sleep. Stepping away from the fire, he clicked on his little battered torch, an old wind-up contraption he had had since he was a toddler. He walked out upon the rocky, blasted slope upon which the bodies of the dead lay contorted and rotting, and felt no fear, only a sense of wonder, and a profound restlessness. He picked his way down the slope and apart from his yellow band of torchlight there was no other radiance in the world save for the stars.

And one other thing. Off to his left he caught sight of something which came and went, an infinitesimal red glow. Intrigued, he made his way towards it, sliding his knife out of the sheath at his waist. He crouched and padded forwards, as quiet as when hunting in these same hills with his father’s old lasgun. Several times the light died altogether, but he was patient, and waited until he could see it again. It was at the foot of a looming, broken crag which stood up black against the stars.

Something half-buried in rubble, but still with a shine to it that reflected back the torchlight. It was a helmet, huge, fit for a giant. It looked almost like a massive skull. In the eye-sockets were two lenses, one cracked and broken, and the other with that flickering scarlet light oozing out of it. The boy knelt down and gently tapped the helmet with the butt of his knife. There was a hiss as of static, and the thing moved slightly, making him spring backwards in fright. He saw then that it was not just a helmet. Buried in the fallen stone there was a body attached to the helm. Off to one side lay a massive hemispherical shape – the boy could have sat in it – and painted upon it in white was the symbol of a double-headed axe. A shoulder-guard made for a giant.

The boy scraped and scratched frantically at the stones, levering away the looser ones, uncovering more and more of the buried figure. There was a gleam of silver below the helm, and he saw that he had unearthed shining

wings engraved upon a mighty breastplate, and in the centre of the wings, a skull emblem. He stared, open-mouthed. This was no Chaos fiend, no armoured heretic. He had found one of *them*, one of the Astartes his father talked about.

A fallen angel, he thought.

'Pa!' he shouted. 'Pa, come here quick and see this!'

It took them most of the remainder of the night to uncover the buried giant. As dawn broke, and the relentless rain began again, so the water washed the mud and caked filth and blood from its armour, making it gleam in the sunrise. Dark blue metal, as dark as an evening sky, save for the white silver wings on the chest. The boy and his father knelt, panting before it. The armour was dented and broken in places, and loose wiring sprang out of gashes in the metal. There were bullet-holes in the thigh, and here and there plates had been buckled out of shape by some inconceivable force, bent out of place; the heavy dark paint scraped off them so they could see the bare alloy underneath.

The boy's father wiped his brow, streaking it with mud. 'Help me with the helmet, boy – let's see if we can get a look at him.'

They felt around the helmet seal with their fingertips, that savage visage staring up at them, immobile. The boy's quicker fingers found the two pressure points first. There were two clicks, and a hiss, then a loud crack. Between the two of them they levered up the mass of metal, and eased it off. It rolled to one side, clinking on the stones, and they found themselves staring at the face of an Astartes.

The skin was pale, as though it seldom saw the sun, stretched tight across a huge-boned skull, long and somehow horse-like. It was recognisably human, but out of scale, like the face of a great statue. A metal stud was embedded above one colourless eyebrow. The head was shaved, criss-crossed with old scars, though a bristle of dark hair had begun to regrow on it. The right eye was gone – he had been shot through the lens of his helmet – but the hole was already healed, a ragged whorl of red tissue.

Then the left eye opened.

The boy and his father tumbled backwards, away from the glare of the eye. The giant stirred, his arm coming up and then falling back again. A rasping growl came up from somewhere deep in the barrel-wide chest, and the legs quivered. Then the giant groaned, and was still again, but now his teeth were bared and clenched – white, strong teeth which looked as though they could snap off a hand. He spoke, a slur of pain-filled words.

The boy's father approached the giant on hands and knees. 'You're among friends here. We're trying to help you, lord. The fighting is over. The enemy is gone. Can you hear me?'

The eye, bloodshot and as blue as midwinter ice, came to rest on the boy's father. 'My brothers,' the giant said. 'Where are they?' His voice was deep, the accent so strange that the boy could barely understand him.

'They've gone. I saw the great ship leave orbit myself, six days ago.'

A deep snarl, a cross between rage and grief. Again, the helpless movement of the massive limbs.

'Help me. I must stand.'

They tried, tugging at the cold metal armour. They managed to get him sitting upright. His gauntleted hand scrabbled at the rubble.

'My bolter.'

'It's not here – it must be buried, as you were. We had to dig you out.'

He could not raise himself. The single eye blinked. The Astartes spat, and his spittle spattered against the rocks, bright with blood.

'My armour is dead. We must get it off. Help me. I will show you what to do.'

The rain came lashing down. They struggled in the muck and gravel around the giant, clicking off one piece after another of the armour which enclosed him. The boy could not lift any of them, strong though he was. His father grunted and sweated, corded muscles standing out along his arms and chest, as he set each piece of the dark blue carapace to one side. The massive breastplate almost defeated them all, and when it came free the giant snarled with pain. As it fell away, slick, mucus-covered cables slid out of his torso along with it, and when they sucked free, the boy saw that his chest was pocked with metal sockets embedded in his very flesh. The armour had been part of him.

He had been shot through the thigh, but the wound was almost closed. It was a raised, angry lump, in the midst of which was a suppurating hole. The Astartes looked at it, frowning. 'Something's in there. My system should have fixed it by now.' He probed the hole with one finger, teeth bared against the pain, and raised his bloody pus-covered digit to his face and sniffed at it. 'Something bad.' He put a knuckle to his empty eye-socket. 'It feels hot. I have infection in me.' His voice held a note of incredulity. 'This should not be.' He thought for a moment. 'They used chemical agents in the fighting. Maybe biological too. It would seem my system has been compromised.'

The Astartes looked at the man who knelt by him. 'I must rejoin my brethren. I need a deep space comms link. Do you know where there would be such a thing?'

The boy's father tugged at his lower lip. 'In the city, at the spaceport I suppose. But the city is pretty much destroyed. There may be nothing left.'

The Astartes nodded again. Something like humanity came into his surviving eye. 'I remember. Our Deep Strike teams made planetfall not far from the landing fields. The Thunderhawks took out positions all up and

down the pads. They had drop-ships there, three of them. We got them all.'

'Who were they, lord, if I might ask?'

The Astartes smiled, though the effect was less humorous than ferocious on that massive, brutal face. 'Those who brought us here were the enemies of Man – a Chaos faction my Chapter has been charged with eradicating for decades now. They call themselves the *Punishers*. They meant to take over your world and use it as a bridgehead to conquer the rest of the system. My brothers and I saved you from that fate.'

'You destroyed my world,' the boy said, high and shrill with anger. 'You didn't save anything – you burnt us to ash!'

The giant regarded him gravely. 'Yes, we did. But I promise you that the Punishers would have done worse, had they been allowed. Your people would have been cattle to them, mere sport for the vilest appetites imaginable. Those who died quickly would have been the lucky ones. You will rebuild your world – it may take twenty years, but you can do it. Had it been tainted by Chaos, there would have been nothing for it but to scald it down to the very guts of the planet, and leave it an airless cinder.'

The man grasped his son's arm. 'He's young – he knows nothing.'

'Well, consider this part of his education,' the Astartes snapped. 'Now find me something we can use to splint my leg – and something to lean on that will take my weight. I must get mobile – and I need a weapon.'

Their search took much of the day, until finally they hit upon dismantling one of the discarded weapons lying on the battlefield and using the recoil rod within the firing mechanism to splint the Astartes's thigh. As he tied it tight about his lacerated flesh with lengths of wire, the giant ground his teeth, and pus popped out of the hot red wound in his leg. The boy's father retrieved the Imperium weapon his son had found the day before. The Astartes's eyes lit up as he saw it, then narrowed again as he popped the magazine and checked the seat of the rounds within. 'Maybe thirty, if we're lucky. Well, a working bolter is worth something. Now hand me that pole.'

The pole was part of the innards of one of the great biomechanical carcasses which littered the field. The Astartes regarded it with disgust, wiping it clean with wet soil and sand. He used it as a staff, and was finally able to lever himself upright. In his free fist he held the bolter. He found its weight hard to manage in his weakened state however, and so fashioned a sling from more gleaned wire so that he might let it swing at his side. The wire of the sling cut into his shoulder, slicing the skin, but he seemed not to feel the pain.

'It'll be dark soon,' the boy's father said. 'We should perhaps stay here another night and then set off at dawn.'

'No time,' the Astartes said. Now that he was upright he seemed even huger, half as tall again as the man in front of him, his hands as big as

shovels, his chest as wide as a dining table. ‘I see in the dark. You can follow me.’ With that, he set off, hobbling down the slopes of the shattered hillside to the valley below, where the sun was setting in a maelstrom of black cloud and toiling pillars of even blacker smoke, still rising from the stricken city that was their destination.

They walked half the night. The ground they traversed was broken by great bombardments and littered with the wreckage of war machines, some tracked, some wheeled, and some it seemed fashioned with arms and legs. They stopped once beside a great burnt-out carcass which squatted as tall as a building. So shot to pieces was it that its original shape could hardly be made out, but the Astartes limped up to it and carefully, reverently clicked off a metal seal with a tattered remnant of parchment still clinging to it. He bowed his head over this relic. ‘Ah, brother,’ he whispered.

‘What is it?’ the boy asked, even as his father tried to hush him.

‘One of my battle-brothers; a spirit so bold, so fine, he chose to be encased in this mighty Dreadnought after his own body was destroyed, to carry on the fight, to stay with us, his brethren. His friends. His name was Geherran. He was with my company, and saved us from these–’ Here the Astartes gestured at the other wrecks which stood round about, evil, crab-like structures adorned with all manner of ordnance, emblazoned with sickening symbols, ‘–these defilers. Abominations of Chaos. He broke them, took their heaviest fire upon himself so we might bring them down one by one.’

The Astartes blinked his one eye, then straightened, and limped on without another word.

The boy and his father followed him through a graveyard of the great machines, awed by their size, and the way in which they had been blasted to pieces where they stood. As the planet’s two moons began to rise, it seemed they were in the midst of some ancient arena, where the dead had been left forgotten in mounds about them. But the dead were all twisted, snarling, white-faced and putrid. In the moons’ light, it did not do to look at them too closely.

They entered the suburbs of the city and began to encounter signs of life. Rats flickered and squealed amid avalanches of rubble, and here and there a dog growled at them from the deepest shadows, eyes alight with madness, luminous foam dripping from its jaws. Once, a stream of cockroaches, each as big as a man’s fist, went chittering across their path, dragging some unidentifiable chunk of carrion with them as they went. The Astartes watched them go thoughtfully, hefting the bolter.

‘Such creatures are not native to this world, am I right?’

The boy’s father was wide-eyed. ‘Not that I have heard.’

‘Something has been happening here. My brothers would not have left this

world again so quickly unless there was a good reason. My guess is something called them out of orbit. A secondary threat of some kind.'

'You think they destroyed all the enemy down here on the surface?'

'We do not leave jobs half done.'

'How do you know?' the boy piped up. 'You were buried under a ton of stone, dead to the world. They left you behind.'

The Astartes turned, and in his eye they could see a light not unlike that in the dog's caught by lamplight. But he said nothing. The boy was cuffed across the back of his head by his father.

They moved on, more slowly now, for the Astartes was straining to keep his massive firearm at the ready. An ordinary man would struggle to lift, let alone fire it. His metal staff clicked against the plascrete underfoot, and stones skittered aside as his feet found their way. Watching him, the boy realised that the giant was near the end of his strength, and now he noticed also that the Astartes was leaving a thickly stippled trail of dark liquid in his wake. He was bleeding to death. He pointed this out to his father, who grasped up at the giant's arm.

'Your leg – you must let me look at it.'

'My systems should have taken care of it. I am infected. Some kind of bio-agent. I can feel it in my skull, like red-hot worms writhing behind my eyes. I need an Apothecary.' The Astartes was panting heavily. 'How far to the spaceport?'

'Another four or five kilometres.'

'Then I will rest, for now. We must find somewhere to lay up until daylight. I don't like this place, these ruins. There is something here.'

'No bodies,' the boy said, making his companions stare at him. He shrugged. 'Where are all the dead people? There's nothing but vermin left.'

'Lean on me,' the boy's father said to the ailing giant. 'There are houses on our right, up ahead, and they look more intact. We'll find one with a roof.'

By they time they bedded down for what remained of the darkness the Astartes was shivering uncontrollably, though his skin was almost too hot to touch. They gathered rainwater out of puddles and broken crockery and sipped enough of the black, disgusting liquid to moisten their mouths. The air was full of smoke and soot which left a gritty taste on the tongue and there were sparks flying in the midst of the reek.

'The fires are up north, towards the spaceport,' the boy's father said, rubbing his aching shoulder.

The Astartes nodded. He stroked the bolter in his lap as though it comforted him. 'It may be best if I go on alone,' he said.

'My other shoulder is still good enough to lean on.'

The giant smiled. 'What are you, a farmer?'

‘I was. I had cattle. Now I have rocks and ash.’

‘And a son, who still lives.’

‘For now,’ the man said, and he looked at the filthy, pinched face of his son, who lay sleeping like an abandoned orphan, wrapped in the charred rags of a blanket on the floor.

‘Think of him, then – you have accompanied me far enough.’

‘Yes,’ the boy’s father said dryly. ‘And you are in such tremendous shape. You want rid of us because you think something bad is up ahead, at the spaceport, and you want to spare us.’

The giant inclined his head. ‘Fighting is my life, not yours.’

‘Something tells me this thing is not over. Your brothers overlooked something when they left. This is my world we are on – I will help you fight for it. There is nothing behind me but burnt earth, anyway.’

‘So be it,’ the Astartes said. ‘At daybreak we will walk out together.’

Daybreak did not come. Instead there was only a slight lightening of the darkness, and in the sky ahead, a glow which had nothing to do with the colour of flame. The two moons were setting amid oceans of smoke, and the smoke itself was tinted on its underside, a colour like the underbelly of a maggot.

The Astartes rose unaided. His remaining eye seemed to have sunk into his skull, so that it was but a single gimlet gleam in his soot-blackened face. He cast aside his iron staff and stood upright as the pus ran yellow and pink from his swollen leg. The agony of it brought the sweat running down his forehead, but his face was impassive, at peace.

‘The Emperor watch over us,’ he said quietly as the boy and his father rose in turn, rubbing their smarting eyes. ‘We must be quick and quiet now, like hunters.’

The three set off.

The scream burst ahead of them like a fire in the night, a tearing shriek which rose to the limits of human capacity, and then was cut off. There was a murmur, as of a distant engine, heavy machinery moving. And when it stopped they heard another sound, murmuring through the heavy smoke and the preternatural darkness. Voices, many voices chanting in unison.

The three of them went to ground in a burning house as the gledes and coals of the rafters spat and showered them. Some hissed as they landed on the sweat of the Astartes’s back, but he did not so much as twitch.

‘Cultists,’ he said, listening. ‘They’re at the work of the warp, some ceremony or sorcery.’

His two companions stared at him, uncomprehending.

‘Followers of the Dark Powers,’ he explained, ‘gulled or tortured into

subservience. They are fodder for our guns.' Carefully, he unloaded the magazine from his bolter, eyed the rounds, and then kissed the cold metal before reloading. He eased back the cocking handle with a double click, like the lock of a door going back and forth.

'How far to the spaceport now?'

'We're almost on it,' the man told him. He was gripping his son's shoulder until his knuckles showed white. 'Up ahead the road turns to the right, and there's a gate, and walls – the spaceport is within.'

'I doubt the walls still stand,' the Astartes said with grim humour.

'There's a guardpost and a small barracks for the militia just within the gate – and an armoury out back, by the control tower. Ammunition, lasguns.'

'Lasguns,' the Astartes said with a kind of contempt. 'I am used to heavier metal, my friend. But it may be worth checking out. We need something to up our killing power. From here in, you stay close to me, both of you.'

He sprang up, and was off with barely a limp. With astonishing speed he sprinted to the end of the street and disappeared into the shell of the last house on the right. After a moment's hesitation, the man and his son got up and followed him.

He was right – the walls had been blasted away. In fact most of the buildings on this side of the spaceport lay in ruins, and the landing pads themselves were cratered with massive shell-holes and littered with the debris of all sorts of orbital craft. At the western end, three tall towers of twisted wreckage stood out, the smoke wreathing them, fires still burning deep in their tangled hulls.

'Punisher drop-pods' the Astartes said. 'We got all three.'

'There's another one,' the boy spoke up, pointing.

They peered together, squinting in the smoke. The boy was right. A fourth, undamaged drop-pod was squatting to the east, where the damage to the landing pads was less severe. Infantry was marching down its ramps.

The Astartes's face creased with hatred. 'It would seem my brothers and I were not as thorough as we thought. We must get word to my company, or your planet will fall to the enemy after all. We must have comms!'

'It'll be in the control tower, out yonder – if it's still intact,' the man said, jerking his head to the north. Dimly through the smoke they could make out a pale white pillar with a cluster of grey plascrete buildings around its foot. There seemed to be no enemy activity out in that direction, but with the smoke and gathering darkness it was hard to be sure.

'Then that is where we go,' the Astartes said simply. 'My brothers must be brought back to this world to cleanse it – or else they will have to extinguish it from space – get down!' This last was in a hiss. A troop of enemy infantry marched past. Strange, angular bald-headed men with heavily tattooed faces. They wore long leather coats adorned with studs and chains and what seemed

to be human body parts. They bore lasguns, and chattered and snarled incessantly as they passed by.

‘Their talk hurts my ears,’ the boy said, rubbing his head.

‘The warp infects them,’ the Astartes told him. ‘If we cannot cleanse this place, then it will begin to infect the remainder of your people.’ He lifted a hand to the wound where his eye had been, then dropped it again. ‘To the tower, then.’

They ran, right into the heart of the foul-smelling smoke. The boy became dizzy, and found it hard to breathe, and the distant chanting of the cultists seemed to cloud over his thinking. He faltered, and found himself standing still, staring vacantly, aware that he was missing something.

Then he found himself lifted into the air and crushed against an enormous, fever-hot body. The Astartes had picked him up and tucked him under his free arm, still running.

Out of nowhere a cluster of pale faces appeared in the smoke. Before they could even raise their weapons the Astartes was upon them. A kick broke the ribcage of one and sent him hurtling off into the darkness. The heavy bolter was swung like a club and smashed the heads of two more into red ruin, almost decapitating them. The fourth got off a red burst of lasgun fire that spiked out harmlessly into the air, before the Astartes, dropping the boy, had him by the throat. He crushed the man’s windpipe with one quick clench of his fist, and tossed him aside.

‘Get the weapons,’ he said to the man and the boy, panting. ‘Grenades, anything.’ He bent over and coughed, and a gout of dark liquid sprayed out of his mouth to splatter all over the plascrete landing strip. He swayed for a second, then straightened. When his companions had retrieved two lasguns and a sling of grenades from the bodies he nodded. ‘Someone may have seen that las-fire. If we run into more of them, do not stop – keep running.’

They set off again. The giant was hobbling now, and left a trail of blood behind him, but he still set a fearsome pace, and it was all the man and his son could do to keep up with him, as they fought for air in the reeking hell that surrounded them.

At last the white pillar of the control tower appeared out of the smoke – and a band of cultists at its foot. They saw the shapes come running out of the darkness at them and set up a kind of shriek and began firing wildly. Las-fire came arcing through the air.

In return the Astartes halted, set the bolter in his shoulder, and began firing.

Short bursts, no more, two or three rounds at a time. But when the heavy ordnance hit the cultists it blew them apart. He took down eight of them before the first las-burst hit him, in the stomach. He staggered, and the bolter-muzzle dropped, but a second later he had raised it again and blew to pieces

the cultist who had shot him.

The boy and his father lay on the ground and started firing also, but the heavy Chaos lasguns were unwieldy and hard to handle – their shots went wild. The boy fumbled with the sling of grenades and popped out one thumb-sized bomb. There was a tiny red button at the top of the little cylinder. He pressed it, and then tossed the thing at the cultists. It clinked on the base of the tower and lay at their feet. One looked at it with dawning horror on his face, and then the grenade exploded, and splattered him in scarlet fragments across the white painted wall of the control tower, along with three of his comrades.

The rest broke and ran, quickly disappearing into the toiling darkness. The Astartes sank to one knee, leaning on his bolter. His other hand was bunched in a fist where the lasgun had burnt a black hole through his torso from front to back.

‘You need my shoulder again, I think,’ the man said, helping up the maimed giant. ‘Not far to go now. Lean on me, my friend. I will get you there.’

The Astartes managed a strangled laugh, but said no more.

They found the door ajar, a tall steel affair whose command-box had been blown out. The man made as if to enter but the Astartes held him back. ‘Grenade first,’ he rasped.

The boy tossed another of the little explosives inside. He was smiling as he did so, and when the thing went off, he laughed.

‘I am glad everyone finds this so amusing,’ his father said, as he stepped inside.

Two dead bodies, blown to pieces in the confined chamber at the base of the tower. There was an elevator, but the boy punched its buttons in vain.

‘No power, Pa,’ he said. ‘The whole place is dead.’

‘Stairs,’ the Astartes gasped.

‘Listen,’ the man said. ‘Outside – can you hear it?’

A confused babel, a roaring, bellowing sound of voices, some shrill, some deep. Even as they listened, it grew louder.

‘Get the door closed,’ the Astartes snapped. ‘Block it, jam it – use anything you can.’

They slammed the heavy steel door shut, and piled up whatever they could find in the way of wreckage and furniture against it. The Astartes, with an agonised cry, wrenched a stretch of iron piping free of the wall and wedged it against the steel. Seconds later, the cacophony of voices was right outside, and they were hammering on the door. Gunfire sounded, and shells rang loudly against the metal.

That won’t hold them,’ the man said. He and his son were white-faced, and sweat was cutting stripes down the grime on their faces.

‘Up,’ the Astartes said impatiently. ‘We must go up. You first, then your boy. I will hold the rear. Any sounds ahead of you, start firing and keep firing.’

‘We’re trapped here,’ the man said unsteadily.

‘Move!’ the giant barked.

The stairs wound round the inside of the tower like the thread of a screw. They laboured up them in almost pitch darkness, the sound of their own harsh breathing magnified by the plascrete to left and right, their feet sounding hollow on the metal steps. Several times the Astartes paused to listen as they ascended, and once he ordered them to halt.

‘Anyone got a light?’ he asked.

‘I have,’ the boy said. There was a whirring sound, and then a feeble glow began, yellow and flickering. It strengthened as the boy kept winding up his torch.

‘Good for you,’ the Astartes said. ‘Give me those grenades.’ He popped one out of the sling and peered at it.

‘They copy us in everything – these are just like Imperium charges. They have three settings: instant, delay and proximity. The most obvious one is delay, the red button on top – give thanks to the Emperor you picked that one back outside. You twist the top of the cylinder for the other settings.’ He did so. ‘Move up the stairs.’ He set down the little cylinder upright, pressed the red button on its top, and then followed them. Behind him there were three tiny clicks, and then silence.

‘The next thing to approach that is going to have a surprise. I just hope there are no rats in here. Move out.’

Round the tower they went by the flickering glow of the boy’s clockwork torch. Finally they came to another steel door. It was very slightly ajar, and there were voices on the far side. The boy reached for the grenades, but the Astartes stopped him. ‘We need this place intact. Get behind me.’

He kicked open the door and there was a roar of bolter fire, a stuttering series of flashes, and then a click as the bolter’s magazine came up empty. The Astartes roared and lunged forward.

Behind him, the boy and his father burst through the doorway, coughing on the cordite stink that filled the space beyond. They were in a large circular room filled with consoles and monitors, with huge windows that overlooked the entire spaceport. A trio of cultists lay dead, their innards scattered like red streamers across the electronic wall-consoles of the tower. On the far side of the room, a titanic battle was raging, smashing back and forth, sending chairs flying, filling the air with broken glass. The Astartes was struggling with a dark, armoured figure almost as massive as himself, and the two were grappling with each other, bellowing like two bulls intent on mayhem. The boy and his father stood staring, lasguns almost forgotten in their hands.

The Astartes was knocked clear across the room. He crashed into the heavy blast-proof glass of the tower and the impact spidered it out in a web of cracks. His adversary straightened, and there was the sound of horrible, unhinged laughter.

‘Brother Marine!’ the voice gargled, ‘You have not come dressed for the occasion! Where is your blue livery now, Dark Hunter? Can’t you see you are on the wrong world? This place is ours now!’

The speaker was clad in power armour similar to that they had found the Astartes wearing, but it was bone-white in colour, and a black skeleton had been picked out upon it with ebony inlays. Its bearer wore a helm adorned with two great horns, and the light from his eye sockets glowed sickening green. The many-arrowed star of Chaos had been engraved on his breastplate, and in his hand he held a cruel monomolecular blade which shone with blood.

‘How many of you are left now, heretic?’ the Astartes spat. ‘My brothers will wipe you from this system as a man wipes shit from the sole of his boot.’

‘Big words, from the mouth of a cripple,’ the Chaos warrior snarled. He drew a bolt pistol from its holster and aimed it at the Astartes’s head.

The boy and his father both raised their lasguns and fired in the same moment. The man missed, but his son’s burst caught the enemy warrior just under the armpit. The fearsome figure cried out in pain and anger, and dropped the knife. The pistol swung round.

‘What are these, brother– pets of yours? They need chastising.’

He opened fire. The pistol bucked in his hand and the impact of the heavy rounds sent the boy’s father smashing back against the wall behind, ripping open his chest and filling the air with gore. The Chaos warrior stepped forward, still firing, and the bolter shells blew open the wall in a line of explosions as he followed the flight of the boy, who had dropped his lasgun and was scrabbling on hands and knees for the shelter of the consoles. The magazine clicked dry, and the warrior flicked it free, reaching in his belt for another one. ‘Such vermin on this world – they must be exterminated to the last squealing morsel.’

‘I agree,’ the Astartes said.

The Chaos warrior spun round, and was staggered backwards by the force of the blow. He fell full length on his back. Dropping his pistol, his hands came up to his chest to find the hilt of his knife buried in his own breastplate. There was a thin, almost inaudible whine as the filament blade continued to vibrate deep in his body cavity.

The Astartes, his face a swollen mask of blood, dropped to his knees beside his prone enemy.

‘We have two hearts each, you and me,’ he said. ‘That is how we are made. We were created for the betterment of Man, to make this galaxy a place of order and peace.’ He gripped the knife blade, slapping his struggling

adversary's hands aside, and pulled the weapon free. A thin jet of blood sprang out, and the Chaos warrior grunted in agony.

'Let me see if I can find that second heart,' the Astartes said, and he plunged the knife downwards again.

The boy crept out of his hiding place and crouched by the mangled remains of his father. His face was blank, wide eyes in a filthy blood-spattered mask. He closed his father's staring eyes and clenched his own teeth on a sob. The he stood up and retrieved his lasgun.

The Astartes was lying by the wall in a pool of his own blood, his dead enemy sprawled beside him. His body was white as ivory, and the blood leaking from his wounds had slowed to a trickle. He looked up at the boy with his remaining eye. They stared at one another for a moment.

'Help me up,' the Astartes said at last, and the boy somehow climbed behind him and pushed his immense torso upright.

'Your father–' the Astartes began, and then there was a dull boom from below them.

'The grenade,' the boy said dully. 'They're on the stairs.'

'Toss another one down there and then lock the door,' the Astartes said. 'Bring me over that bolt pistol when you're done.'

'What's the point?' the boy asked, sullen. His eyes were red and bloodshot. He looked like a little old man, shrunken and defeated.

'Do as I say,' the Astartes cracked out, glaring. 'It's not over while we live, not for us, not for your world. Now toss the grenade!'

The boy looked round the door.

'There's movement on the stairs,' he said, calm now. He pressed the red button on the explosive and threw it down the stairs. It bounced and clinked and clicked as it went down the steps. He shut the heavy metal door and slid the bar-lock in place. Another boom, closer than the first. There were screams below them, and the floor quivered. The boy handed the Astartes the bolt pistol, and the giant ripped the ammo belt off the fallen Chaos Marine, clicking in a fresh magazine and cocking the weapon.

'I've found the comms,' the boy said, across the room. He flicked several switches up and down. 'At least I think so – it looks like a comms unit anyway. But it's dead. There's no power.'

The Astartes laboured over to the boy on his hands and knees. Blood dripped out of his mouth and nose and ears. He sounded as though he were breathing through water.

'Yes, that's it. Old-fashioned. But it still needs power.' He sighed deeply. 'Well, that's that then.'

The boy stared at the dead lights on the console. He was frowning. He did not even start when the first battering began on the door to the control room,

and a slavering and snarling on the other side of it, as though a herd of beasts milled there.

‘Power,’ he said. ‘I have power – I have power here.’ His face quickened. ‘My torch!’

He drew it out of the bag of oddments at his waist. ‘I can attach it – I can plug it in and get it running!’

The Astartes drew himself up and sat on the creaking chair before the console. ‘A fine idea, but you’ll never crank up enough power with that little hand-held dynamo.’

‘There must be something!’

They stared at the dead array of lights and switches before them. The comms unit was a relic, a patched up antique for use on a far-flung border world. The Astartes’s good eye narrowed.

‘Plug in your torch and start winding,’ he said.

‘But–’

‘Just do it!’ He scrabbled open the wooden drawer below the console, while behind them both, blow after heavy blow was rained down on the door to the chamber. The lock-bar bent inwards. A chorus of cackles and growls sounded on the other side, like the memory of a fevered nightmare.

‘Sometimes they hang on to the most obsolete of technologies on worlds like yours,’ the Astartes said. He smiled. ‘Because they still work.’ From a tangle of junk in the drawer, he produced a contraption of wires and a small knobbed device. He stared at it, considering a moment, and then set it up on the bench, plugging it into the adaptor socket. Immediately, a small green light came on within it.

‘Built to last,’ he muttered. He closed his eye, and then began tapping down on the device. A high series of clicks and tones was audible. He adjusted the frequency with an ancient circular dial, and there was a faint crackle.

The two of them were so intent, the boy turning the handle on his creaking torch, the giant tapping away on the strange device, that they were almost oblivious to the grinding and banging at the room’s door.

‘Is it working?’ the boy asked.

‘The signal is going out. The code is ancient; a relic of old Earth, but we still use it in my Chapter, for its simplicity. It is elegant, older even than the Imperium itself. But like many simple, elegant things in this universe, it has endured.’

The Space Marine stopped his tapping. ‘Enough. We must see if we can get you out of here.’

‘There’s no way out,’ the boy said.

‘There’s always a way out,’ the Astartes told him. He turned and fired at the plexi-glass of the control tower. It shattered and cascaded in an avalanche of jagged shards. Then he reached into the console drawer with a fist and

produced a long coil of dull coppery wire.

‘It will slice your hands as you go down,’ he said to the boy, ‘but you must hold on. When you get to the bottom, start running.’

‘What about you?’

The Space Marine smiled. ‘I will be on the other end. Now do it.’

The door burst open, and was flung back against the wall with a clang. A huge figure loomed out of the darkness, and more were behind it.

The Astartes was slumped by the huge broken maw of the plexiglass window, a glint of wire wrapped round one arm, disappearing into the smoky vacancy beyond. He bared his teeth in a rictus.

‘What kept you?’ he asked the hulking shapes as they advanced on him. Then he raised his free arm and fired a full magazine from the bolt pistol into the intruders. Screams and yowls rent the air, and the foremost two shapes were blasted off their feet.

But more were behind them. The howling mob in the doorway poured into the room, firing bolters as they came, the heavy rounds blasting everything to pieces.

Away from the tortured little world, the vastness of hanging space was utterly silent, peaceful, but in the midst of that peace tiny flowers of light bloomed, white and yellow, lasting only an instant before lack of oxygen snuffed them out. From a distance – a great distance – they seemed minute and beautiful, brief jewels in the blackness. Closer to, the story was different.

There were craft floating in the blackness, immense structures of steel and ceramite and titanium and a thousand other alloys, constructed with an eye to utility, to endurance. Made for destruction. They looked like vast airborne temples created for the worship of a deranged god, kilometres long, their flanks bristling with turrets and batteries. About them, smaller craft wheeled and dove like flycatchers on the hide of a rhino.

Within the largest of these craft an assemblage of giants stood clad in shining dark blue armour, unhelmed, their pale faces reflecting back the distant infernos that were on the viewscreens to their front. All around them, travesties of man and machine worked silently, murmuring into their stations, hands of flesh working in harmony with limbs of steel and muti-hued wiring. Incense hung in the air, mixed with the unmistakable fragrance of gun-oil.

‘You’re sure of this, brother?’ one of the giant figures said, not turning his head from the scenes of kinetic mayhem on the screens about him.

‘Yes, captain. The signal lasted only some forty-five seconds, but there was no doubting its content. Several of my comms-techs know the old code, as do the Adeptus Mechanicus. It is a survival from ancient days.’

‘And the content of the message?’

‘One phrase, repeated again and again. Captain, the phrase was *Umbra Sumus*.’

At this, all the standing figures started and turned towards the speaker. They were all two and a half metres high, clad in midnight-blue armour. All had the white symbol of the double-headed axe on one of their shoulderguards. They carried their helms in the crook of their arms, and bolt-pistols were holstered on their thighs.

‘Mardius, are you sure – that is what it said?’

‘Yes, captain. I have triple checked. The signal was logged and recorded.’

The captain drew in a sharp breath. ‘The motto of our order.’

‘*We are shadows*. Yes, captain. No Punisher would ever utter those words – the hatred they feel for the Dark Hunters is too great. It is my belief one or more of our brethren sent it from the surface of the planet; he was contacting us in the only way he could. Or warning us.’

‘The signal cut off, you say?’

‘It was very faint. It may have been cut off or it may merely have passed out of our range-width. We are too far away to scan the planet. The signal itself took the better part of ten days to reach us.’

‘Brother Avriel,’ the captain snapped. ‘Who was unaccounted for after we left the surface?’

Another of the giants stepped forward. ‘Brother Pieter. No trace was found of him. We would have searched longer, but–’

‘But the Punishers had to be pursued. Quite right, Avriel. No blame is attached to my query. It was the priority at the time.’ The captain stared up at one of the giant screens again. Within the massive nave of the starship, there was almost silence, except for the clicks and muttering of the adepts at their posts.

‘No other communications from planetside?’

‘None whatsoever, captain. Their infrastructure was comprehensively destroyed during our assault, and it was a backwater to begin with. One spaceport, and nothing but suborbital craft across the whole planet.’

‘Yes, yes, I am aware of the facts of the campaign, Avriel.’ The captain frowned, the studs on his brow almost disappearing in the folds of scarred flesh there. At last he looked up.

‘This engagement here is almost concluded. The Punisher flotilla has been crippled and well nigh destroyed. As soon as we have finished off the last of their strike craft we will turn about, and set a course for Perreken.’

‘Go back?’ one of the Astartes said. ‘But it’s been weeks. If it was Pieter–’

‘Avriel,’ the captain snapped, ‘What is our estimated journey time to the planet?’

‘At best speed, some thirty-six days, captain.’

‘Emperor guide us, that’s a long time to leave a Brother-Marine alone,’ one

of the others said.

‘We do this not just for our brother,’ the captain told them. ‘If any taint of Chaos has remained on the planet then it must be burnt out, or our mission in this system will have utterly failed. We return to Perreken, brothers – in force.’

The ceremony was almost complete. For weeks the cultists and their champions had danced and prayed and chanted and wept. Now their mission was close to its fruition. Across the plascrete of the landing pads, a dark stain had grown. This was no burn mark, no sear of energy weapon or bombardment crater. Within its shadow the ground bubbled like soup left too long on a stove. It steamed and groaned, cracking upwards, segments of plascrete floating on the unquiet surface. The screaming chant of the cultists reached a new level, one that human ears could barely comprehend. Hundreds of them were gathered around the unquiet, desecrated stain of earth.

‘Hold your fire until I give the word,’ the boy said, and up and down the line the order was passed along. In a series of impact craters to the east of the spaceport scores of men and women lay hidden by the broken rubble. They were a tatterdemalion band of ragged figures weighed down by bandoliers of ammunition and a bewildering assortment of weaponry, some modern and well-kept, some ancient and worn-out. Once, a long time ago it seemed now, they had been civilians, non-combatants. But now that distinction had ceased to exist on Perreken.

A black-bearded man who lay beside the boy was chewing on his thumbnail nervously. ‘If we’ve got this wrong, then all of us will die here today,’ he said.

‘That is why I didn’t get it wrong,’ the boy said. He turned to stare at his companion and the black-bearded man looked away, unable to meet those eyes.

Almost three months had passed since the boy had slid down a piece of wire held by a dead Space Marine. In that time he had broadened, grown taller, and yet more gaunt. The flesh of his face had been stripped back to the bone by hunger and exhaustion, and his eyes were blank with the look of a man who has seen too much. Despite his youth, no one questioned his leadership. It was as if his fellow fighters recognised something unique in him, something none of the rest of them possessed.

The boy held an Astartes bolt pistol in his hands, and as he lay there in the crater with the rank sweat of fear filling the air around him, he bent his head and kissed the double-headed eagle on the barrel. Then he fumbled in the canvas satchel at his side and produced a mess of wires and a little control panel. A green light burned on the heavy battery still in the satchel.

‘Send it,’ he said to the black-bearded man. ‘It’s time.’

His companion began tapping clicks out on the elderly wired contraption. ‘May the Emperor smile on us today,’ he muttered. ‘And may His Angels arrive on time.’

‘When the Astartes say they will do something, they do it,’ the boy said. ‘They gave their word. They will be here.’

Across the landing fields, the cultists were dancing and stamping and screaming their way into a frenzy. Some of the madly cavorting figures had once been smallholders and blacksmiths and businessmen, friends and neighbours of the ragged guerrillas who lay in wait among the craters to the east. Now they had been turned into chattels of the Dark Gods, worshippers of that which drew its strength from the warp. And now the warp had stirred them into a kind of ecstasy, and it fed off their worship, their blood-sacrifices. The patch of ground which they circled darkened further, popping and undulating as though cooked on some great invisible flame.

And inside that roiling cauldron, something stirred. There was a momentary glimpse of something breaking the surface, like the fin of a great whale at sea. The earth spat upwards, as though trying to escape whatever writhed beneath it. The cultists went into paroxysms, prostrating themselves, shrieking until the blood vessels in their throats burst and sprayed the air with their life fluids. Farther back from the edge, the armour-clad champions of their kind stood and stamped and clashed power swords against their breastplates. The darkness thickened over them all like a shroud.

The boy lay and watched them with his face disfigured by hatred and fear. Up and down the line there was a murmur as his fellow fighters brought their weapons into their shoulders. Some were priming homemade bombs, others were checking magazines. They were an underfed, rancid, ill-equipped band, but they held their position with real discipline, waiting for their young leader’s word.

I did that, the boy thought. I made them like this. I am good at it.

He could barely remember a time now when he had been a mere farm boy, living on a green planet where the skies were blue and there was fresh food to be had, clean water to drink. He could barely even remember his father. That boy who had known a father was someone else, from another time. All he could remember now was the endless smoke-shrouded landscape, the constant fear, the explosions of bloody violence, the carnage. And the face of the Astartes who had died while helping him to live. That, he could not forget.

Nor could he forget the moment of sheer bubbling joy and relief when the ancient comms device he had found in the city had proved to work as well as that which they had found in the control tower. One of the older men knew the ancient code by heart and taught it to him. When the first message had

come clicking back at them from a far-flung starship on the other side of the system it had seemed like a benediction from the God-Emperor Himself. It was enough to engender hope, to help him recruit fighters from the shattered survivors of the population. They had lived like rats, scavenging, scurrying for weeks and then months in the ruins of their world. Until today. Today they would stand up and take it back.

That was the plan.

The boy clambered to his feet just as the battery-fed contraption in the satchel clicked by itself in a sharp staccato final message.

An incoming message.

The boy smiled. ‘Open fire!’ he shouted.

And all around him hell erupted.

The chanting of the cultists faltered. They looked up, distracted, angry, shocked. The first volley cut down almost a hundred. Then the ragged guerrillas followed the boy’s lead and charged forward across the broken plascrete of the landing field, firing as they came and yelling at the top of their voices.

The ring of cultists opened up, fraying under the shock of the assault. But there were many hundreds more of them further west by their drop-pods. These now set up a cacophony of fury, and began running eastwards to meet the attack.

The boy went to one knee, picking his targets calmly, firing two or three rounds into each. The enemy formation had splintered – they were confused, scattered, but in their midst their champions were restoring discipline quickly, shooting the more panicked of their underlings, roaring at the rest to stand fast.

Now, the boy thought. *It must be now*.

In the sky above the spaceport, eye-blinding lights appeared, lancing even through the heavy smoke and the preternatural night. With them came a sullen, earth-trembling roar.

In an explosion of concrete and soil, a behemoth thundered to earth. It was dozens of metres tall, painted midnight blue, and on its multi-faceted sides was painted the sigil of the double-headed axe. It scattered the cultists through the air with the force of its impact, and in its wake came another, and another, and then two more. It was as if a series of great metal castles had suddenly been hurled to earth.

With a scream of straining metal, long hatches fell down from the sides of these monstrous apparitions, as though they were the petals opening on a flower. These hatches hit the ground and buried themselves in earth and shattered stone and the bodies of the screaming cultists, becoming ramps. And down the ramps came an army, a host of armour-clad warriors blazing a bloody path with the automatic fire of bolters, melta guns, plasma rifles and

rocket launchers. In their midst hulking Dreadnoughts strode, picking up the cultist champions in their clawed fists and tossing them away like discarded rags. They belched flame as they came, incinerating the cultists, boiling their flesh within their armour, making of them black desiccated statues.

And overhead the engines of destruction swooped down to unloose cargoes of bombs on the unholy stain which the Chaos minions had inflicted upon the tortured planet. As they went off, so in their brilliant light something bestial and immense could be seen twisting and thrashing in its last agonies. It sank down below the level of the plascrete launch pad as though below the surface of a lake, bellowing, and as the missiles rained down on it, so the blackened earth became solid again, and the stain became that of normal charred earth and stone, the desecration lifted before it could be consummated.

The boy stood with his bolt pistol forgotten in his hands, staring at that great storm of fire, a scene like the ending of a world. He felt the concussion of the shells beat at the air in his very lungs, and the heat of them crackled the hair on his head, but he stood oblivious. Tears shone in his eyes as he watched the obliteration of those who had destroyed his home, and in that moment there was only a single thought in his mind.

He stared at the massive, fearsome ranks of the advancing Space Marines, and thought: this is me – this is what I want to be.

Thus did the Dark Hunters Chapter of the Adeptus Astartes return to the planet of Perreken, to save a world, and to retrieve the remains of one of their own.

AT GAIUS POINT

Aaron Dembski-Bowden

I

The memory of fire. Fire and falling, incineration and annihilation.

Then darkness.

Absolute silence. Absolute nothing.

II

I open my eyes.

There before me, outlined by scrolling white text across my targeting display, is a shattered metal wall. Its architecture is gothic in nature – a skeletal wall, with black steel girders like ribs helping form the wall's curvature. It is mangled and bent. Crushed, even.

I do not know where I am, but my senses are awash with perception. I hear the crackle of fire eating metal, and the angry hum of live battle armour. The sound is distorted, a hitch or a burr in the usually steady thrum. Damage has been sustained. My armour is compromised. A glance at the bio-feed displays shows minor damage to the armour plating of my wrist and shin. Nothing serious.

I smell the flames nearby, and the bitter rancidity of melting steel. I smell my own body; the sweat, the chemicals injecting into my flesh by my armour, and the intoxicatingly rich scent of my own blood.

A god's blood.

Refined and thinned for use in mortal veins, but a god's blood nevertheless.

A dead god. A slain angel.

The thought brings my teeth together in a grunted curse, my fangs scraping the teeth below. Enough of this weakness.

I rise, muscles of aching flesh bunching in unison with the fibre-bundle false muscles of my armour. It is a sensation I am familiar with, yet it feels somehow flawed. I should be stronger. I should exult in my strength, the ultimate fusion of biological potency and machine power.

I do not feel strong. I feel nothing but pain and a momentary disorientation. The pain is centralised in my spinal column and shoulder blades, turning my back into a pillar of dull, aching heat. Nothing is broken – bio-feeds have already confirmed that. The soreness of muscle and nerve would have killed a human, but we are gene-forged into greater beings.

Already, the weakness fades. My blood stings with the flood of adrenal stimulants and kinetic enhancement narcotics rushing through my veins.

My movement is unimpeded. I rise to my feet, slow not from weakness now, but from caution.

With my vision stained a cooling emerald shade by my helm's green eye lenses, I take in the wreckage around me.

This chamber is ruined, half-crushed with its walls distorted. Restraint thrones lie broken, torn from the floor. The two bulkheads leading from the chamber are both wrenched from their hinges, hanging at warped angles.

The impact must have been savage.

The… impact?

The crash. Our Thunderhawk crashed. The clarity of recollection is sickening… the sense of falling from the sky, my senses drenched in the thunder of descent, the shaking of the ship in its entirety. Temperature gauges on my retinal display rose slowly when the engines died in exploding flares that scorched the hull, and my armour systems registered the gunship's fiery journey groundward.

There was a final booming refrain, a roar like the carnosaurs of home – as loud and primal as their predator-king challenges – and the world shuddered beyond all sanity. The gunship ploughed into the ground.

And then… Darkness.

My eyes flicker to my retinal display's chronometer. I was unconscious for almost three minutes. I will do penance for such weakness, but that can come later.

Now I breathe in deep, tasting the ashy smoke in the air but unaffected by

it. The air filtration in my helm's grille renders me immune to such trivial concerns.

'Zavien,' a voice crackles in my ears. A momentary confusion takes hold at the sound of the word. The vox-signal is either weak, or the sender's armour is badly damaged. With the ship in pieces, both could be true.

'Zavien,' the voice says again.

This time I turn at the name, realising it is my own.

Zavien strode into the cockpit, keeping his balance on the tilted floor through an effortless combination of natural grace and his armour's joint-stabilisers.

The cockpit had suffered even more than the adjacent chamber. The view window, despite the thickness of the reinforced plastek, was shattered beyond simple repair. Diamond shards of the sundered false-glass twinkled on the twisted floor. The pilot thrones were wrenched from their support columns, cast aside like detritus in a storm.

Through the windowless viewport there was nothing but mud and gnarled black roots, much of which had spilled over the lifeless control consoles. They'd come down hard enough to drive the gunship's nose into the earth.

The pilot, Varlon, was a mangled wreck sprawled face-down over the control console. Zavien's targeting reticule locked onto his brother's battered armour, secondary cursors detailing the rents and wounds in the deactivated war plate. Blood, thick and dark, ran from rips in Varlon's throat and waist joints. It ran in slow trickles across the smashed console, dripping between buttons and levers.

His power pack was inactive. Life signs were unreadable, but the evidence was clear enough. Zavien heard no heartbeat from the body, and had Varlon been alive, his gene-enhanced physiology would have clotted and sealed all but the most grievous wounds. He wouldn't still be bleeding slowly all over the controls of the downed gunship.

'Zavien,' said a voice to the right, no longer over the vox.

Zavien turned from Varlon, his armour snarling in a growl of joint-servos. There, pinned under wreckage from the collapsed wall, was Drayus. Zavien moved to the fallen warrior's side, seeing the truth. No, Drayus was not just pinned in place. He was impaled there.

The sergeant's black helm was lowered, chin down on his collar, green eyes regarding the broken Imperial eagle on his chest. Jagged wreckage knifed into his dark armour, the ravaged steel spearing him through the shoulder guard, the arm, the thigh and the stomach. Blood leaked through his helm's speaker grille. The biometric displays that flashed up on Zavien's visor told an ugly story, and one with an end soon to come.

'Report,' Sergeant Drayus said – the way he always said it – as if the scene around them were the most mundane situation imaginable.

Zavien kneeled by the pinned warrior, fighting back the aching need in his throat and gums to taste the blood of the fallen. Irregular and weak, a single heartbeat rattled in Drayus's chest. One of his hearts had shut down, likely flooded by internal haemorrhaging or burst by the wreckage piercing his body. The other pounded gamely, utterly without rhythm.

'Varlon is dead,' Zavien said.

'I can see that, fool.' The sergeant reached up one hand, the one not half-severed at the forearm, and clawed with unmoving fingers at the collar joint beneath his helm. Zavien reached to help, unlocking the helmet's pressurised seals. With a reptilian hiss, the helmet came free in Zavien's hands.

Drayus's craggy face, ruined by the pits and scars earned in two centuries of battle, was awash in spatters of blood. He grinned, showing blood-pinked teeth and split gums. 'My helm display is damaged. Tell me who is still alive.'

Zavien could see why it was damaged – both eye lenses were cracked. He discarded the sergeant's helm, and blink-clicked the runic icon that brought up the rest of the squad's life signs on his own retinal display.

Varlon was dead, his suit powered down. The evidence of that was right before Zavien's eyes.

Garax was also gone, his suit transmitting a screed of flat-line charts. The rangefinder listed him as no more than twenty metres away, likely thrown clear in the crash and killed on impact.

Drayus was dying, right here.

Jarl was…

'Where's Jarl?' Zavien asked, his voice harsh and guttural through his helm's vox speakers.

'He's loose.' Drayus sucked in a breath through clenched teeth. His armour's failing systems were feeding anaesthetic narcotics into his blood, but the wounds were savage and fatal.

'My rangefinder lists him as a kilometre distant.' Even with its unreliability compared to a tracking auspex, it was a decent enough figure to trust.

The sergeant's good hand clenched Zavien's wrist, and he glared into his brother's eye lenses with a fierce, bloodshot stare. 'Find him. Whatever it takes, Zavien. Bring him in, even if you have to kill him.'

'It will be done.'

'After. You must come back, after.' Drayus spat onto his own chest, marking the broken Imperial eagle with his lifeblood. 'Come back for our gene-seed.'

Zavien nodded, rising to his feet. Feeling his fingers curl in the need to draw weapons, he stalked from the cockpit without a backward glance at the sergeant he would never see alive again.

Jarl had awoken first.

In fact, it was truer to say that Jarl had simply not lost his grip on consciousness in the impact, for his restraints bound him with greater security than the standard troop-thrones. In the shaking thunder of the crash, he had seen Garax hurled through the torn space where a wall had been a moment before. He had heard the vicious, wet snap of destroyed vertebrae and ruined bone as Garax had crashed into the edge of the hole on the way out. And he had seen Zavien thrown from his restraint throne to smash sidelong into the cockpit bulkhead, sliding to the floor unconscious.

Enveloped in a force cage around his own restraint throne, Jarl had seen these things occurring through the milky shimmer-screen of electrical force, yet had been protected against the worst of the crash.

Ah, but that protection had not lasted for long. With the gunship motionless, with his brothers silent, with the Thunderhawk around him creaking and burning in the chasm it had carved in the ground, Jarl tore off the last buckles and scrambled over the wreckage of what had been his power-fielded throne. The machine itself, its generator smoking, reeked of captivity. Jarl wanted to be far from it.

He glanced at Zavien, stole the closest weapons he could find in the chaos of the crash site, and ran out into the jungle.

He had a duty to fulfil. A duty to the Emperor.

His father.

Zavien's blade and bolter were gone.

Without compunction, he took Drayus's weapons from the small arming chamber behind the transport room, handling the relics with none of the care he would otherwise have used. Time was of the essence.

The necessary theft complete, he climbed from the wreck of the gunship, vaulting down to the ground and leaving the broken hull behind. In one hand was an idling chainaxe, the motors within the haft chuckling darkly in readiness to be triggered into roaring life. In the other, a bolt pistol, its blackened surface detailed with the crude scratchings of a hundred and more kill-runes.

Zavien didn't look at the smoking corpse of his gunship in some poignant reverie. He knew he would be back to gather the gene-seed of the fallen if he survived this hunt.

There was no time for sentiment. Jarl was loose.

Zavien broke into a run, his armour's joints growling at the rapid movement as he sprinted after his wayward brother, deep into the jungles of Armageddon.

III

They call it Armageddon.

Maybe so. There is nothing to love about this planet.

Whatever savage beauty it once displayed is long dead now, choked under the relentless outflow of the sky-choking factories that vomit black smog into the heavens. The skies themselves are ugly enough – a greyish-yellow shroud of weak poison embracing the strangled world below. It does not rain water here. It rains acid, as thin, weak and strangely pungent as a reptile's piss.

Who could dwell here? In such impurity? The air tastes of sulphur and machine oil. The sky is the colour of infection. The humans – the very souls we are fighting to save – are dead-eyed creatures without passion or life.

I do not understand them. They embrace their enslavement. They accept their confinement within towering manufactories filled with howling machines. Perhaps it is because they have never known freedom, but that is no true excuse to act as brain-killed as a servitor.

We fight for these souls because we are told it is our duty. We are dying, selling our lives in the greatest war this world has ever known, to save them from their own weakness and allow them to return to their lightless lives.

The jungle here… We have jungles on my home world, yet not like this.

The jungles of home are saturated with life. Parasites thrive in every pool of dark water. Insects hollow out the great trees to build their chittering, poisonous hives. The air, already swarming with stinging flies, is sour with the reptilian stench of danger, and the ground will shake with the stalking hunts of the lizard predator-kings.

Survival is the greatest triumph one can earn on Cretacia.

The jungle here barely deserves the name. The ground is clinging mud, leaving you knee-deep in sulphuric sludge. What ragged life breathes the unclean air is weak, irritating, and nothing compared to the threats of home.

Of course, the jungles here possess a danger not even remotely native to the planet itself. They swarm with the worst kind of vermin.

With the planet locked in the throes of invasion, I am all too aware of what brought down our Thunderhawk.

A pack of them hunted up ahead.

As soon as he heard their piggish snarls and barking laughter, Jarl's tongue ached with a raw, coppery urgency. His teeth itched in their sockets, and he felt his heartbeat in the soft tissue around his incisors.

His splashing sprint through the jungle became a hunched and feral stride, while the chainblade in his grip growled each time he gunned the trigger.

Small arms fire rattled in his direction even before he cleared the line of trees. They knew he was coming, he made sure of that.

Jarl ignored the metallic rainfall of solid rounds clanging from his war plate. The trees parted and revealed his prey – six of them – hunkered around a tank made of scavenged, rusted scrap.

Greenskins. Their fat-mouthed pistols crashing loud and discordant, their brutish features illuminated by the flickering of muzzle flashes.

Jarl saw none of this. His vision, filtered through targeting reticules, saw only what his dying mind projected. A far greater enemy, the ancient slaves of the Ruinous Powers, feasting on the bodies of the loyal fallen. Where Jarl ran, the skies were not the milky-yellow of pus, but the deep blue of nightfall on ancestral Terra. He did not splash through black-watered marshland. He strode across battlements of gold while the world ended around him in a storm of heretical fire.

Jarl charged, his scream rendered harsh and deafening by his helm's vocalisers. The chainsword's throaty roar reached an apex in the moment before it was brought down onto the shoulder of the first ork.

The killing fury brought darkness again, but the blackness now was awash with blessed, sacred red.

Zavien heard the slaughter. His pace, already at a breakneck sprint through the vegetation, intensified tenfold.

If he could catch Jarl, catch him before his brother made it to Imperial lines, he would avert a catastrophe of innocent blood and the blackest shame.

His red and black war plate – the dark red of arterial blood, the black of the void between worlds – was a ruined mess of burn markings, silver gougings where damage in the crash had scored away the paint from the ceramite's surface, and mud-spattered filth as he raced through the swamp.

Yet when one carries the pride of a Chapter on one's shoulders, necessity lends strength to aching limbs and the false muscles of broken armour.

Zavien burst into the clearing where his brother was embattled. His trigger fingers clenched at once – one unleashing a torrent of bolter shells at his brother's back, the other gunning the chainaxe into whirring, lethal life.

'Jarl!'

Treachery.

What madness was this? To be struck down by one's own sons? Sanguinius, the Angel of Blood, turns from the twisted daemons he has slain and dismembered. One of his own sons screams his name, charging across the golden battlements while the heavens above them burn.

The primarch cries out as his son's weapon speaks in anger. Bolt shells crack against his magnificent armour. His own son, one of his beloved Blood

Angels, is trying to kill him.

This cannot be happening.

And, in that moment, Sanguinius decides it is not. There is heresy at work here, not disloyalty. Blasphemy, not naked betrayal.

'What foulness grips you!' the Angel cries at his false son. 'What perversion blackens the soul of a Blood Angel and warps him to serve the Archenemy?'

'Sanguinius!' the traitor son screams. 'Father!'

Zavien roared Jarl's name again, not knowing what his brother truly heard. The cries that returned from his brother's vox-amplifiers chilled his blood – a bellowed, clashing litany of archaic High Gothic and the tongue of Baal that Jarl had never learned.

Surrounded by the ravaged bodies of dead greenskins, the two brothers came together. Zavien's first blow was blocked, the flat of Jarl's chainblade clashing against the haft of his axe. Jarl's armour was pitted and cracked with smoking holes from the impact of bolt shells, yet his strength was unbelievable. Laughing in a voice barely his own, he hurled Zavien backwards.

Unbalanced by his brother's insane vigour, Zavien fell back, rolling into a fighting crouch, shin-deep in marshwater.

Again, Jarl shouted in his unnerving, ancient diction – words Zavien recognised but did not understand. As with Jarl, he had never learned Baalian, and never studied the form of High Gothic spoken ten thousand years before.

'Let this not be your end, my son. Join me! We will take the fight to Horus and drown his evil ambitions in the blood of his tainted warriors!'

Sanguinius removes his helm – a sign of honour and trust despite the war raging around them – and smiles beneficently at his wayward son. His benevolence is legendary. His honour without question.

'It need not be this way,' the Angel of Blood says through his princely smile. 'Join me! To my father's side! For the Emperor!'

Zavien stared at his brother, barely recognising Jarl's face in the drooling, slack-jawed grin that met his gaze. His brother's features were red; a shining wetness from eyes that cried blood.

A meaningless screed of syllables hammered from Jarl's bleeding mouth. It sounded like he was choking on his own demented laughter.

'Brother,' Zavien spoke softly. 'You are gone from us all.'

He rose to his feet, casting aside the empty bolt pistol. In his red gauntlets, he clutched the chainaxe two-handed, and stared at the brother he no longer knew.

‘I am not your son, Jarl, and I am no longer your brother. I am Zavien of the Flesh Tearers, born of Cretacia, and I will be your death if you will not let me be your salvation.’

Jarl heaved a burbling laugh, bringing bloody froth to his lips as he wheezed in a language he shouldn’t know.

‘You disgrace my bloodline,’ the Angel said with infinite sorrow, his godlike heart breaking at the blasphemy before his eyes. ‘The Ultimate Gate calls to me. A thousand of your masters will fall by my blade before they gain entrance to the Emperor’s throne room. I have no more patience for your puling heresy. Come, traitor. Time to die.’

Sanguinius unfurled his great white wings, pearlescent and sunlight-bright in the firestorm wreathing the battlements. With tears in his eyes, tears of misery at the betrayal of one of his own sons, he launched forward to end this blasphemy once and for all.

And I realise I cannot beat him.

When we are shaped into what we are, when we are denied our humanity to become weapons of war, it is said that fear is purged from our physical forms, and triumph is bred into our bones. This is an expression, an attempt at the kind of crude verse forever attributed to the warrior-preachers of the Adeptus Astartes.

It is true that defeat is anathema to us.

But I cannot beat him. He is not the warrior I trained with for decades, not the brother whose every move I can anticipate.

His chainblade, still wet with green gore, arcs down. I block, barely, and am already skidding back in the sulphuric mud. His strength is immense. I know why this is. I am aware of the… the genetic truths at play. His mind cannot contain his delusional fury. He is using everything he has, *everything,* powering his muscles with more force and expending more energy than a functioning mind can allow. I can smell the alkaline reek of his blood through the damage in his armour – combat narcotics are flooding his system in lethal quantities. In his madness, he cannot stem the flood of battle narcotics fusing with his bloodstream.

His strength, this godly power, will kill him.

But not quickly enough.

A second deflected slice, a third, and a fourth that crashes against my helm; a blocked headbutt that crunches into my bracer and dulls my arm; a kick that hammers into my chestplate even as I lean aside to dodge.

A thunderclap. My vision spins. Fire in my spine.

I think my back is broken. I try to say his name, but it comes out as a scream.

Rage, black and wholesome, its tendrils bearing the purest intent, creeps in at the edge of my vision.

I hear him laughing and damning me in a language he shouldn't know.

Then I hear nothing except the wind.

Sanguinius lifts the traitor with contemptuous ease.

Held above his head, the blasphemer thrashes and writhes. The Angel of Blood stalks to the edge of the golden battlements, laughing and weeping all at once at the carnage below. It is a tragedy, but it is also beautiful. Mankind using its greatest might and achievements as it attempts to engineer its own demise. Titans duel in their hundreds, with millions of men dying around their iron feet. The sky is on fire. The entire world smells of blood.

'Die,' the Angel curses his treacherous son with a beauteous whisper, and hurls him from the battlements of the Imperial Palace into the maelstrom of war hundreds of metres below.

Freed of his burden and his bloodline's honour restored, the Angel in gold makes haste away.

His duty is not yet done.

IV

Consciousness returned with the first impact.

A jarring crunch of armour against rock jolted Zavien from his lapse into the murky haze of near-unconsciousness. Feeling himself crashing down the cliff side, he rammed his hand down hard into the rock – a claw of ceramite clutching at the stone. The Astartes grunted as his arms snapped straight, taking his weight, arresting his tumbling fall.

Damage runes flicked up on his retinal display, a language of harsh white urgency. Zavien ignored them, though it was harder to ignore the pain throughout his body. Even the injected chemical anaesthetic compounds from his armour and the nerve-dulling surgery done to him couldn't entirely wash it away. That was a bad sign.

He clawed his way back up the cliff, teeth clenched, gauntlets tearing handholds into the stone where nature hadn't provided any.

Once at the top, the Flesh Tearer retrieved the chainaxe that had flown from his grip, and broke into a staggering run.

He almost killed me.

That is a hard truth to swallow, for we were evenly matched for all of our

lives. My armour is damaged, operating at half capacity, but it still lends me strength as I run. Behind me, the wrecked greenskin tank remains alone, its crew slain, the rest of its missiles aiming into the sky with no one to fire them.

Curse those piggish wretches for bringing down our gunship.

I run on, gathering speed, slowing only to hack hanging vegetation from my path.

I recall the topography of this region from the hololithic maps at the last war council. The mining town of Dryfield is to the east. Jarl's rage-addled mind will drive him to seek out life. I know where he is going. I also know that unless something slows him down…

He will get there first.

Sister Amalay D'Vorien kissed the bronze likeness of Saint Silvana, and let the necklace icon fall back on its leather cord. The weak midday sun, what brightness penetrated the gauzy, polluted cloud cover, was a dull presence in the heavens, only occasionally reflecting glare off the edges of *Promethia*, the squad's Immolator tank.

Her own armour was once silver, now stained a faint, dull grey from exposure to the filthy air of this world. She licked her cracked lips, resisting the desire to drink from the water canteen inside the tank. Second Prayer was only an hour before, and she'd slaked her thirst with a mouthful of the brackish water, warmed as it was by the tank's idling engine.

'Sister…' called down Brialla from the Immolator's turret. 'Did you see that?'

Amalay and Brialla were alone while the rest of their squad patrolled the edges of the jungle. Their tank idled on the dirt road, with Amalay circling the hull, bolter in hand, and Brialla panning her heavy flamers along the tree lines.

Amalay whispered a litany of abasement before duty, chastising herself for letting her mind wander to thoughts of sustenance. Her bolter up and ready, she moved around to the front of the Immolator.

'I saw nothing,' she said, eyes narrowed and focused. 'What was it?'

'Movement. Something dark. Remain vigilant.'

There was a tone colouring Brialla's voice, on the final words. A suggestion of disapproval. Amalay's laxity had been noticed.

'I see nothing,' Amalay spoke again. 'There's… No, wait. *There.*'

The 'something' broke from its crouch in the vegetation at the tree line. A blur of crimson and black, with a chainblade revving. Amalay recognised an Astartes instantly, and the threat a moment later. Her bolter barked once, twice, and dropped from her hands to clatter to the dirt. The gun crashed once more from its vantage point on the ground, a loud boom that hammered a shell into the tank's sloped armour plating.

Even as this last shot was fired, Amalay's head flew clear of her shoulders, white hair catching the wind before the bleeding wreckage rolled into the undergrowth.

Brialla blasphemed as she brought the flamer turret around on protesting mechanics, and wrenched the handles to aim the cannons low.

The Astartes was cradling Amalay's headless body, speaking to it in a low snarl. Her sister was already dead. Brialla squeezed both triggers.

Twin gouts of stinking chemical flame roared from the cannons, bathing Amalay and the Astartes in clinging, corrosive fire. She was already whispering a lament for her fallen sister, even as she blistered the armour and skin from Amalay's bones.

It was impossible to see through the reeking orange miasma. Brialla killed the jets of flame after seven heartbeats, knowing whatever had been washed in the fire would be annihilated, purged in the burning storm.

Amalay. Her armour blackened, its joints melted, her hands reduced to blackened bone. She lay on the ground, incinerated.

A loud thud clanged on the tank's roof behind Brialla. She turned in her restraint throne, the slower turret cycling round to follow her gaze. Already, she was trying to scramble free of her seat.

The Astartes was burning. Holy fire licked at the edges of his war plate, and his joints steamed. He eclipsed the sun, casting a flickering shadow over her. His armour was black, charred, but not immolated. As she hauled herself out of her restraints, he levelled a dripping chainsword at her face.

'The Flesh Tearers!' she screamed into the vox-mic built into her armour's collar. 'Echoes of Gaius Point!'

In anciently-accented Gothic, her killer said six whispered words.

'You will pay for your heresy.'

I watch from the shadows of the trees.

The Sororitas are tense. While one of them performs funerary rites over the destroyed bodies of their sisters, three others stalk around the hull of their grey tank, bolters aimed while they stare into the jungle through gunsights.

I can smell the corpses beneath the white shrouds. One is burned, cooked by promethium chemical fire. The other had bled a great deal before she died, torn to pieces. I do not need to see the remains to know this is true.

For now, I hide, crouched and hidden. The jungle masks the ever-present charged hum of my armour from their weak, mortal ears, while I listen to fragments of their speech.

Jarl's trail has grown cold, even the smell of his potent blood lost in the billion scents of this sulphuric jungle. I need focus. I need direction.

But as soon as I draw near enough to see the sisters' steel-grey armour and the insignias of loyalty they each wear, I curse my fortune.

The Order of the Argent Shroud.

They were with us at Gaius Point.

Echoes of that battle will haunt us all until the Chapter's final nights.

'My auspex senses something,' I hear one of them say to her sisters. I make ready to move again, to taste shame and flee. I cannot confront them like this. They must not know of our presence. 'Something alive,' she says. 'And with a power signature.'

'Flesh Tearer!' one of the sisters calls out, and my blood freezes in my veins. It is not fear I feel, but true, sickening dread as she uses our Chapter's sacred name. *How can they know?*

'Flesh Tearer! Show yourself! Face the Emperor's judgement for the barbarity of your tainted Chapter!'

My teeth clench. My fingers quiver, then grip the chainaxe tighter. *They know.* They know a Flesh Tearer did this. Their wretched slain sisters must have warned them.

Another female voice, the one carrying the auspex scanner, adds to the first one's cries. 'We were at Gaius Point, decadent filth! Face us, and face retribution for your heresy!'

They know what happened at Gaius Point. They saw our shame, our curse, and the blood that ran that day.

They believe I butchered two of their sisters here, and now lay the sins of my brother Jarl upon my shoulders.

Gunfire rings out. A bolter shell slices past my pauldron, shredding vegetation.

'I see him,' a female voice declares, 'There!'

My trigger finger strokes the Engage rune on the chainaxe's haft. After a heartbeat's hesitation, I squeeze. Jagged, whirring teeth cycle into furious life. The weapon cuts air in anticipation of the moment it will eat flesh.

They *dare* blame me for this…

They open fire.

I am not a heretic.

But this must end.

V

Zavien reached Dryfield just as the sun was setting.

He had left the jungle behind three hours before. The lone warrior's run came to an end at the fortified walls – outside the mining settlement, he heard no sound from within, only the desperate howl of the wind across the

wasteland.

Hailing the walls, calling for sentries, earned him no response.

The settlement's gates were sealed: a jury-rigged amalgamation of steel bars, flakboard and even furniture piled high behind the double doors in the wall ringing the village. These pitiful defences were the colony's attempts to reinforce their walls against the ork hordes sweeping across the planet.

With neither the time nor the inclination to hammer the gates open through force, Zavien mag-locked his axe to his back and punched handholds in the metal wall itself, dragging himself to the ramparts fifteen metres above.

The village was a collection of one-storey buildings, perhaps enough to house fifteen families. A dirt track cut through the village's centre like an old scar; evidence of the supply convoys that made it this far out from the main hives, and the passage of ore haulers who came to profit from the local copper mine. Low-quality metal would be in great demand by the planet's impoverished citizens, who could afford no better.

The largest building – indeed, the only one that was more than a hut made from scrap – was a spired church bedecked in crudely-carved gargoyles.

Zavien acknowledged all of this in a heartbeat's span. The Astartes scanned the ramshackle battlements around the village, then turned to stare at the settlement itself.

No sign of movement.

He walked from the platform, falling the fifteen metres to the ground and landing in a balanced crouch.

He came across the first body less than a minute later.

A woman. Unarmed. Slumped against the wall of a hovel, a blood-smear decorating the wall behind her. She was carved in half, and not cleanly.

The wide streets between the ramshackle huts and homes were decorated with trails of blood and the tracks of weight dragged through the dirt. All of these led to the same place. Whomever had come here and slain the colonists had dragged the bodies to the modest church with its shattered windows and corroded walls of flakboard and red iron.

Zavien's retinal locator display was finally picking up faint returns from Jarl's war plate. His brother was inside, no longer running. And from the silence, no longer killing.

The Flesh Tearer stalked past the weaponless corpse, limp in its lifeless repose, slain by his own sword in his brother's hands. Zavien had seen such things before – they were images he would never forget while he still drew breath.

He felt cold, clinging shame run through his blood like a toxin. Just like at Gaius Point.

It wasn't supposed to happen.

At Gaius Point.

It was never supposed to happen.

That night, they had damned themselves forever.

It should have been a triumph worthy of being etched onto the armour of every warrior that fought there.

The Imperial front line was held by the Point's militia and the Order of the Argent Shroud, who had rallied the people of the wasteland town into an armed fighting force and raised morale to fever pitch through their sermons and blessings in the name of the God-Emperor.

The greenskins descended in a swarm of thousands, hurling themselves at the town's barricades, their mass forming a sea of bellowing challenges, leathery flesh and hacking blades.

At the battle's apex, the Sisters and the militia were on the edge of being overwhelmed. At last, and when it mattered most, Gaius Point's frantic distress calls were answered.

They came in Thunderhawks, boosters howling as they soared over the embattled horde. The gunships kissed the scorched earth only long enough to deploy their forces: almost two hundred Astartes in armour of arterial red and charcoal black. The rattling roar of so many chainblades came together in a ragged, ear splitting chorus, sounding like the war-cry of a mechanical god.

Zavien was in the first wave. Alongside Jarl and his brothers, he hewed left and right, his blade's grinding teeth chewing through armour and bloody, fungal flesh as the sons of Sanguinius reaped the aliens' lives.

The orks were butchered in droves, caught between a hammer and anvil, being annihilated from behind and gunned down from the front.

Zavien saw nothing but blood. Xenos blood, stinking and thick, splashing across his helm. The smell of triumph, the reek of exultant victory.

He was also one of the first to the barricades.

By then, he couldn't see. He couldn't think. His senses were flooded by stimuli, all of it aching, enticing and maddening. He tried to speak, but it tore from his lips as a cry aimed at the polluted skies. Even breathing did nothing but draw the rich scent of alien blood deeper into his body, disseminating it through his system. To be so saturated by xenos taint ignited a fire in his mind, tapping into the gene-deep fury that forever threatened to overwhelm him.

Driven on by the ceaseless urge to drown his senses in the purity of enemy blood, Zavien disembowelled the last ork before him, and vaulted the barricade. He had to kill. *He had to kill.* He was born for nothing else.

He and his brothers had been fighting in ferocious hand-to-hand battle for two hours. The enemy was destroyed. The joyous cheers of the militia died in thousands of throats as, in a wave of vox-screams and howling chainswords, half of the Flesh Tearers broke the barricades and ran into the town.

With no foes to slay, the Astartes turned their rage upon whatever still lived.

The Angel mourned the slain.

Their deaths were a dark necessity on the path to redemption. The prayers he chanted to the ceiling of the Emperor's throne room inspired tears in his eyes, and tears in the eyes of the thousands of loyal soldiers staring on.

'We must burn the slain,' he whispered through the silver tears. 'We must forever remember those who died this day, and remember the foulness that turned their hearts against us.'

'Sanguinius!' a voice cried from behind. It echoed throughout the chamber, where a million banners hung in the breezeless air, marking every regiment ever sworn to fight and die for the young Imperium of Man.

The Angel tilted his head, the very image of patient purity.

'I thought I killed you, heretic.'

'Jarl!'

Wheezing, mumbling, with bloody saliva running in strings from his damaged mouth grille, Jarl staggered around to face his brother.

What burbled from his mouth was a mixture of languages, wet with the blood in his throat. The chemical reek of Jarl's body assaulted Zavien's senses even over the smell of his brother's burned armour and the reek of the slain. The combat narcotics flooding Jarl's body were eating him alive.

Zavien did nothing but stare for several moments after he called his brother's name. The dead were everywhere, piled all across the floor of the church, a slumbering congregation of the slaughtered. Perhaps a hundred of them, all dragged here after the carnage. Perhaps many of them had been found here in worshipful service, and only half the village had needed to be dragged. Trails of streaked, smeared blood marked the floor.

'Burn the bodies,' Jarl said in grunted Cretacian, the tongue of their shared home world, amongst a screed of words Zavien couldn't make out. 'Purge the sin, burn the bodies, cleanse the palace.'

Zavien raised his chainaxe. In sickening mirror image, his blood-maddened brother raised his dripping chainsword.

'This ends now, Jarl.'

There was a bark of syllables, a drooling mess of annihilated words.

The Angel raised his golden blade.

He had been so foolish. This was no mere heretic. Had he been blinded all along? Yes… the machinations of the tainted traitors had shrouded his golden eyes from the truth. But now… Now he saw everything.

'Yes, Horus,' he said with a smile that spoke of infinite regret. 'It ends now.'

VI

The brothers met in the defiled church, their boots struggling to grip the mosaic-laid floor, awash as it was with innocent blood. The whining roar of chainblades was punctuated by crashes as the weapons met. Jagged teeth shattered with every block and parry, clattering against nearby wooden pews as they were torn from their sockets.

Zavien's blood hammered through his body, tingling with the electric edge of combat stimulants. Jarl was a shadow of the warrior he had been – frothing at the mouth, raving at allies that didn't exist, and half-crippled by the lethal battle-drug overdose that was burning out his organs.

Zavien blocked his brother's frantic, shaking cuts. Every time his axe fell, he'd carve another chasm into Jarl's armour. Ultimately, only one warrior was aware enough to know this would never be settled by chainblades.

With a last block and a savage return, Zavien smashed Jarl's blade aside and kicked it from his grip. Its engine stuttered to a halt, resting on the tiled ground. Jarl watched it fly from his grip with delayed, bleeding vision.

Before he could recover, Zavien's hands were at his throat. The Flesh Tearer squeezed, his hands crunching into Jarl's neck, collapsing the softer joint-armour there and vicing into the flesh beneath.

Jarl fell to his knees as his brother strangled him. His gene-enhanced physiology was poisoned by both the curse and the narcotics, and his sight began to darken as his body could take no more punishment.

Darken, yet clear.

Deprived of air, unable to even draw a shred of breath, he mouthed a voiceless word that never left the confines of his charred helm.

'Zavien.'

Zavien wrenched his grip to the side, snapping the bones of his brother's spine, and still strangling.

He stood like this for some time. Night had fallen before the warrior's gauntlets released their burden and Jarl's body finally slumped to the ground.

There the madman rested, asleep among those he had slain.

'It is done,' Zavien spoke into his squad's vox channel, his eyes closed as only silence replied.

'Jarl is dead, brothers. It is done.'

He chose to finish what his brother had begun. Even in madness, there sometimes hides a little sense.

The bodies had to be burned. Not to purify any imagined heresy, but to hide the evidence of what had happened here.

It was never supposed to happen. Here, or at Gaius Point. They had damned themselves, and all that remained was to fight as loyally as they could before righteous vengeance caught up with them all.

As the church burned, pouring thick black smoke into the polluted sky, the sound of engines grumbled from the horizon.

Orks. The enemy was finally here.

Zavien stood among the flames, immune to them, his axe in his hand. The fire would draw the aliens closer. There was no way he could defend the whole village against them, but the thought of shedding and tasting their blood before he finally fell ignited his killing urge.

His fangs ached as the vehicles pulled in to a halt outside.

No.

Those engine sounds were too clean, too well-maintained. It was the enemy. But it was not the greenskins.

I walk from the church, the broken axe in my hand.

There are twenty of them. In human unison, impressive enough even if it lacks the perfection of Astartes unity, they raise their bolters. The Sisters of the Order of the Argent Shroud. The silver hulls of their tanks and their own armour are turned a flickering orange-red in the light of the fire that should have hidden our sins.

Twenty guns aim at me.

The thirst fades. My hunger to taste blood trickles back into my throat, suddenly ignorable.

‘We were at Gaius Point,’ the lead sister calls out. Their eyes are narrowed at the brightness of the flame behind me.

I do not move. I tell them, simply:

‘I know.’

‘We have petitioned the Inquisition for your Chapter’s destruction, Flesh Tearer.’

‘I know.’

‘That is all you have to say for yourself, heretic? After Gaius Point? After killing the squad of our sister Amalay D’Vorien? *After massacring an entire village?*’

‘You came to pass judgement,’ I tell her. ‘So do it.’

‘We came to defend this colony against your wretched blasphemy!’

They still fear me. Even outnumbered and armed only with a shattered axe, they still fear me. I can smell it in their sweat, hear it in their voices, and see it in their wide eyes that reflect the flames.

I look over my shoulder, where Jarl’s legacy burns. Motes of amber fire sail up from the blaze. My brother’s funeral pyre, and a testament to what we have all become. A monument to how far we have fallen.

We burn our dead on Cretacia. Because so many are killed by poisons and beasts and the predator-king reptiles, it is a mark of honour to die and be burned, rather than be taken by the forest.

It was never meant to be like this. Not here, and not at Gaius Point.

Twenty bolters open fire before I can look back.

I don't hear them. I don't feel the wet, knifing pain of destruction.

All I hear is the roar of a Cretacian predator-king, the fury rising from its reptilian jaws as it stalks the jungles of my home world. A carnosaur, black-scaled and huge, roaring up to the clear, clean skies.

It hunts me. It hunts me now, as it hunted me so long ago, at the start of this second life.

I reach for my spear, and…

Zavien clutches the weapon against his chest.

'It is death itself,' he grunts to his tribal brothers as they crouch in the undergrowth. The tongue of Cretacia is simple and plain, little more than the rudiments of true language. 'The king-lizard is death itself. It comes for us.'

The carnosaur shakes the ground with another slow step closer. It breathes in short sniffs, mouth open, jaws slack, tasting the air for scents. A grey tongue the size of a man quivers in its maw.

The spear in his steady grip is the one he made himself. A long shaft of dark wood with a fire-blackened point. He has used it for three years now, since his tenth winter, to hunt for his tribe.

He does not hunt for his tribe today. Today, as the sun burns down and bakes their backs, he hunts because the gods are in the jungle, and they are watching. The tribes have seen the gods in their armour of red metal and black stone, always in the shadows, watching the hunting parties as they stalk their prey.

If a hunter wishes to dwell in paradise among the stars, he must hunt well when the gods walk the jungles.

Zavien stares at the towering lizard-beast, unable to look away from its watery, slitted red eye.

He shifts his grip on the spear he crafted.

With a prayer that the gods are bearing witness to his courage, he throws the weapon with a heartfelt scream.

The Flesh Tearer crashed to the bloodstained ground, face down in the dust.

'Cease fire,' Sister Superior Mercy Astaran said softly. Her sisters obeyed immediately.

'But he still lives,' one of them replied.

This was true. The warrior was dragging himself with gut-wrenching slowness, one-armed and with a trembling hand, through the dirt. A dark trail

of broken armour and leaking lifeblood pooled around him.

He raised his shaking hand once more, dug the spasming fingers into the ground, and dragged himself another half-metre closer to the burning church's front door.

'Is he seeking to escape?' one of the youngest sisters asked, unwilling to admit her admiration for the heretic's endurance. One arm lost at the elbow, both legs destroyed from the knees down, and his armour a cracked mess that leaked coolant fluids and rich, red Astartes blood.

'It is hardly escape to crawl into a burning building,' another laughed.

'He wishes to die among the blasphemy he caused,' Astaran said, her scowl even harsher in the firelight. 'End him.'

A single gunshot rang out from the battle-line.

Zavien's fingers stopped trembling. His reaching hand fell into the dust. His eyes, which had first opened to see the clear skies of a distant world, closed at last.

'What should we do with the body?' Sister Mercy Astaran asked her commander.

'Let the echoes of this heresy remain as an example, at least until the greenskins take control of the surrounding wastelands. Come sisters, we do not have much time. Leave this wretch for the vultures.'

MISTRESS BAEDA'S GIFT

Braden Campbell

Lord Malwrack was rich, powerful and emotionally dead inside. Even though his was a race renowned for their passions and lust for life, time had tempered him. With every passing century he became all the more desiccated, both physically and spiritually, until all that remained was a perpetually scowling, slightly hunched old man who treated each new day with a dismal contempt. It therefore came as a great surprise when he suddenly found himself in love.

Malwrack and his daughter, Sawor, had been attending one of Commorragh's endless gladiatorial games and their box seat, perched high along the curving wall of the arena, offered them a spectacular view. Sawor watched with rapt interest as below her the combatants slashed each other with razorsnares, eviscerated each other with hydraknives and turned one another into large cubes of bloody meat with the aid of a shardnet. She was young and vigorous, and her senses were sharp. Even from so far above the killing floor, Sawor could smell its erotic mixture of sweat and blood, could taste the fear and adrenaline steaming from the participants, could see the detail of sinew, flesh and bone in every severed limb.

Malwrack, on the other hand, had long ago lost most of his senses. It happened with eldar his age when they let themselves go. Taste, touch and smell were greatly diminished now, as if coming to him from behind a thick blanket. Even his sight was cloudy and, grunting in dissatisfaction and submission, he reached into the folds of his robes and withdrew an ornate pair of opera glasses. For a time he too watched the ballet of carnage below, but it didn't bring him the same exhilaration as it did Sawor. Malwrack had seen such wych-work hundreds of times before on worlds throughout the galaxy. At first he felt only a deep malaise, but as his daughter began to cheer more

loudly, he felt something else: envy.

He felt that quite a lot these days, truth be told. Well aware of his own infirmity, he hated nearly everyone around him; hated them for their youth. The one exception was Sawor. She was the only person in his kabal to whom he might extend forgiveness for an attempted assassination or coup. The mere thought of her made the wrinkled corners of his mouth twitch; the faintest echo of a smile. Of all the things he owned, of all the people who served under him, she was his most favoured. There was a word, a single word, used by the other, lesser inhabitants of the galaxy to describe this feeling, but it escaped his aged brain at the moment.

Malwrack's attention drifted from the fighting, and he began to look around the stadium. His wandering gaze eventually turned to the other box seats where the Dark City's social elite sat. One came to the theatre to be seen after all, and he idly wondered who was here today. Suddenly, he stopped and sat upright. Halfway across the arena sat a woman. She was alone, flanked on either side by a pair of stalwart incubi bodyguards. Her black hair, shot through with grey, was piled high atop her head and spilled around her neck and shoulders in thick waves. Her skin was flawlessly pallid, stretched smooth and tight like a drumhead. Her eyes were dark and luminous, her lips painted obsidian. As she reclined into her throne-like chair, Malwrack saw that she wore a form-fitting suit of armour with leg greaves shaped like spike-heeled stiletto boots, and an upper section that was more like a bustier than a protective chest plate. Black evening gloves ran from her tapered fingertips to her elbows, and the train of a charcoal dress with multiple layers flowed around her. A large pendant, obviously a shadow field generator, nestled between her pale breasts.

'Who is that?' he breathed.

Sawor's head snapped around, and she raised an eyebrow. It was a rare event to see her father actually interested in something. Quickly, she followed his line of sight until she too was looking at the statuesque woman across the way. With her younger eyes, Sawor could make out the intricate spider-web pattern etched onto the woman's dress with silver thread. She rifled through her memory, comparing faces to names. As her father's most trusted aide, his sole hierarch, it was her job to know every one of Malwrack's enemies. After a few seconds, she drew a blank. 'I don't know her,' she said.

'Find out,' he muttered as he continued to stare through his glasses. 'Now.'

Sawor nodded and immediately gathered up her weapons. Grasping a glowing halberd in one hand, she checked her sidearm with the other.

'Just discover her name, Sawor,' he said. 'Nothing more.'

Disappointed that she wouldn't be killing anyone this afternoon, Sawor shrugged and left.

Malwrack watched intently as the mysterious woman sipped from a goblet.

Everything about her seemed to crystallise for him: the sensual, languid way she swallowed, the colour of her fingernails as she brushed a lock of hair from her face, the slight pulsing of the drug injector tube that ran into her jugular. It was as if the longer he observed her, the younger he became. His body stirred, pulse flaring, muscles tensing. He licked his lips, salivating for the first time in a decade. Something was washing over him in a sudden wave, a feeling that had been absent from his life for so long that he shook as if electrified. He knew then, without question, that he had to have this woman, had to impress and then utterly dominate her. His sole purpose in life now was to make her his cherished yet personal property. He was head over heels in… what was that word the *mon-keigh* used?

The woman furrowed her brow suddenly, cocked her head to one side, then looked directly at Malwrack. The old archon gasped and dropped his glasses. He awkwardly gathered up his belongings, and hurried out into the hallway. His own incubi, silent as ever, followed behind him. ‘Been so long,’ he muttered, chastising himself for his lack of obfuscation. Within minutes he was outside, seated aboard his modified Raider, waiting for Sawor. When she arrived, she had barely enough time to grasp onto the handrail before Malwrack signalled to the pilot. The machine bobbed slightly, then rocketed off into the air.

‘You’re in a hurry,’ Sawor said teasingly. The wind whipped her hair and skirt out behind her in fluttering purple waves.

‘What did you find out?’ Malwrack demanded. He leaned in closer to hear her reply.

‘I couldn’t get very close to her,’ Sawor prefaced.

‘Because of her bodyguards?’

‘Because of her entourage. She might have been sitting alone in that box, but the hallway beyond was filled with people. Not just her own servants either. There were representatives from half a dozen different kabals, all apparently waiting to see or speak with her.’

‘I did discover a few things though. Her name is Baeda, and she’s only just moved to Commorragh from one of the outlying web cities. Shaddom, I believe. She was apparently the consort of an archon there, and when he finally died, she inherited the entire kabal. Extensive resources at her disposal now, they say.’

Malwrack nodded and narrowed his eyes. That certainly explained why so many others were trying to gain access to her. A rich widow had come to town, and now the Dark City’s most eligible bachelors were positioning themselves to claim her. He wondered just who his competition was.

As always, Sawor seemed to read his mind. ‘I saw warriors there in several colours. The kabals of the All-seeing Eye, Poisoned Fang, and Rending Talon. That means Lord Ranisold, Lord Hoenlor and Lord Ziend.’

Malwrack knew them. Each one an up-and-comer who had managed to gain control of a kabal through exploitation and murder. They were as formidable as they were young and handsome.

‘I need to get back into shape’, he said.

It was some time later that Malwrack finally felt prepared enough to go and see the widow. He brought no bodyguards with him, no warriors. Only Sawor, who carried a large box and kept a respectable distance. To arrive at a woman’s home with an army in tow not only betrayed fear and insecurity, he thought, but was quite rude. A deformed and mutilated servant answered the door, and ushered him through the cavernous house. As he passed an ornate mirror, Malwrack paused briefly to assess himself. His haemonculus surgeons had really outdone themselves, he thought. You could see the staples in the back of his skull that pulled his flaccid face tight. A half a dozen of his warriors had been scalped, and now his limp, greasy hair was replaced by a magnificent raven mane. A mixture of drugs and concoctions ran through his injection harness, toning his muscles and giving his eyes a healthy green glow. He curled his lips back, admiring his new stainless-steel teeth. He had dressed in his finest suit of combat armour, replete with a golden tabard, flowing purple cape and the largest shoulder pads that money could buy. This poor woman, he thought to himself, doesn’t stand a chance.

He was brought into a grand sitting room filled with voluptuous, high-backed furniture. Arched windows looked out over the Commorragh cityscape. Baeda stood before them, drinking in the view. ‘Lord Malwrack,’ she muttered without so much as a turn of her proud head. Her voice was throaty and soft.

‘Mistress Baeda,’ he announced loudly. ‘I welcome you to our fair city.’

At last she faced him, her eyes so black against her alabaster skin they looked like empty sockets. Her expression was that of an unreadable statue. Malwrack’s pulse raced nonetheless, and his injector automatically compensated for the increased endorphin level.

‘And?’ she asked with some impatience.

Malwrack showed his new teeth. ‘And, I come to proclaim my intentions.’

She did not swoon and fall on her knees before him as she had in Malwrack’s fantasies, but instead blew out her cheeks, crossed the room and draped herself across a settee. ‘Of course you do,’ she said with a slight shake of her head.

Malwrack closed towards her and spread his arms wide. ‘Lady, I am rich and powerful, and my kabal is composed not only of many fine warriors, but also of hireling wyches and Scourges. I command a fleet of war machines, and an armada of starships. Those who know me, fear me, and my combat prowess–’

‘–is legend across the galaxy,’ she finished. ‘I’ve heard this speech.’

Malwrack was taken aback. ‘You have?’

‘From men more supple than you.’ She looked past him then, towards Sawor and said coldly, ‘At least you come with only one slave in attendance, though whether that speaks of respect or arrogance remains to be seen.’

Sawor’s eyes flashed, incensed. ‘I am no slave,’ she hissed.

Malwrack raised a gloved hand to calm her. ‘Sawor is my daughter,’ he said calmly. ‘She serves me willingly. Just as you must.’

Baeda’s eyebrows arched. ‘My, but the men in this city are bold! Do you suppose you are the first to come before me, making such overtures?’

‘Not at all,’ Malwrack replied. ‘I know that Lord Ranisold, Lord Hoenlor and Lord Ziend covet you.’

‘To name a few.’

‘They pursue you no longer,’ Malwrack said quietly. Sawor marched forwards, opening the box she carried. Inside, neatly arrayed, were a dozen faces, peeled away from the skulls of his competition. For the briefest of moments, an expression of shock crossed Baeda’s face, but she instantly regained her composure. She stared at Malwrack.

‘All that was theirs, is now mine,’ he said. His gaze travelled hungrily up the length of her body. ‘Just as you will be.’

With startling swiftness, Baeda was on her feet. Malwrack and Sawor were suddenly aware of incubi standing where there had been only shadows before. The tension in the air was palpable.

Baeda’s voice was strained. ‘You are… passionate, Lord Malwrack, but you do not impress.’

Sneering, Malwrack gave a curt nod, spun on his heel and walked towards the door. Sawor dropped the box. It clattered on the floor as she followed her father, spilling the remains of the archon’s rivals like dried flowers across the parquet.

The planet Franchi was cold, its days rainy and its nights foggy. It was covered in sweeping mountain ranges, dense forests and churning oceans of grey foam. In short, it was a world that any dark eldar could appreciate, and Malwrack was determined to present it to Baeda as a gift. In fact, Franchi had only one flaw: there were humans living on it. So, the old archon got to work.

First, his air force lanced and bombed their paltry fortifications and bastions. Then, once they had only ruins in which to hide, he unleashed his main forces upon the surviving defenders. His Raiders glided silently over the smashed cityscape, indiscriminately firing grenades into bunker and building alike. The corrupted wraithbone spheres exploded into a chalky powder so fine that even the Imperium’s best filtration system couldn’t completely block it out. It made its way into eyes, ears, and lungs, and once there, created such terrifying hallucinations that those affected could do nothing but scream and

wail. As they rolled on the ground, clawing at their faces and gouging out their own eyes, Malwrack's warriors shot the good people of Franchi with hails of poisoned crystal shards or ran them through with bayonets. Those who weren't killed outright were hauled to their feet and bound with lengths of barbed chain. They would be spared a quick and painless death, lingering instead for years or even decades as slaves, playthings and foodstuffs when the dark eldar returned to Commorragh.

All in all, it was a thrilling, glorious time and Malwrack's followers delighted in it. Yet, he himself was strangely uninterested. He knew he should have been right there in the thick of it, revelling in the murder and mayhem. Instead, he stood alone in a city square filled with toppled monuments and heaps of dead humans, watching everyone else have all the fun. His thoughts remained focussed on Baeda.

He waded ankle-deep through spilled intestines, as fragrant to him as the flowers of spring, but all he could see was her face. Nearby, a commissar was struggling to free himself from where he lay pinned beneath the remains of his men. One of Malwrack's sybarite lieutenants ran up gleefully and shot him square in the face, detonating the man's head like an overripe melon. There were squeals of delight from the other warriors who watched the brain and bone fragments fly outwards like ruby-coloured fireworks.

All Malwrack felt was a burning desire to throw the widow to the floor and suffocate her body beneath his. To him, the slaughter on Franchi was work, not play. He committed genocide as one might polish silver, because his gift to her must be unblemished. It was irrational he knew, but he had to impress her. After all, he was in… he was in…. the *mon-keigh* word escaped him again.

His soldiers were now carving up the dead bodies with their knives, taking small trophies such as fingers, ears or teeth. He looked up at them from within his distracted thoughts and was about to say something, when there was an explosion. For a brief second, Malwrack saw his men engulfed in fire. Then, the ground beneath him heaved upwards and he was in freefall. Instincts taking over, he pulled his limbs in tight to his body and rode the shock wave. His personal force field flared to life, wrapping him tightly in a cocoon of black energy and utterly protecting him. Even when he hit the ground, the shadowy field absorbed the impact that would otherwise have shattered every bone in his willowy frame. Malwrack rolled up onto his feet, and sensing somehow that he was safe for the moment, the field became transparent.

Rumbling towards him out of the smoky haze was an Imperial tank, behind which he could make out several dozen human forms. He glanced behind him, but where his warriors had been a moment before, there was now only a smoking crater. Body parts were scattered everywhere, humans and dark eldar now indistinguishable from one another in death. Fury swept though

Malwrack's mind; he had ordered all of Franchi's war machines to be neutralised before his main forces moved into the city, but obviously, something had been overlooked. As technologically underdeveloped as the *mon-keigh* were, he knew from painful experience that his forces stood little chance of survival unless this mechanical monstrosity was immediately destroyed.

The Guardsmen, who had been cowering behind the tank, were now fanning out around it. They were lightly armed, save for a trio who hastily began assembling a large cannon of some kind. Malwrack was alone, and out in the open. He snarled, disgusted with himself for letting this happen. He had not been focussed on the here and now, but had been distracted again by thoughts of how best to debase and titillate the widow Baeda. Then, as he often did, he redirected his loathing outwards, vomiting it upon the Guardsmen. There was a clunking sound from within the tank as it loaded another shell into place. Malwrack knew he had only one hope. He jerked his neck sharply, activating his drug injector, and charged.

The humans opened up with everything they had. They spat out a rain of lasgun fire and heavy bolter rounds. Autocannon shells flew wildly. The tank fired its main gun with a deafening roar, and the men who were huddled around its bulk winced and closed their eyes. The square exploded. For a moment, there was nothing to see but dust and smoke, but then a singular form leapt forwards, high into the air, and plunged down into their midst.

Malwrack's right hand was sheathed by an enormous glove with short swords in place of fingers. He flicked this now, activating its agony-inducing electrical properties, and killed three Guardsmen before the rest of the platoon could even blink. Their corpses twitched wildly and collapsed like discarded puppets. Then, they were all around him, punching, kicking, trying vainly to beat him with their rifles. Malwrack was calm and collected, his breathing controlled as he parried their blows. He found the humans almost comical in their ferocity; they did more frothing, cursing and grunting than they did actual damage. Still, they pressed in, refusing to break or flee. They pummelled away, hammering on his protective field as if trying to chisel rock with their bare hands.

It was mildly admirable, so Malwrack killed few, opting to maim instead. He swept another of them off his feet, removing the man's leg as he did so. Each time he slashed or stabbed, another Guardsman went down. They piled around his feet, wailing and screaming, whispering prayers to their God-Emperor or calling out for their mothers.

Suddenly, the telltales on Malwrack's forearm bracer lit up. His shadow field was a formidable piece of technology, but it was not infallible. There was only so much punishment it could take before it either overloaded or shut down to recharge itself. With a popping sound, it collapsed, and as it did, the

butt of a lasgun slammed into his face. The old archon's head snapped around violently, and inky blood sprayed out from between his steel teeth. Malwrack glared back at the man who had actually managed to hurt him, and drove the agoniser through his face. Arcs of electricity hissed and sparked. The man's eyes liquefied and ran down his cheeks, while he wailed like a thing possessed. The remaining Guardsmen recoiled at the sight and, while they were momentarily stunned, Malwrack finished them off in a whirling flourish. He killed four of them outright. The rest he left lying on the ground, fodder for his slave takers.

Beside him, the tank was trying to reposition itself so that it could once again bring its weapons to bear on him. Malwrack's eyes grew wide in horror. For a moment, caught up in the rush of the melee, he had forgotten all about the thing. Now, he realised that without his protective shield, any one of the machine's weapons would tear him in half. Certain that he was about to die, his last thought was of Sawor. She would lead the kabal in his stead, and she would do it well. His only regret was that he would no longer be around to see her come into her own.

Miraculously, the turret rotated away from him to face back into the square. Malwrack glanced over to see a Ravager coming to his rescue, firing as it came. Beams of black energy burrowed into the armoured side of the tank, and with a tortured sound, its turret exploded into twisted metal ribbons. Gouts of flame burst from every seam and joint, and its sponson weapons sagged. Malwrack recovered his composure and strode towards the waiting gunboat. Already, the gunnery crew was leaping down from the running boards and rushing to meet him.

'My lord,' one of them panted, 'are you all right?'

The archon pointed to the destroyed remains of the tank. 'Who is responsible for this?' he asked.

'An oversight,' another of his soldiers replied as bat-like aircraft raced across the sky. 'A military base outside of the city that escaped our orbital survey. It's being dealt with as we speak.'

Malwrack watched the jets pass, trailing sonic booms behind them. 'Well then,' he said, 'let's make certain it's properly taken care of.'

When at last he arrived, there was little left of the Imperial base save for wreckage. Buildings burned out of control. Dead Guardsmen and destroyed vehicles lay scattered about. A single bunker remained; its solitary door had been wrenched free.

Within it, his warriors reported, a handful of scared refugees had holed up in the hope that they might be spared. Lord Malwrack descended a narrow set of concrete steps into a damp, square room littered with blankets and pre-packaged food wrappers. The only light came from a few dim panels set into the walls. Four dead bodies lay splashed across the floor, the handiwork of his

sybarites. The last two survivors had been reserved for him.

Malwrack assessed them quickly: a male and female, dressed in soiled, khaki uniforms accentuated only by identification tags around his neck, and a diamond ring on one of her fingers. They sat in a corner with their arms wrapped tightly around one another. The female buried her face in the man's chest, muting her sobs. He in turn rocked her gently and tried to whisper soothing words of comfort.

'Well,' Malwrack said joylessly. 'Best get this over with.'

At the sound of his voice, the man looked up, his eyes wide. 'Please,' he spat in his ineloquent tongue. 'We know what you are. Please, don't take us away with you.'

'Not to worry, *mon-keigh*,' he said in clipped Low Gothic. 'It's not you I'm after. Just your planet.'

In the name of expedience, he pulled his pistol from its holster, intending to shoot the female. Then, quite unexpectedly, there was an explosion of movement as the man launched himself forwards. He grabbed Malwrack's left wrist, bending it upwards, and a cloud of splinters tore into the ceiling. In a single motion Malwrack slammed his forehead down onto the human's nose, jerked his knee into the man's stomach, and drove an elbow into his back when he doubled over. Malwrack effortlessly shifted his weight, and kicked him square in the chest. The man's body collapsed against a computer display screen. Glass shattered and sparks flew. Malwrack leapt and drove his bladed glove through flesh, bone and concrete flooring. He snorted loudly as he inhaled the man's escaping life essence.

This, it seemed, was finally enough to snap the female out of her paralysis. She ran over to her partner's body, howling, and draped herself across it.

He chambered another round into his pistol, and looked down at the female. 'He doesn't deserve so touching a tribute as your tears and wails,' he said to her. 'Why do you weep for such an insignificant man?'

She glared at him with her cornered animal eyes. 'He was my husband,' she roared. 'I loved him!'

Malwrack suddenly brightened. He snapped the fingers of his gloved hand, and pointed at her with one of its talons. 'That's it!' he said with glee. 'That's the word I've been trying to remember. Thank you.'

Seeing her bewilderment, he knelt down to be at eye level. 'You know, it just so happens that I am in love myself. Tell me, did it take much for him to dominate you?'

'Dominate me?' she asked dumbly.

'Yes. We say *inyon lama-quanon*: to make another person one's prized property or subservient. But I like your barbaric term, "love". It's concise, powerful, like a killing blow.'

The woman stifled a hysterical laugh. 'I always thought the xenos profiles

were exaggerated, but you really believe it, don't you? That there's nothing more to life than degrees of enslavement.'

'I'm afraid I don't follow,' Malwrack said.

'Love is about being together,' she continued. 'It's a sharing experience, an equal partnership. No ownership. No control. Love is about caring for someone so much that you can't bear to be apart.' She looked down at the blood-soaked remains of her husband and began to weep again.

Malwrack thought about the things he owned: his collection of hellmasks, his agonisers, his spire in Commorragh, his followers. Certainly he had his favourites among these, people and possessions held in high esteem. Yet, he was still confused. Sharing? Partnership? Perhaps he had been trying to remember the wrong word.

'Now kill me,' the woman said with impertinence.

'Kill you,' the archon said slowly, 'so that you can be together again.'

The woman did not reply, and the warriors crowded in the doorway held their collective breath. Malwrack stood, his ancient knees popping, and holstered his gun. He glanced towards his lieutenants and with a curt nod, they filed up and out of the bunker. He turned to do likewise.

The woman gasped. 'What are you doing?'

'Leaving you to savour your agony, of course.'

He lingered in the doorway, waiting for her to say something courteous, but she simply stared at him, agape. Perhaps it was too much to expect proper manners from the *mon-keigh*. After a moment he sighed and said, 'You're welcome'. Then he left her to revel in her pain, if it were even possible. Poor, limited creature that she was, Malwrack doubted the woman could properly appreciate a decent bout of anguish.

However, it seemed ingratitude was a quality not limited to human females. Upon his return to the Dark City, Malwrack went to Baeda's home to present her with Franchi. Her servant informed him carefully that Baeda refused to see him. She relayed that she had no interest in the planet he had ransacked for her, for she had worlds and captives of her own. Frothing, Malwrack considered forcing his way inside, but thought better of it when confronted by a pair of Baeda's incubi. Attacking them would be an open declaration of war, and despite his growing frustration, he wanted to win the widow, not slay her.

Sawor was exercising when he returned home. Stripped down to the barest of coverings, skin glistening, she ducked and weaved her way around a half-dozen sparring partners wielding serrated knives. Shallow cuts adorned her arms, legs and abdomen, and her oily sweat made them sting gloriously. Part training, part foreplay, she loved these midday sessions almost as she did actual combat. All activity screeched to a halt however when Malwrack threw the doors wide.

‘That woman!’ he bellowed, spittle flying from his mouth. ‘I’ll make her choke on her arrogance.’

Sawor made a shooing motion with her hand and her companions backed away fearfully. She had seen her father angry many times, but this was something different. He reminded her of some caged monster that the wyches might fight in the arena, incoherent with frustration and rage.

‘She defeated you in a fight?’ she asked hopefully, thinking it to be the only logical explanation. ‘Are our kabals now at war?’

‘She wouldn’t even see me,’ he said breathlessly. ‘I kill her suitors, but I do not impress. I go through all the effort of cleansing a planet for her, and she spurns it.’

Sawor bit her upper lip and said ‘Father, you have my fear and respect, but you know nothing about women. Trophies? Planets? How could you expect her to be impressed by you when you gift her with such commonalities? She has standards, Father. If you want her, truly want her, you are going to have to give her something unique. Something that no one else has ever dared to.’

The old archon deflated a little. Had anyone else tried to quench his fury, he would have slain them in a stroke, but Sawor was different. As always, she was like a salve placed on a burn; thankfully the pain remained, but the ferocity of it was dimmed.

‘You’re right, of course,’ he muttered. ‘Something that takes her breath away. Makes her realise, instantly, that it’s in her best interest to yield to me.’

He thought again of the married couple on Franchi. The woman had loved the man, but why? What had he given her in exchange for her submission? She had been the plainest creature in existence, practically rag-clad, except for–

Malwrack placed a hand on Sawor’s shoulder. ‘Gather the kabal,’ he said. ‘Our entire force. I know now what to give Mistress Baeda.’

Cthelmax was a desert world. Outside a baleful sun beat down, but here, in the vast interior of the tomb complex, it was so cool that Malwrack could see his breath when he spoke. He and Sawor stood bathed in an eerie green glow. In all other directions stretched an inky blackness, stabbed by beams of light as the warriors set up a defensive perimeter and studied how best to abscond with their prize.

‘Do you know what human males customarily use to buy the loyalty of their women?’ Malwrack asked his daughter. ‘Stones. Lumps of compressed carbon, especially.’

‘I’ve never understood your fascination with *mon-keigh* culture,’ Sawor answered distractedly. There was something about this place, this city-sized mausoleum that genuinely frightened her. The sooner they left here, the better.

Malwrack was too enraptured to notice the slight. ‘I have no idea what this

thing is actually made of, but its size and rarity should finally stifle that damned widow.' He turned to Sawor and laughed.

The necrontyr power crystal towered above them. Its base fitted into some kind of circular pedestal from which arcane conduits ran off in all directions. It glowed from within, but dimly, like a lamp nearly out of oil. A sybarite approached and informed Malwrack that the men were ready to disconnect it. The archon nodded impatiently.

Sawor frowned. 'I think you misunderstood me. When I said you had to give her something no one else could, I didn't mean–'

The green light went out suddenly, as the crystal was separated from its base. It grew very dark, and very still.

Malwrack clapped his hands together. 'Right, let's get this back home.'

Sawor walked a few steps away. Her breath came in short spasms. There was something stirring here now, touching her latent senses. Then she heard it. Over the grunts of the men working, and of her father barking orders, there was a scraping sound from the blackness. Metal on stone. Tiny dots appeared in the distance, and for a moment Sawor thought that some kind of phosphorescent carpet was undulating towards them with fantastic speed.

Realisation splashed over her like cold water. 'Father!' she screamed.

Then the scarabs were on them, surging forwards like a wave. They swarmed around the disconnected crystal with hissing, chittering sounds. The warriors attempted to defend themselves with pistols and knives even as the tiny machines slashed at their leg armour.

Malwrack backed away and jerked his neck, feeling the drugs pour through him. He had time to see Sawor do likewise before his incubi formed a protective circle around him. From the darkness above, massive forms were descending with thick, pointed legs unfurling. Their faces were tightly packed clusters of camera lenses, glowing brightly. They made a churning noise, and from their abdomens more scarabs appeared, raining down. The archon's bodyguards began to slash out with their pole arms, their every motion fluid. Malwrack activated his shadow field, and shoved his way between two of his protectors. One of the tiny machines tried to amputate his foot. He impaled it on his bladed glove for its trouble.

He had an unobstructed view now. The power crystal, its base and everyone who had been standing on or around it were covered by hundreds of tiny insectoid robots. For each one his soldiers killed, the large spider-forms floating above made several more. Sawor was in full swing, surrounded by wyches and attacking anything that got too close to her. She was shouting something, but Malwrack couldn't make it out.

A moment later, there was a rush of hot wind and the sound of rocket engines. Sawor had called in reinforcements from their base camp outside, Malwrack surmised. More soldiers leapt from Raiders while behind them

several slower-moving gunboats began to blow the scarabs apart with volleys from their energy cannons. The horde of machines began to thin. One of the large spiders crashed to the floor in a pool of slag. As if in response to the shifting tide of battle, twisting streams of green fire stabbed forth from out of the darkness. Humanoid shapes were slouching towards them, skeletal and hunched; cumbersome weapons hung heavy in their hands. Every soldier they hit flew apart into piles of burnt flesh and charred bones. The gunboats began to ignore the scarabs and turned their attention to this new threat.

There was a bright flash to Malwrack's left that cast twisted shadows across the broken floor. Another group of necrons, nearly two dozen in all, suddenly appeared. Above them floated a machine that looked like one of the scarab-making spiders with a skeletal torso fused to the top. In one hand, it raised a long stave. In the other was a glowing sphere. The ones on the ground immediately began firing their rifles. Two of the incubi were killed outright, but the armour of the others withstood the barrage. The archon's protective field turned opaque in several places, protecting his eyes from the blinding beams as it saved his body from vaporisation. Then it was his turn.

Malwrack leapt the distance and slashed out with his gauntleted hand. Five of the machines collapsed, heads severed and torsos ripped open. Wires spilled gut-like onto the ground. Behind him, his remaining retinue thrust forwards with their pole arms. Nine more of the things were destroyed. The floating machine brought its stave around in a sweeping arc, effortlessly decapitating two incubi, and the remaining necrons fell into the melee. There was a flurry of blows, all of which Malwrack easily parried. Then, responding to some command only they could hear, the machines began moving backwards, stunned perhaps at the ferocity of the dark eldar attack.

Malwrack let them retreat for the moment, and struggled to locate Sawor amidst the chaos. Despite the great strides he was making, the rest of his kabal was not faring half as well. Two of his gunboats were floating helplessly, abandoned by their crews and gutted by fire. The bodies of his soldiers were piling up everywhere, blackened and smoking. Amidst them, dead necrons were staggering back to their feet, reassembling themselves somehow until they again looked like gunmetal skeletons. Worse yet, two of the giant spiders were setting the crystal back into place. Newly minted scarabs swirled around them like a river of chrome. An archon came to power by knowing two things: when to fight, and when to run. For Malwrack, it was time to run.

'Back to the boats!' he yelled.

Those that could, began to fall back, weapons blazing and throats screaming. Malwrack and his remaining two guards ran to where Sawor stood alone again. Bodies, both flesh and bone and metallic, lay in pieces all around her. She herself was bleeding from a score of lacerations, none of which

seemed to slow her down or lessen her fury. Malwrack grabbed her forearm, dragging her from atop the charnel pile, and together they sprinted towards a nearby Raider. Bolts of green energy flew around them. The last incubi staggered and fell, but Malwrack never so much as glanced back at his erstwhile defenders. If none but he and Sawor escaped this, he would consider the day a victory.

Underlings were clamouring around the transport. Malwrack shot one of them and impaled another, flinging the man into the encroaching necron phalanx. Sawor, following suit, lopped off the arm of one warrior who refused to give up his place for her. The machine lurched violently before it blasted up and out of the tomb. Dark walls sped past them as they raced towards the exit. Sawor held on tightly and craned her neck to look behind them. A squadron of necron vehicles was in pursuit, firing powerful beams at them, but their speed was no greater. The Raider would make it to surface first, where their base camp and a portal to Commorragh awaited. Despite all the carnage, it seemed that she and Malwrack would live to fight another day. Sawor looked over at her father. He met her gaze, and realising the same thing, he actually smiled.

They were almost to the exit when the Raider crashed. Without warning, serpentine enemies emerged from the walls and floor of the tomb. They lashed out with pointed tails and monstrously bladed hands, tearing through the hull and engine housing. The transport pitched downwards and cartwheeled through space with a terrible velocity. It careened through the exit, and impacted on the sand outside, crumpling and shearing. Malwrack's shadow field flared into protective mode, turning pitch-black as he was thrown free of the wreckage.

How long he lay there, Malwrack had no way of telling. His shadow field was clear, so any danger was apparently past. Slowly he sat up. While he waited for his vision to stop swimming, he registered a pile of flaming wreckage, a half-dozen bodies clad in purple armour and the silent entrance to the tomb. Presumably, the necrons within were under no instructions to pursue invaders out here into the desert. He looked around for Sawor, but didn't see her. He called her name, but there was no response from anyone. He called again, louder. Still no reply. With a twinge of panic, he limped to the bulk of the downed Raider.

He found her beneath one of the running boards, literally folded in half. Jagged pieces of the transport protruded from her in several places, the most gruesome of which exited through her gaping mouth. He made a mewling sound and dropped down to her side. He inhaled desperately, but there was nothing there. Her life essence, her soul, had dissipated. She was dead beyond any haemonculus's resuscitational skill.

'Get up,' he said.

He stood once more and looked down at her shattered form. 'Get up,' he

repeated. ‘I order you to get up.’

Malwrack realised with a start that he was powerless. No beating, no threat, no command would make her live again. This was not the way it was supposed to have happened, his kabal gutted, his successor gone. He activated the portal back to Commorragh, and strode purposefully through the gate, oblivious to the fact that as he did so, he was crying.

When her servant refused him entry, he kicked down the door. When five of her incubi formed a wall across the foyer, he gutted two of them in a flash, and massacred the rest as they tried to fall back. On the grand staircase that led up to her personal chambers, an entire unit of warriors fired their weapons at him. He walked through the hail of splinters and, with shadow field blazing darkly, killed every last one of them. Then, he made his way upstairs. Throwing the doors wide, he found her in the room with arched windows where he and Sawor had first come to see her. She bolted off her settee, one hand flying up to her pendant, the other pulling an ornate handgun from the folds of her dress. Malwrack strode in, arms wide, eyes unblinking, head lowered. His tattered cape flowed behind him like a purple sea.

‘What does a man have to do around here to get a little attention?’ he roared.

Two more incubi, lying in ambush behind the door, lunged at his back. Malwrack spun low. His gauntleted hand tore out the throat of one assailant, then flashed back to impale the other before either one could even land a blow. When he rose and faced Baeda again, his forearm was dripping with gore.

She backed away, slowly, never taking her eyes off him. ‘To what do I owe the pleasure?’ she asked coldly.

‘Don’t you be coy,’ he growled. ‘Don’t you even dare.’

‘Is this about that planet you wanted to give me?’

He kicked a chair with such force that it sailed across the room. ‘You know what this is about! It’s about you. You’ve destroyed me.’

Baeda noticed then that something was terribly wrong with his face. Streams of water were gushing uncontrollably from his eyes. She’d never seen the like.

‘I tried so hard to win you, and all you did was spurn me. I killed for you, and all you could say was that I did not impress. I should have stopped even then, just called the whole thing off and moved on, but I couldn’t. It was like you’d infected me. You were all I could think about.

‘I gave you a world, but you wouldn’t even see me. Why wouldn’t you see me? If you’d just let me in that day, she’d still be here, but no, you thought it would be more fun to refuse me. Was that your plan, mistress, to starve me? Like a dog? Deprive me of your presence until I just went rabid?’

He was babbling, Baeda saw, hyperventilating and lost in a dark train of thought. She could have shot him dead right then and there, he was so distracted, yet there was something about his behaviour that was fascinating.

‘Who would still be here?’ she asked him.

‘Well, it worked,’ he continued. ‘I swore that I would have you, Baeda. *Inyon lama-quanon.* To the detriment of everything else. My followers, my armies, all gone. My kabal is finished because of you; because I became so enraptured, and thought I’d finally found the perfect gift with which to win you.’

He still had not answered her question, and so she asked again. ‘Malwrack, who would still be here?’

The old archon appeared to deflate, shoulders stooping, his chest caving in. He gave a heart-wrenching sigh and said, ‘Sawor.’

Outside the room, Baeda could hear running footsteps. More of her soldiers and protectors were rushing to her defence. They would surely kill the old man, by weight of numbers if not by martial skill. Yet, she had to hear him out first. His tears, his ragged breathing, his palpable aura of loss were entrancing.

When he spoke again, his voice was almost inaudible. ‘I took her to Cthelmax. There are ruins there. Very well preserved. I looked over at her. I was so certain that we would be all right. Then she was gone.’

Weapons clicked into readiness behind him as Baeda’s forces piled into the room. At the slightest signal from her, they would open fire, and that would be the end of Lord Malwrack. He seemed to take no notice, however. Instead, his whole being shuddered, and he collapsed at the widow’s feet.

‘She’s gone!’ he cried from a place so dark, it made Baeda gasp. Malwrack could see now that Sawor had been no mere hierarch. She had been his sounding board, his strong-arm, his partner in all things. She had been his most prized possession, and he had loved her. He would never be complete again, and thus, there was no point in his life continuing. Sobbing, he waited only for a volley of splinter fire or a killing blow from Baeda to end it all.

He felt her lift him up. Spent, he didn’t resist. Baeda looked him square in the face, placed a hand on each of his cheeks, and clamped her mouth over his. Malwrack was certain she was giving him the kiss of death, but it just went on and on. Instead of stabbing or shooting him, he felt Baeda’s body soften and press into his. Her tongue darted around his steel teeth. Her fingers dug into his cheeks. He kissed her back and wrapped his arms around her so tightly that her body armour creaked. When she finally pulled away, she had a dreamy expression on her face.

‘*Lama-quanon*,’ she said. ‘I yield to you.’

‘I don’t understand,’ Malwrack said. ‘I have no kabal left to fight you with. You wouldn’t take the planet, and I couldn’t retrieve the crystal, so I have

nothing with which to buy your obedience.’

‘Of course you do,’ she purred as her long fingers traced his wrinkled brow. ‘You’ve given me the greatest gift imaginable: your suffering. There’s a void in you now, a delicious emptiness that will never heal. Say you’ll always give that to me, that you’ll feed me with it the rest of our days, and all that I have will be yours.’

Malwrack looked over his shoulder at the horde of warriors behind him. Baeda began scratching at his armour as if she meant to undress him here, immediately, and in front of everyone, cement their new partnership in a torrent of public lovemaking.

A smirk slowly crept across Malwrack’s face. He had squandered one kabal only to inherit another. These soldiers would live and die at his command, and he was not, after all, defeated. Malwrack pointed to the doorway, and after a moment, the soldiers lowered their heads and shuffled out. He threw his bladed gauntlet to the floor, increased the flow to his drug injector, and grabbing a fistful of her hair, wrenched Baeda’s head back. She smiled at him. Soon he and the widow would ride out across the galaxy together, inflicting anguish on any who could bear it. With his experience and Baeda’s resources, there would be no stopping them. He could avenge his daughter’s death a thousandfold upon the whole of creation.

‘It’s going to be glorious,’ Baeda said cryptically. She kissed Malwrack again, deep and long. Through the window behind them, the spires and lights of the Dark City watched without comment.

SURVIVOR

Steve Parker

Bas was up and running full tilt before he even knew why. Part of his brain reacted the moment the cry went out, then his legs were moving, pounding the dusty alleyways as he flew from his pursuers.

The first rule was simple: *don't be seen*. He'd broken it only a few times since the monsters had come, and never by choice. This time, as before, it wasn't through clumsiness. It wasn't carelessness. It was just raw bad luck, plain and simple. He had taken all the usual precautions. He'd stuck to the shadows. He'd moved low and fast. He'd been patient and silent and constantly aware. But the monsters chasing him now, yapping and chittering joyously at the prospect of spilling his blood, had come from below. They had emerged from a sewer grate just a few metres behind him and the day's quest for clean water was suddenly forgotten in favour of a far more pressing need.

Bullets smacked into the alley walls on either side of him as he fled, blowing out little clouds of dust and stone chips. Some came near to ending his life, their passage close enough to whip at his filth-caked hair. That lent him an extra burst of speed, extra adrenaline to further numb the agony of his aching joints and muscles.

Up ahead, he saw the twisted remains of a fire escape and bolted towards it. The rooftops – those were his domain. In the months since their coming, he had spent hours laying boards and planks between what was left of the town's roofs. Up there, he moved where he pleased and saw all. He had the advantage. The big ones never went up there, and the smaller ones didn't know the terrain like he did. The rooftops were his –control your environment and you would always be one step ahead.

The crooked metal stairs shook and groaned as he thundered up them, heart

hammering in his ears, skull pounding with accelerated blood flow. He chanced a look down and saw his pursuers, four scrawny green figures with red eyes and needle teeth. They reached the bottom of the fire escape and leapt onto it, clambering up after him.

Bas kept on and made the roof in a few more seconds. For the briefest moment, he took stock of where he was. Here in the town's south-west quarter, he had a few established hiding places, two of which were close by. But he couldn't risk leading his enemies to one of his sanctuaries. He had to put some distance between them first. He could go north across the makeshift bridges he had laid weeks ago, or he could head east where the gaps between the tenements were narrow enough to leap.

North, then. The monsters behind him could leap as far as he could. East was a bad gamble.

He sped on across the roof, avoiding the gaps where alien artillery shells had bitten great gaping holes. He was at the far side when the first of the wiry green killers topped the fire escape and resumed shooting wildly at him. The others appeared beside it and, seeing that their guns were missing the mark, they rushed towards him.

Eyes front, Bas told himself as he took his first hurried step out onto the twin planks. Don't look down.

The gap between the buildings was five metres wide. As he neared the middle, the wood sagged under him, but he knew it would hold. He had tested the strength of the wood before he laid it.

A couple of bullets sang past his ears. He half-ran the last few steps across and leapt the final one. Behind him, his pursuers were halfway across the previous rooftop.

Bas turned to face them. There wasn't time to pull the planks in like he wanted to, not with his enemies wielding those scrappy, fat barrelled pistols. Instead, he kicked out at the planks and watched them tumble end-over-end to the dark alley below.

His pursuers howled and spat in rage and opened fire. One, perhaps more reckless than the others, or perhaps with a greater bloodlust, refused to be beaten. The creature took a run up to the edge of the roof and leapt out into space. Bas was already sprinting towards the next rooftop. He didn't see the creature plunge to its death, but he heard the chilling scream. Soon, he had left his hunters far behind, their alien cries of frustration and outrage ringing in his ears.

He was dying.

Maybe. Probably. He couldn't be sure. Bas was only ten years old, and all the dying he had seen so far in this short life had been the violent, messy kind – and all of that in the last few months.

This was different. This was a loosening of his back teeth. This was a burning in his gut on those increasingly rare occasions when he ate something solid. This was blood in his phlegm when he spat and in his stool when he made his toilet. Pounding headaches came and went, like the sharp cramps that sometimes wracked his weakening muscles.

After his flight across the rooftops, all these symptoms came on him at once. He fought them off until he reached relative safety. Then he lay down, and the pain rolled over him like a landslide.

Had he known any better, he would have recognised the signs of dehydration and malnourishment. As his scavenged supplies dwindled, he was forced to spread them ever thinner. But Bas didn't know. He could only guess.

How long had he lived like this now? Was it months? It felt like months. What date was it? He couldn't be sure of anything. Time passed for him not in hours and minutes, but in periods of hiding and running, of light, tormented sleep and the daily business of surviving on a knife edge. He felt like the last rodent in a tower of ravenous felines.

If the green horrors ever caught him, his end would come quickly enough. It would be painful and horrific, but it would be short. Shorter than disease or hunger, anyway. He wondered if a slow, quiet death was any better. Something instinctual made him back away from that train of thought before he formed an answer. For now, he was alive, and here, in one of his many boltholes, he was safe.

He chided himself. No, not safe. Not truly. He was never that.

He heard the old man's voice in his head, berating him from memory, as sharp and harsh as a rifle's report.

Safety is an illusion, boy. Never forget that.

Aye, an illusion. How could Bas forget? The words had been beaten into him until he learned to sleep only lightly and wake to a readiness any frontline Guardsman would have envied. While living with the old man, if he wasn't up and at attention three seconds after first call, that heavy cane would whistle through the air and wake him up the hard way. Now, if a blow ever caught him in his sleep, it wouldn't be for the sake of a lesson. It would be the bite of a greenskin blade, and his sleep would be the eternal sleep of the dead.

His traps and snares, he knew, wouldn't protect him forever. One day, maybe soon, one of the savages would get all the way in. Not one of the tusked giants. Bas was careful to bed down only in small, tight spaces where they couldn't go. But the scrawny, hook-nosed ones could slip into all the places he could, and they were wicked, murderous things, gleeful in their bloodletting. He trusted his defences only as much as he trusted himself, so he was diligent to a fault. He triple-checked every last point of entry before he ever allowed his eyes to close. Simple though they were, his traps had already

saved him a dozen times over. The old sod had drilled him relentlessly, and Bas had despised him for it. But those lessons, hard-learned and hated, were the thin line between life and death now, the reason one last ten-year-old boy survived in the remnants of this rotting town where eighteen thousand Imperial citizens had died screaming, crying out to the Emperor for salvation.

Bas lived, and that in itself was spit in the eye of the greenskin nightmare.

He had never thanked the old man. There had been a moment, back when they had parted company for good, in which Bas had almost said the words, but the memories of all the fractured bones and cuts and bruises were still too sharp back then. They had stilled his tongue. The moment had passed, never to come again, and the old man was surely dead. For what it was worth, Bas hoped the old bastard's soul would take some satisfaction in his grandson's survival.

Time to rest now. He needed it more than ever. It was blackest night outside. The wind screamed in the shell-holes that pocked the walls of this four-storey tenement. A hard cold rain beat on the remains of the crumbling roof and the cracked skylight above.

Good, thought Bas. The greenskins wouldn't be abroad tonight. They kept to their cookfires when it rained this hard.

At the thought of cookfires, his stomach growled a protest at long hours of emptiness, but he couldn't afford to eat again today. Tomorrow, he'd have something from one of the tins, processed grox meat perhaps. He needed protein badly.

Hidden deep at the back of a cramped metal air-vent, the boy drew a filthy, ragged sheet up over his head, closed his eyes, and let a fragile, temporary peace embrace him.

When Bas was just seven years old, his parents died and what he was told of it was a lie. Two officers brought the news. His father's major-domo, Geddian Arnaust, asked for details, at which point the officers exchanged uncomfortable looks. The taller of the two said something about a bombing at the planetary governor's summer mansion – an attack by elements of an anti-Imperial cult. But Bas knew half-truth when he heard it. Whatever had really happened, the grim, darkly-uniformed duo in the mansion's foyer would say no more about it. Bas never found out the real story.

What they did say, however, was that, on behalf of the Imperium of Man and the Almighty God-Emperor Himself, the noble Administratum was taking full possession of the Vaarden estate and all assets attached to it. War raged across the segmentum. Money was needed for the raising of new troops. Imperial Law was clear on the matter. The mansion staff would be kept on, the tall officer assured Arnaust. The new tenant – an Administratum man, cousin of the planetary governor, no less – would engage their services.

‘What will happen to the young master?’ Arnaust had asked with only the mildest concern, less for the boy than for the simple practicality of dispensing with an unwanted duty. He had never held any particular affection for his master’s son.

‘Maternal grandfather,’ said the officer on the left. ‘His last living relative, according to records. Out east, by New Caedon Hive. The boy will be sent there.’

‘There’s a cargo train taking slaves that way this afternoon,’ said the taller. ‘It’s a twenty-hour trip. No stops.’

Arnaust nodded and asked how soon the boy might embark.

‘We’re to take him to Hevas Terminal as soon as he’s ready,’ said the shorter officer. ‘He can bring one bag, enough for a change of clothes. Whatever else he needs, the grandfather will have to provide.’

It was as simple as that. One moment, Bas had been the son of a wealthy investor with mining concerns on a dozen mineral-rich moons, the next he was a seven-year-old orphan stuffed into the smallest, filthiest compartment of a rusting train car with nothing but a tide of cream-coloured lice for company and a bag of clothes for a pillow.

At least he wasn’t put with the others. Among the slaves all chained together in the larger compartments, there were several hunched, scowling men who had eyed him in the strangest manner as he’d walked up the carriage ramp. Their predatory stares, unreadable to one so naive, had nevertheless chilled Bas to the marrow.

Father and mother gone, and him suddenly wrenched from the security and stability of the wealth and comfort they had provided! Curled up in his grimy, closet-sized space, Bas had wept without pause, his body trembling with sobs, until exhaustion finally took over. Asleep at last, he didn’t feel the lice crawling over his arms and legs to feed. When he awoke much later, he was covered in raw, itching bumps. He took vengeance then, the first he had ever known, and crushed all the blood-fat lice he could find. It took only moments, but the satisfaction of killing them for their transgressions lasted well beyond the act itself. When the pleasure of revenge finally subsided, he curled up into a ball and wept once more.

A scream ripped Bas from a dream immediately forgotten, and he came awake at once, throwing off his filthy sheet and rolling to a crouch. His hand went to the hilt of the knife roped around his waist. It sounded again. Not human. Close by.

The traps in the hall! One of the snares!

Bas scrambled to the opening of the air-vent. There, he paused for a dozen thunderous heartbeats while he scanned the room below him.

No movement. They hadn’t gotten this far in, thank the Throne.

He jumped down. Crouching low, he scooted towards the door in the far wall. Beyond the grimy windows to his left, the sky was a dull, murky green. Morning. The sun would rise soon, not that it would be visible. The rain had ceased, but the clouds hung thick and heavy and low.

Bas stopped by the room's only door just long enough to deactivate the hinged spike trap above it. He stretched up on tip-toes to fix the simple safety lock in place. Then, cautiously, quietly, he opened the door and peered through, eyes wide against the liquid darkness of the hallway beyond.

A mewling sound guided his gaze towards the intruder. There, barely visible among the mounds of fallen concrete and shattered glass that littered the floor, was one of them, distinguishable from the rubble only by the sound it made and the panicked scrabbling of its long-fingered hands as it struggled with the wire that bit into its flesh.

Bas could smell its blood on the dusty air – salty and metallic like human blood, but with strong overtones of something else, something like mould.

He checked for any sign of movement in the shadows beyond the intruder. If the creature wasn't alone, he would have to flee. There could be no fighting toe-to-toe. Much as he valued the little sanctuary he had worked so hard to create here, he wasn't fool enough to die for it. He had abandoned other boltholes for less.

Though Bas matched most of the hook-noses in size, they had the physical edge. The hideous creatures were far stronger than they looked. Their long powerful hands and razor-lined mouths made them deadly. Even one so hopelessly entangled in his sharp wire snares could still do him lethal damage if he got careless.

But Bas hadn't lived this long by being careless.

The old man's voice rose again in his mind.

No slips, boy. A survivor minds his details. Always.

Satisfied that the monster was alone, Bas acted quickly. He dashed from the doorway, low and silent as ever, and closed on his scrabbling prey. Before the alien knew it had company, Bas was on it, stamping viciously down on its face. Bones snapped. Teeth broke. The vile, misshapen head hammered again and again against the stone floor. With the creature stunned, Bas straddled it, drew his knife and pressed the long blade up under the creature's breastbone. He threw his whole weight behind the thrust, leaning into it with both hands. The creature's body heaved under him. It began flailing and bucking wildly, but Bas held on, gripping its skinny torso between his knees. Then, with his knife buried up to the hilt, Bas began to lever the blade roughly back and forward, cleaving the creature's heart in two.

A wheezing gasp. A wet gurgle. A last violent tremor, and the creature went limp.

Bas rolled off the body, leaving the knife buried in his foe. Withdrawing it

now would only mean spillage and he wanted to avoid that as much as he could. Lying in the gloom, catching his breath, he watched his hands for the moment they would stop shaking.

Don't be afraid, he told himself. This is nothing new. We've done this before.

That gravelly voice rasped again from the past.

Adrenaline is your ally, boy. Don't mistake it for fear. They're not the same thing.

The shaking subsided far faster than when he'd made his first kill, but Bas knew from experience that the hard work would start in earnest now. He had a body to deal with. If the other savages smelled blood – and they always did – they would come. He had to move the corpse.

Hissing a curse, he kicked out at the thing's ugly, dead face.

Being abroad in daylight was a constant gamble, much more so with a burden like this one, but he knew he could still save this precious bolthole from discovery if he moved fast. The more time he gave the greenskins to rouse, the more danger he'd be in.

With a grunt, he forced his aching, exhausted body to its feet and set about his grisly business.

The cargo train ground to a slow halt at noon on the day after its journey had begun. The iron walls of Bas's tiny cabin shuddered so much as the brakes were applied that Bas was sure the train would come apart. Instead, after what seemed an eternity, the screeching of metal against metal ended and the vehicle gave one final lurch.

Bas, unprepared for this, cried out as he was flung against the wall, bumping his head. He sat rubbing his injury, fighting to hold back tears.

A scruffy teenaged boy in the orange overalls of a loader came looking for him a few minutes after the massive vehicle's engines had powered down.

'Arco Station,' he rasped around the thick brown lho-stick he was smoking. 'It's yer stop, grub. Up an' out.'

Bas stood shakily and lifted his bag, then followed the young loader and his trail of choking yellow smoke to the nearest exit ramp. As they walked, he asked meekly, 'Why did you call me *grub*?'

Bas wasn't offended per se. He was unused to insult, sheltered as his life had been until now. He was simply confused. No one had ever called him names before. He had always been *the young master*.

The loader snorted. Over his left shoulder, he said, 'Lookit yerself, grub. Small an' pale an' fat. Soft an' squirmy. You got rich written all over you. I 'eard about you. Serves you right, the likes o' you. Serves you right, all what happened.'

Bas didn't understand that. He wasn't rich. That was his father. He hadn't

done anything wrong. Suddenly, he felt fresh tears rising and a tightness in his throat. This boy hated him, he realised. Why? What had he done? Before he could ask, they reached the train car's portside personnel ramp. The loader stepped aside and shoved Bas forward. The light outside was blinding in contrast to the dank interior of the huge train. Bas felt the harsh radiance stabbing at his eyes. The sun was glaring, the sky a blue so intense it seemed to throb.

As his eyes adjusted, he squinted down the long ramp, taking in the rockcrete expanse of the loading platform. Beyond it, shimmering in the heat haze way off to the north, stood the shining steel towers of a great city.

New Caedon Hive.

His new home, surely, for one of the Civitas officers had mentioned the place by name. From here, it looked glorious. He had read all about the great hive cities of the Imperium in one of his father's databooks. Their streets teemed with all manner of people, living and working together in unity to fuel the glorious machine that was the Imperium of Man. He felt a momentary thrill despite his fears. What would it be like to live in such a place, so different from the quiet isolation of the estate? What grand role would he come to play there?

Already, indentured workers and mindless servitors were unloading crates from the other cars on to the sun-baked surface of the platform. Armed men, their faces hidden beneath black visors, pushed and kicked the newly arrived slaves into orderly lines. Someone Bas couldn't see beyond the rows of slaves was barking out a list of rules which, if broken, would apparently be met with the direst physical punishment.

'Go on, then,' spat the loader from behind Bas. 'Get on about yer business, grub. Someone's waiting for you, they are.'

Bas scanned the platform again. He had never met his maternal grandfather. His mother, distant at the best of times, had never once mentioned the man. Bas could see no one who stood out from those he had already noted.

A hand on his back started him down the ramp, forcing that first step. Numbly, he let his legs carry him further, step after step, clutching his bag tight, eyes still searching for his grandfather with a growing sense of panic and confusion.

'Emprah 'elp you, grub. Thassa mean-lookin' bastard you got waiting for you.'

Bas turned, but the loader was already tramping back into the carriage's shadowy interior. Returning his gaze to the platform, he saw it at last, a single figure marked out because it wasn't moving, wasn't hefting crates or bags or boxes or bundles. It was a man, and he stood in the shadow of a rusting green cargo container, his back resting against its pitted surface.

Bas couldn't see him well, not cloaked in such thick, black shadow, but his

skin turned to gooseflesh all the same. The cold hand of dread gripped his heart. He slowed. He wanted to turn back, but to what? To a dark metal cabin crawling with lice? He kept moving.

When his feet touched level ground, he gave a start and looked down, surprised that he had descended the whole ramp. There was nothing else to do now. He had to keep on. His numb legs drove him reluctantly towards the green container. When he was five metres from it, a voice as rough as grinding rocks said, ‘Took your blasted time, boy. What are you, soft in the head as well as the body?’

There was no introduction beyond this, no courtesies.

‘Don’t fall behind,’ said the man as he pushed himself upright from the side of the container. ‘And don’t speak.’

As the man stepped into the glaring sunshine, Bas saw him properly for the first time and failed to stifle a whimper. A sudden hot wetness spread from his crotch, soaking his trousers. The old man turned at the lack of following footsteps. He took in the pathetic sight, a scowl of disgust twisting his awful features.

‘Blasted Throne,’ he hissed. ‘If you’ve got any of my blood in you, it’s not much!’

Bas stared back, frozen in place, lip quivering, hands trembling. This man couldn’t be his mother’s sire. There had to be some mistake. His mother had been beautiful and refined. Cold, if he were being honest, but nonetheless a woman he had loved and admired above all others. He searched the stranger in front of him for any sign of his mother’s bloodline.

If it was there at all, it was buried deep beneath leathery skin and scar tissue.

The man before him was old, over seventy standard years if he was a day, but impressively muscled for his age. He carried barely an ounce of fat. Veins stood out on his hard shoulders and arms and snaked up his neck to the temples on either side of his shaved head. He wore a beard of middle length, untidy and uneven, and some kind of silver chain with two small metal plates hanging from it. His clothes were olive green, both the sweat-stained vest and the tattered old pants, and his boots, which could hardly be called black anymore, were scuffed and covered with dirt.

The worst thing about the old man by far, however – the thing that held the boy’s eyes for the longest time – was the huge crater of missing flesh where his right cheek should rightly have been. It was monstrous. The tissue that remained was so thin Bas could make out individual teeth clenched in anger beneath it.

The old man noted where the boy’s eyes had settled.

‘Think I’m a horror, boy?’ he said. ‘One day, I’ll tell you about horrors.’

At this, a strange, far-away look came over him. In that instant, the old man

seemed suddenly human, almost vulnerable somehow, a man with his own very real fears. But it was just a moment. It passed, and the hard, cold glare of contempt returned as fierce as before.

‘The sun will dry your trousers,’ said the old man as he turned away, ‘but not your shame, if you’ve any left.’ He started walking again, off towards the southwestern edge of the platform where another broad ramp descended to ground level. It was now that Bas noticed the pronounced limp in the old man’s right leg and the muffled sound of grinding metal that came from it with every step.

‘Keep up, boy,’ the old man shouted back. ‘Keep up or I’ll leave you here, Emperor damn you.’

Bas hurried after him and was just close enough to hear him mumble, ‘I’m all you’ve got, you poor little bastard. Throne help the both of us.’

The alien’s body was heavy despite its size, and Bas laboured hard as he carried it across the roofs to a place he felt was far enough from any of his boltholes. He was glad for the clouds now. The assault of a blazing sun would have made the task that much harder. It might even have finished him off.

Dizziness threatened to topple him twice as he crossed his plank-bridges, but both times he managed to recover, just. There hadn’t been time to eat. Once the body had cooled and the blood inside had congealed, he had withdrawn his knife from the beast’s chest and stuffed the wound with rags. There was almost no spillage at all. He had bound the wrists and ankles with lengths of wire, to make carrying it more manageable, and had wrapped it in an old curtain he had torn from a third-floor window. Even so, as careful as he was, every moment he remained with the corpse was a moment closer to death. Hunger raged like a fire in the pit of his empty stomach and his legs and shoulders burned with lactic acid. As soon as he was done dumping the body, he promised himself, he would eat a whole can of something. Part of him balked at the thought of such excess. Eating well now meant running out of food that much sooner. But it couldn’t be helped. He had felt it yesterday running for his life. He felt it now. He was getting weaker, putting himself at a disadvantage, and he had to sustain himself. One day soon, he would no longer be able to dump the ones he killed. He would be forced to cook their flesh and eat it just to survive. He knew it would come to that. It was inevitable. He’d have cooked and eaten sewer rats first, but they seemed to have disappeared, perhaps eaten by the strange ovoid carnivores the invaders had brought with them. Bas didn’t care about taste, but he suspected alien flesh, cooked or otherwise, would fatally poison him. No matter what he did, one way or another, they would kill him in the end.

But not today. Not while he still had power enough to defy them.

Up ahead he could see the shattered chimney pots of the last standing

tenement on the town's southern edge. There, on that rooftop, he would leave the body. The smell of its decay wouldn't reach the ground. The winds from the wastelands would carry it off.

He left the carcass near the centre of the roof, burying it in rubble so that any hook-noses that did come up here wouldn't see anything to get curious about. At least, not from a distance.

With his labours done, Bas was about to turn back and retrace his steps when he heard a great rumble from the plains south of the town. He flattened himself and crawled to the rooftop's edge. A vast cloud of dust had risen up, at least a mile wide. At first he thought it was a sandstorm, but it was closing on Three Rivers and the wind was blowing against it.

Insistent as it was, Bas forgot his hunger then. This was something new, something unexpected. He had to stay and watch. He had to know what it was and how it would affect his survival. A spark of hope almost lit in his heart. Could it be humans? Could it be Imperial forces come to take back the town? Throne above, let it be so.

But it was just a spark. The darkness inside him swallowed it quickly. He had lived too many days and nights without succour to believe things would change now. For all he knew, he was the last living human on Taos III. Given the unstoppable strength and violent nature of the alien invaders, that didn't seem unlikely at all.

Thus, he wasn't disappointed so much as unsurprised when the cloud of dust turned out to be a massive greenskin convoy. The air filled with engine noise that would have rivalled a summer thunderstorm. Vehicles of every possible description raced across the plains towards the town. There were hundreds of them with wheels and treads in every possible configuration. Bas's eyes could hardly take them all in, such was the variety of strange shapes. Monstrous weapons sprouted at all angles from heavily plated turrets. Radiator grills and glacis plates had been modified to look like grotesque faces. Gaudy banners of red and yellow snapped in the windblown dust, painted with crude skulls and axes rendered with childish simplicity.

There was nothing childlike about the riders, though. They were hulking brutes, all green muscle, yellow tusks and thick metal armour. They revelled in the noise of their machines, raising their bestial voices to roar along with them. They cavorted on the backs of bastardised trucks and troop transports. Those that fell off were crushed to red smears beneath the wheels and treads of the vehicles behind, drawing cackles of laughter from all that noticed.

They were terrible to behold and Bas felt his bladder clench. If they had come to stay, to reinforce the greenskins that already controlled Three Rivers, his time was surely up. The odds of evading numbers like these were slim at best. He still had to scavenge for old cans of food each day, still had to fill his water-bottles from any source he could find. He still had to venture out from

the safety of his boltholes. When he did, he would face a town swarming with savage nightmares. Why had they come? What had driven them here?

It was then, as this question formed in his mind, and as the first of the vehicles roared along the street below him into the town proper, shaking the foundations of the building atop which he rested, that he saw them:

Humans!

At first, he couldn't believe his eyes. He stopped breathing and his heart beat a frantic tattoo on his ribs. He wasn't the last after all. He wasn't alone on this world. There were dozens of them, chained and caged in the back of slaver trucks. Bas ignored the warbikes and heavy armour that rumbled past now. He had eyes only for the cages.

They looked a weak lot, these people. Beaten down, tortured. It wasn't a criticism. Bas pitied them. He knew what they must have endured. He alone had lived to witness the deaths of the people of Three Rivers. So many deaths. He had seen what the invaders were capable of. Theirs was a brutality wholly reflected in their terrible appearance.

The slaves in the cages wore soiled rags or nothing at all, men and women both. At one time, Bas might have been curious to look on the women, naked as they were. What ten-year old boy wouldn't be? Not so now. Not like this. Now, he noticed only the wasted muscles, the clotted blood on their faces and scalps, the ribs that protruded from their bruised torsos.

Most of them looked dead already, like they had given up. Perhaps they didn't have it in them to end their own lives, but from the looks of them, they would welcome the end when it came.

They are not like me, Bas found himself thinking. They are not survivors. And there are no children.

In that last regard, he was wrong. A moment later, as the last slaver truck passed beneath Bas's rooftop perch and off up the street towards the town centre, he looked at the rear wall of its cage and saw a boy roughly his own age and height. A boy! Unlike the others, the child was standing upright gripping the bars of the cage, his knuckles white.

There was fire in his eyes. Even from this distance, Bas saw it, felt it. Defiance and the will to live burned bright in this one.

A brother, thought Bas. A friend. And suddenly he knew that his months of loneliness and torment had had a purpose after all, a purpose beyond just spitting in the red eye of the foe. He had survived to see this day. He had survived to find this boy, and he would rescue him so that he would never be alone again. Together, they could bring meaning to each other's lives. They could look out for each other, depend on each other. Between them, the burden of caution could be shared. Life would be better. Bas was certain of it.

His grandfather's voice snapped at him from the past.

Weigh everything against your survival. Live to fight. Don't throw

everything away on lost causes.

No, Bas argued back. I can't go on alone. I will save him for my own sake.

If the old man had been alive, he'd have beaten Bas black and blue for that. Not out of anger – never that – but because each man gets only one life, and some mistakes, once made, cannot be undone.

The streets were still trembling with the roar and passage of the convoy as Bas got to his feet. He suppressed his hunger once again and followed the slaver trucks towards the town centre. There, he would stay low, observe, and draw his plans.

It quickly became clear, as his grandfather drove them away from Arco Station, that Bas was not to live in the great hive-city to the north as he had imagined. The road they followed ran south and the rail terminal's blocky buildings soon fell away behind them, obscured by dust, heat haze and distance. The land on either side of the wide, empty road was flat and largely dry, populated by little else but hardy grasses and shrubs and the tall, strange cattle which plucked at them. Bas was too scared to ask his grandfather where they were going, or anything else for that matter. The old man smelled of sweat, earth and strong alcohol, and he drove his rickety autocar with his jaw clenched, neither looking at nor speaking to his terrified young charge.

After two or three hours in the vehicle's hot, stuffy interior, Bas saw a town materialise from the wavering line of the horizon. As the old man drove nearer, Bas became depressingly certain that this was his new home. The buildings at the settlement's north edge were lop-sided, patchwork affairs with rusting, corrugated walls. It was the first slum-housing Bas had ever seen. Beyond them, the structures got taller and more dense, though little more appealing. An oily pall hung over everything. Towering smoke stacks belched thick, dirty smoke into the sky. As they drove deeper into the town, Bas peered through the windows at the scowling, hard-eyed people on the streets. Tenements dominated. The inky alleys between them spilled tides of refuse onto the main thoroughfares.

Who would live like this? Bas asked himself. Who would stay here?

For the second time that day, he felt the desperate urge to turn around, to run to anywhere but here. But there was simply nowhere to go. He was a seven-year old boy, alone in the Imperium but for the man next to him, linked by blood and nothing else.

'Welcome to Three Rivers,' grunted his grandfather.

Bas didn't feel welcome at all.

Ironically, Three Rivers boasted only one. The other two rivers had dried up as the result of a Munitorum hydropower project some two hundred kilometres to the west, and the town, once prosperous, had gone into economic collapse. The agriculture on which it depended struggled to survive.

The workhouses began to fill with children whose parents could no longer sustain them. Many turned to alcohol, others to crime. The streets became unsafe, and not just at night.

In this environment, a man like Bas's grandfather, former Imperial Guard, hardened and honed by decades of war, found work where others could not, despite his age. As Bas would later learn from snippets of hushed conversation on the streets, the old man worked as an occasional fixer, solving problems with violence for those willing to pay the right price. The local public house also paid him to keep troublemakers out, though, if word was to be believed, he caused at least as much trouble as he solved. But on that first night, Bas knew none of this. All he knew was that his former life was over and he had been cast into absolute darkness, a living hell. He had no idea then of just how bad things would get.

The old man's home was a dingy basement at the bottom of a black tenement in which every window was shielded by wire mesh. The steps down to its entrance were slick with urine and wet garbage. The smell made Bas feel sick for at least the first week. It was better inside, but not by much. A single glowglobe did its best to light a room with no natural illumination whatsoever.

Bas was shown where he would sleep – an old mattress stuffed into a corner near a heater that, in the three years he would live there, would never once be switched on. He was shown the tiny kitchen and told that, in return for food and lodgings, he would be expected to prepare meals for both of them, among a score of other chores. Bas couldn't even imagine where to start with cooking. His father had employed two private chefs back on the estate. He had never once thought about the effort that went into preparing food.

The lavatory was another shock – little more than a thirty-centimetre hole in the tiled floor with a water pump above it that had to be worked by hand. A steel basin could be filled for washing one's body, but the water was always ice cold. That first day, Bas held his waste in for hours rather than use that horrid little room, until finally, he thought he would burst. Necessity took him beyond his initial reluctance. He adapted.

They had dinner together an hour after arriving, if it could even be called dinner. His grandfather made that meal. It was a tasteless stew of tinned grox meat and potatoes and, though it smelled awful, Bas was desperately hungry by then and cleared his bowl. His grandfather nodded approvingly, though the hard look never left his eyes. When they had finished, the old man ordered Bas to clear the table. Another first. And so it went, day after day, until Bas learned how to do all the things that were expected of him. When he made mistakes or dared complain, he was punished – a hand as fast as a striking snake would flash out and clip him on the ear. Weeping brought him no

sympathy, only contempt.

As hours became days, and days became weeks, Bas discovered he was learning something else he had never known.

He learned to hate.

Salvation Square hadn't seen this much noise since its construction. Maybe not even then. The ruined buildings shuddered with the ruckus of the greenskin horde and the throaty rumbling of their war engines.

Bas crouched low behind the only intact statue left on the black-tiled roof of the Imperial church that dominated the square's west side. The sky above was clearing of clouds, beams of bright sunlight slicing through like a hundred burning swords.

He had arrived in time to see the slaver trucks emptied and their occupants whipped and kicked towards the broken double-doors of the administratum building, carrying barrels and sacks. The boy from the last truck had trudged in line with the others, keeping his head down, never meeting the glare of the living nightmares that herded him, but Bas could still feel the boy's defiant hate radiating from him until he moved out of sight.

The greenskin newcomers began mixing with those that already occupied the town, sizing them up, eyeing their buggies and bikes and tanks. A few fights broke out, bringing hoots of laughter and encouragement that rose to compete with the rumble and stutter of their machines. Losers were butchered without mercy or remorse, to the delight of both groups. Despite the appeal of these fights, however, the alien crowds parted fast when a great red truck roared into the square, cutting down a dozen greenskins with the jagged blades fixed to its radiator grill. There it halted, the arms and legs of the slain sticking out from beneath its dirty red chassis.

From the back of this truck leapt a group of bellowing brutes, each bigger than the last. They glared at all those around them in unspoken challenge, but none dared answer. Their size and bearing made the others step back, creating a circle of open space around the truck. From the vehicle's rear, their leader stepped down. Bas was sure the statue to which he clung trembled as the huge creature's iron boots added fresh cracks to the square's ruined paving.

There could be no doubt that this was an ork of particular status. Size aside, his armour was bright with fresh paint and bore more iconography than any of the others. A pole jutted from the iron plate on his back, rising two metres above his head, seeming to give him even more height than his already daunting three metres. It was strung with helmets and human skulls, some still carrying dry, desiccated flesh. A banner with two crossed hatchets painted in red hung from it, rippling in the warm breeze.

The warboss stomped forwards to the centre of the square where the fountain of St. Ethiope had once stood, roaring and bellowing in what passed

for its brutish language. Bas glanced across at the dome of the administratum complex. It had taken a lot of damage in the greenskin invasion. Most of its cobalt-blue tiles had been blasted off, revealing the fractured bare stone beneath. Great gaps had been blown in its surface, making it look like the detritus of a massive cracked egg from which some unimaginable animal had already emerged.

Bas had to see inside. He had to find the boy. He had to find a way to save him.

With a veritable army of orks filling the streets below, he knew he had never been at greater risk than he was now. It was broad daylight. If he moved, one of the beasts might spot him, and it would take only one to alert the others. More than ever, he felt himself balanced on a knife's edge. But there was no way he could turn back now. His mind was filled with thoughts of companionship. For the first time since he had emerged from hiding into a town held by horrors from another world, he knew purpose and, more importantly, and perhaps more dangerously, he remembered what it was to hope.

He needed to wait. He needed the horde below to become preoccupied with something.

He didn't have to wait long.

From the doorway of the administratum building, the previously entrenched greenskin leader emerged, roaring and swiping at his subordinates to get them out of his way. In his own right, he was a monster of terrifying proportions, but to Bas's eye, the newcomer looked bigger and better armoured.

The two bosses locked eyes, both refusing to look down in submission. The horde parted between them, sensing the violence that was about to erupt. The newcomer threw his head back and gave a battle cry, a deafening, blood-freezing challenge. The other howled and foamed with rage, hefted a double-handed chainaxe over his head, and raced down the steps to meet his rival. The greenskin mob roared with delight and bloodlust.

Bas had his opening.

He didn't hesitate. Crouching low, he slid away from the statue and set off for the gaping wound in the side of the dome, moving roof to roof, careful to keep his distance from the edges lest his silhouette give him away.

He needn't have worried. Every beady red eye in the area was locked on the battle between the greenskin leaders.

At the end of his first week in Three Rivers, Bas's grandfather enrolled him in a small scholam owned and operated by the Ecclesiarchy, and the nightmare Bas was living became much, much worse. The other boys who attended were merciless from the start. Bas was a stranger, a newcomer, the easiest and most

natural of targets. Furthermore, he had gotten this far in life without ever needing to defend himself, either verbally or physically, and they could smell his weakness like a pack of wild canids smell might smell a wounded beast. It drew them down on him from the first day.

The leader of the pack – the tallest, strongest and most vindictive – was called Kraevin and, at first, he feigned friendship.

'What's your name, then?' he asked Bas in the minutes before the day's long hours of work, prayer and study began.

Other boys drifting through the wrought iron gates noticed the newcomer and gathered round.

Bas was suddenly uncomfortable with all the attention. It didn't feel very benign.

'I'm Bas,' he answered meekly.

Kraevin laughed at that. 'Bas the bastard!' he told the others.

'Bas the maggot,' said another.

'Bas the cave toad!'

The boys laughed. Kraevin folded his arms and squinted down at Bas. 'I've seen you on Lymman Street. You're livin' with Old Ironfoot?'

Bas gaped at the other boy, confused. He didn't know who 'Ironfoot' was. His grandfather insisted on being called 'Sarge', never grandfather or any variation thereof. Bas had heard others call him the Sarge when they spoke of him, rather than to him. Then it dawned on him and he nodded.

Kraevin grinned. 'You like that? You know, because of his leg.'

He started walking around Bas with an exaggerated limp, making sounds like a machine. The other boys broke into fits of laughter.

Bas didn't. He had never asked the Sarge about his leg. He didn't dare. He knew it caused the old man frequent pain. He had seen that pain scored deep in his face often enough. He knew, too, that the leg made a grinding noise on some days and not on others, though there seemed no particular pattern to it. It didn't sound anything like the noise Kraevin was making, but that didn't seem to stop the boys enjoying the joke.

Kraevin stopped in front of Bas. 'So, what are you to him, eh? You his new boyfriend?'

Again, great fits of laughter from all sides.

'I… I'm his grandson,' Bas stuttered. It suddenly dawned on him that every moment spent talking to this boy was a moment spent digging a deeper hole for himself. He needed an escape… and he got it, for all the good it did.

A bronze bell rang out and a portly, stern-looking man with thick spectacles and a hooded robe of rough brown canvas appeared at the broad double doors of the main building. He bellowed at them to get inside.

'We'll talk later, maggot,' said Kraevin as he turned and led the rest of the boys in.

Bas barely made it back to the Sarge's home that evening. He had stopped screaming by then, but the tears continued to stream down his cheeks. His clothes had been cut with knives. His lip was ragged and bloody. One eye was so swollen he couldn't see out of it, and two of his fingers would no longer flex.

The Sarge was waiting for him at the rickety dining table in the centre of the room, bandages and salves already laid out.

'How many hits did you land?' he asked simply.

Bas couldn't speak for sobbing.

'I said how many hits,' the old man snapped.

'None,' Bas wailed. 'None, alright? I couldn't do anything!'

The old man cursed angrily, then gestured to the empty chair opposite him at the table. 'Sit down. Let's see if I can't patch you up.'

For half an hour, the Sarge tended his injured grandson. He was not gentle. He didn't even try to be. Bas cried out in pain a dozen times or more. But, rough as he was, the old man was good with bandages, splints and a needle and thread.

When he was done, he stood up to put away the medical kit. Looking down at Bas, he said, 'You're going back tomorrow. They won't touch you again until you're healed.'

Bas shook his head. 'I don't want to go back. Don't make me go. I'd rather die!'

The Sarge launched himself forward, getting right in Bas's face.

'Never say that!' he hissed. 'Don't you ever back down! Don't you ever let them win! Do you hear me, boy?'

Bas was frozen in absolute terror, certain the old man was about to rip him apart, such was the vehemence in his voice and on that terrible face.

His grandfather stood up straight again.

'The hard lessons are the ones that count,' he said in more subdued tones. 'You understand? Hard lessons make hard people.'

He turned and walked to a cupboard on the left to put the kit away.

'When you get sick of being an easy target, you let me know, boy. I mean it.'

He threw on a heavy groxskin coat and made for the door.

'Rest,' he said as he opened it. 'I have to go to work.'

The door slammed behind him.

Bas rested, but he could not sleep. His wounds throbbed, but that was not the worst of it.

Abject fear had settled over him like a wet shroud, clinging to him, smothering him.

Closing his eyes brought back stark memories of fists and feet pummelling him, of the wicked, joyous laughter that had mocked his cries for mercy.

No, there would be no sleep for him that night, nor for many others to come.

Bas found the human slaves already locked in a broad cage of black iron, the bars of which were crudely cast and cruelly barbed. As before, all but one of the slaves – and Bas judged there were over twenty of them – sat or lay like lifeless dolls. There was no talking between them, no sobbing or whimpering. They had no tears left. Bas wondered how long they had endured. As long as he had? Longer?

He saw the boy standing at the bars, hands clenched tight around them. What was he thinking? Did he always stand like this? Did he ever sleep?

The interior of the building had once been a grand place, even in the years of the town's decline. Now, though, each corner of the great lobby was heaped with mountains of ork excrement and rotting bodies. The walls were splattered with warlike icons in the same childishly simple style as the greenskin vehicles and banners. The air in here was foul, almost overpowering, even for Bas. Part of his success in remaining undetected for so long had depended on rubbing dried greenskin faeces onto his skin. At first, he had gagged so much he thought he might die. But after that first time, he had adjusted quickly, and the regrettable practice had masked his human scent well. Had it not, he would have been found and slaughtered long ago. Even so, the miasma of filth and decay in the wide lobby was sickening.

Much of the marble cladding which had graced the interior walls here had shattered and fallen to the floor, revealing rough brick and, in many places, twisted steel bars, making a descent fast and easy. Bas did a last visual scan to make sure all the greenskins were outside watching the fight, then dropped quickly to the lobby floor. The falls of his bare feet were silent as he moved around the west wall and closed on the black iron cage. None of the human captives saw or heard him until he was almost standing right in front of the boy. Even then, it seemed that they were too exhausted to register his presence. The boy continued staring straight ahead, eyes still intense, unblinking, and Bas felt a moment of panic. Perhaps the boy was brain-addled.

He took an instant to study him at close range. Like the others, he was skinny to the point of ill health, clearly malnourished, and bore the marks of cuts and bruises that had not healed properly. In the centre of his forehead was a black tattoo about three centimetres across. Bas noted it, but he had never seen its like before. He had no idea what it meant – a single stylised eye set within a triangle. Bas looked down at the boy's arms and noticed another tattoo on the inside right forearm. It was a bar-code with numbers beneath it. The greenskins had not done this to him. It was far too cleanly rendered for that. Bas couldn't imagine what these tattoos meant, and right here, right now,

he didn’t care.

He reached out and touched the boy’s left hand where it gripped the bar.

Human contact must have pierced the veil over the boy’s senses, because he gave a start and his eyes locked with Bas’s for the first time.

Joy exploded in Bas’s heart. Human contact! A connection! He hadn’t dared hope to experience it ever again, and yet here it was. Damn the bars that stood between them. He might have embraced the boy otherwise for all the joy he felt at that moment.

He opened his mouth and tried to greet the boy, but the sound that emerged was a dry croak. Had he forgotten how to speak already? With concerted effort, he tried again, shaping his lips to form a word so simple and yet so difficult after his long months alone.

‘Hello,’ he grated, then said it again, his second attempt much better.

The boy blinked in surprise and whipped his hands from the bars. He retreated a step into the cage.

Bas couldn’t understand this reaction. Had he done something wrong?

In his head, words formed, and he knew they were not his own. They had a strange quality to them, a sort of accent he did not recognise.

Who are you?

Bas shook his head, unsure of what was happening.

Seeing his confusion, the tattooed boy gingerly returned to the bars.

Who are you? the voice asked again.

‘Is that you?’ Bas returned hoarsely. ‘It that you in my head?’

The boy opened his mouth and pointed inside. Most of his teeth were gone. Those that remained where little more than sharp, broken stubs. But this was not the reason the boy couldn’t vocalise. Where his tongue should have been, only a dark nub of flesh remained. His tongue had been cut from his mouth.

Sounds of movement came suddenly from either side of the boy. Bas looked to left and right and saw that the other captives had roused at last. Barging each other aside, they surged to the walls of the cage, shoving the tattooed, tongueless boy backwards in order to get closer to Bas.

Bas stepped away immediately, warily. He didn’t like the look in their eyes. Such desperation. He felt the sudden burden of their hopes and expectations before anyone gave voice to them.

It was an ugly, shabby, middle-aged woman who did so first. ‘Get us out, child! Free us, quickly!’

Others echoed her urgently. ‘Open the cage, lad! Save us!’

Bas looked for the cage door and found it easily enough. It was to his right, locked and chained with links as thick as his wrist.

A tall, thin man with deeply sunken eyes and cheeks hissed at the others. ‘Shut up, damn you. They’ll hear!’

When he was ignored, he struck the loudest of the prisoners in the jaw, and

Bas saw her sink to the cage floor. Another quickly took her place, stepping on the shoulder and arm of the first in her need to get closer to her potential saviour. Bas shrank further from them all. This was not right. He did not want to be responsible for these people. He just needed the boy.

Despite the logic in the words of the gaunt man, the others would not be quiet. They thrust their hands out between the bars, tearing their weak, papery skin on the iron barbs. Pools of blood began forming on the tiled floor, filling cracks there. Bas took another step back, searching the crowd in front of him for sign of the tattooed boy, but he had been pushed entirely from view.

'Don't you leave us, son,' begged a bald man, his right arm docked at the elbow.

'Emperor curse you if you leave us,' screeched a filthy woman with only a dark scab where her nose should have been. 'He will, boy. He'll curse you if you don't save us.'

Had the monsters outside not been making such a din of their own, they would surely have heard this commotion. Bas knew he had to go. He couldn't stay here. But it was hard to leave the boy. How could he open the cage? He had no way of cutting through that chain. Had he found this boy only to be frustrated by his inability to save him? Was the universe truly so cruel?

A mighty roar sounded from Salvation Square, so loud it drowned out even the wailing humans. The fight between the warbosses was over. The entertainment had ended. Three Bridges belonged either to the new leader or the old, it didn't matter to Bas. What mattered was that, any second now, massive green bodies would pour into the building through the shattered oak doors.

Go, said the tattooed boy's projected voice. *You have to go now*.

Bas still couldn't see him, but he called out, 'I'll come back for you!'

Don't, replied the boy. *Don't come back. You cannot help us. Just run*.

Bas scrambled back up the lobby wall like a spider. At the top, crouching on the lip of the great jagged wound in the dome, he paused and turned to look down at the cage one more time. The prisoners were still reaching out towards him despite being twenty metres away. They were still calling to him, howling at him.

Bas frowned.

'There's nowhere to run to,' Bas said quietly, wondering if the boy would pick up his thoughts. 'I only have you. I have to come back.'

Jabbering greenskins poured into the building then, laughing and grunting and snorting like wild boar.

Bas slid from view and made for the nearest of his boltholes to prepare for his return tonight. He didn't know how he would set the boy free, but something told him he would find a way. It was all that mattered to him now.

There are two ways to deal with fear, as Bas found out in his first few months in Three Rivers. You can let it corrode you, eat away at your freedom and sanity like a cancer, or you can fight it head on, maybe even overcome it. He didn't have much choice in the approach he was to take. His grandfather had already decided for him.

Kraevin and his gang of scum did indeed wait until Bas recovered before they brutalised him again. When it came, it was as vicious as the first time. They kicked him repeatedly, savagely, as he lay curled into a ball on the ground, and Bas thought they might never stop. Maybe they would kill him. Part of him wished they would. At least it would be an end.

When no more kicks came, it felt like a blessing from the God Emperor Himself. He opened his eyes to see the gang strolling off down the street, the boys laughing and punching each other playfully on the arm. Two local women walked past and looked down at Bas where he bled on the pavement, but they didn't stop. There was no sign of pity in their eyes. They looked at him in passing as they might notice a dead rat on their path.

The next passerby did stop, however. Bas didn't know him. He was a big fat man with skull and sword tattoos on both forearms. 'Having a bad day, son?' he asked as he helped Bas to his feet. 'Let's get you home, eh? The Sarge will fix you up.'

Bas hobbled along at the man's side, doing a fair job of stifling his sobs for once.

'D… do you know the Sarge?' he stammered.

The man laughed. 'You could say that,' he replied. 'I employ him.'

Bas looked up at him.

'I'm Sheriddan,' said the fat man. 'I own the public house on Megrum Street. You know, where your grandfather works at night.'

It turned out that Sheriddan liked to talk. In the twenty-two minutes Bas spent with him that day, he learned more about his grandfather than he had in the weeks since he had come to this accursed place. And what he learned, he could never have guessed.

According to Sheriddan, the sour old bastard was an Imperial hero.

As he had promised himself, Bas ate a full can of processed grox meat, knowing he would need the strength and energy it would give him. Sitting in the bolthole closest to Salvation Square, he thought hard about how he would get the boy out of the cage. One of the orks had to be carrying a key. Which one? How would Bas get it?

He thought, too, about what to do once the cage door was open. The others… he couldn't look after them. They'd have to fend for themselves. They were adults. They couldn't expect him to take the burden of their lives onto his shoulders. Such a thing was well beyond his power. It was too much

to ask of him. They'd have to make their own way. He would lead the boy out at speed, climbing up to the rooftops before the orks realised what was going on. Together, they could return to this bolthole without drawing attention.

Bas looked at the few cans of food remaining in the metal box at his feet. There were no labels on them, but he didn't suppose it mattered. Like himself, the tattooed boy would be glad of whatever food he could get. Together, they would eat well in celebration of their new friendship. Tomorrow, they could search out new supplies as a team.

With these thoughts buoying his spirit, Bas bedded down and tried to sleep, knowing he would need to be well rested for the dangers of the night ahead.

Darkness fell fast in Three Rivers, and this night the sky was clear and bright. Overhead, the planet's three small moons glowed like spotlit pearls. The stars shone in all their glory. Had Bas deigned to look up, he might have noticed some of them moving inexplicably northwards, but he did not. His eyes were fixed on the scene below.

In the ruined plaza, ork cookfires burned by the dozen, surrounded by massive bodies turned orange by the flames. The majority of the brutes were drinking some kind of stinking, fermented liquid from barrels they had unloaded from their trucks. Others ripped hunks of roasted meat from bodies that turned on their spits. Bas didn't know what kind of meat the greenskins were cooking, but he could hear the fat pop and sizzle as the baking skin cracked and burned. Others still were barking at each other in their coarse tongue. Fights broke out sporadically, each ending in a fatality as the stronger hacked or bludgeoned the weaker to death.

Bas's stomach groaned, demanding he act on the savoury smell that wafted up towards his perch, but he ignored it. He needed all his focus, all his attention, to recognise the moment he could slip back inside the dome of the administratum building.

It seemed that a great many hours passed as he hunched there atop the ruins of the old church once more, clinging to the statue that broke up his silhouette. In fact, only two hours had gone by when, with their fill of meat and drink and fighting, most of the orks settled down to sleep. Their communal snoring soon rivalled the noise of their engines from earlier in the day.

It was time to move.

With all his concentration centred on avoiding detection, Bas made his way across his plank-bridges and soon reached the gaping crack in the dome. There, pressing himself close to the exposed stone, he peered inside and scanned the hallway below.

There were fires in here, too, though smaller than the ones outside. Around them slept the biggest of the greenskins, those with the heaviest armour, the

largest weapons, the most decoration. There were a few hook-noses, too, sleeping in groups near the fly-covered dung piles. They had not been allowed to bed down near the fires of their giant masters.

Bas watched and waited and decided that the orks within were as sound asleep as those without. He steeled himself for what had to be done, then stepped out from behind the cover of the dome and began his descent. The stars cast his shadow on the tile floor below, but nothing stirred, nothing noticed.

With all the stealth he could muster, Bas descended, his toes and fingers seeking and finding the same holds he had used earlier in the day. But while the daytime descent had taken only moments, this one took minutes. There was too much at stake to rush, and nothing to be gained.

Finally, his bare feet reached the cold tiles and he turned from the wall. He realised that, even had he slipped and made a noise, none of the orks would likely have heard him. Up close, their snoring was preposterously loud. Good. That would work in his favour.

Bas avoided looking directly at any of the fires. His eyes had adjusted well to the shadows over the last few hours of patient observation. He didn't want to lose that. He had to be able to see into the dark places, for the cage with the human prisoners was flush against the far wall and the marble staircase next to it cast a black cloak over it.

He moved, keeping to pools of deep shadow wherever he could, at the same time careful to steer clear of the huddled hook-noses. Had he not masked his scent with ork filth so often and so diligently, their sensitive noses might well have detected him. But they did not awaken. Bas reached the cage and stood exactly where he had earlier that day.

Gentler sounds of sleep issued from behind the black iron bars.

Good, thought Bas. *Most of them are sleeping, too.*

He hoped they would stay that way. *But where was the boy?*

A figure moved to the cage wall. Bas squinted, and was relieved to see the boy standing there before him. Bas smiled and nodded by way of greeting.

The boy did not smile back.

I told you not to come back. Don't take this risk. Escape with your life.

Bas shook his head and spoke in low tones, unsure if the boy could read thoughts as well as he transmitted his own. 'How do I open the door? How do I unlock this thing?'

He pointed to the heavy chain and crude cast-iron padlock where they lay at the foot of the cage door. The chain's coils wrapped around the bars twice.

I ask you one more time, said the boy. *Will you not leave me and save yourself?*

'No!' hissed Bas. 'I will not go on alone. I'm sick of it. Don't you understand?'

The boy's voice was silent in Bas's mind for a while. Then, it said, *There is a key. The head slaver wears it on his belt, tied to it by a piece of thick rope. If you can cut the rope and get the key without waking him…*

'Which one is he?' Bas whispered.

He lies by the fire closest to your left. His right ear is missing.

Bas stalked off towards the fire, still careful to avoid looking directly at its heart. There were seven orks around it and, as Bas drew close to them – closer than he had ever physically been to one of the tusked giants before – the sheer size of them truly dawned on him for the first time. He had always known they were huge, these savage horrors. But it was only this close, their wide, powerful backs heaving with each breath, that he realised how small he truly was and how fragile. There was nothing he could do against even one of them. If everything went wrong here tonight, he knew it would be the end.

Bas quickly found the slave master and moved around him to find the monster's key.

The slaver's barrel chest expanded like some huge bellows each time he took a deep, rumbling breathe and, when he exhaled, strands of thick saliva quivered on his long, curving tusks. The smell of his breath in Bas's face was foul, like a carcass rotting in the sun.

Against his better judgement, Bas moved between the slave master and the fire. It was the only way to reach the key on the beast's belt. But, as his shadow passed over the closed eyes of the monster, its huge shoulders twitched.

It stopped snoring.

Bas's adrenaline, already high, rocketed. He stood rooted to the spot, his hands and knees shaking. If the beast came awake now, he didn't know what he would do. He simply stood there, and the seconds seemed to stretch out like hours.

But seconds they were, and only a few, before the monster settled again and began to snore even louder than before. Bas's relief was palpable, but he didn't want to be near the damned thing any longer than necessary, so he crouched down by the monster's thickly-muscled belly and, with slow precision, drew his grandfather's knife from the sheath at his waist.

The rope was thick and the key itself was heavy, but the Sarge's old knife was razor sharp. It had never lost its edge, despite all the use it had seen. It parted the rope fibres with ease. Bas lifted the key, re-sheathed the knife and made his way back over to the barbed cage.

'I have it,' he whispered as he crouched down by the massive padlock.

'It turns clockwise,' said a voice from the deep shadows within the cage.

Bas looked up with a start and saw the tall, gaunt man from before standing in front of him on the other side of the cage door.

'I'll help you, son,' said the man, lowering himself into a crouch. 'You turn

the key. I'll keep the chain and lock from rattling.'

Bas looked for the boy he had come to save and saw him come to crouch silently by the gaunt man's side.

'You'll need both hands to turn it,' said the man.

Bas fitted the head of the key into the hole and tried to turn it until his fingers hurt.

Nothing.

An act of no effort whatsoever for the aliens was near impossible for Bas. The torque in his wrists just wasn't enough.

'Here,' said the man, handing Bas a smelly rag that had once been clothing. 'Wrap this around the handle and try again.'

Bas did. With his teeth gritted and the effort raising the veins on his arms and neck, he wrestled with the lock. There was a screech of metal. The lock slid open. Bas turned, certain that he had achieved this feat only to bring death on himself. Every sound seemed so much louder when stealth was paramount. He scanned the hall behind him, not daring to breathe. He sensed the tension on the other side of the cage, too. The orks, however, slumbered on. Perhaps there was little to fear after all. Perhaps the beasts slept so soundly he could have run through here clapping and yelling and not have roused a single one.

Overconfidence kills more men that bullets do, snapped the remembered voice of his grandfather. *Stay grounded!*

'This will be tricky,' said the man in the cage. 'Lift the lock away from the chains and put it to the side. I'll try to uncoil this thing without too much racket.'

That made sense to Bas. The chain looked particularly heavy, and so it was. In the end, it took all three of them – the gaunt man, Bas and the tattooed boy together – to remove it quietly. Remove it they did, but before the gaunt man could try to open the door, Bas raised a hand. 'Wait,' he whispered. 'We should spit on the hinges.'

The man cocked an eyebrow, his face just visible in the gloom. 'Good thinking, boy.'

Bas was surprised by the compliment. His grandfather would never have handed one out so easily.

Regardless of how good the idea was, it proved difficult for the man and the tattooed boy to generate enough saliva for the task. Too long without adequate food and water had made their throats itchy, their mouths bone dry. After a few failed attempts, however, the man had an idea. Instructing the tattooed boy to do the same, he put a corner of his ragged clothing in his mouth and began to chew it.

Soon enough, the door's two large iron hinges gleamed wetly with fresh lubrication. Awakened by the sound of spitting, other prisoners rose and

shuffled forward to see what was going on. That made Bas uncomfortable. He was sure they would give him away and bring the whole rescue down about his head. He was wrong. They had learned early in their captivity not to awaken their captors if they didn't want to be tortured and beaten, or worse.

'Stay quiet, everyone,' the gaunt man told them. 'The lad has freed us, but getting out will be no easy matter. You must stay quiet. Exercise patience or we'll all die here tonight.'

'We're with you, Klein,' whispered someone at the back. Others nodded assent.

Assured of their compliance, the gaunt man, Klein, turned back to the cage door and gently eased it open. The hinges grated in complaint, but only a little. At last, the cage stood open.

Bas stepped back.

Klein put a hand on the tattooed boy's shoulder and ushered him through first. He stopped just in front of Bas, who couldn't prevent himself from reaching out and embracing the boy.

'I told you I'd get you out,' Bas whispered, then stepped back, abruptly self-conscious.

Klein led the others out now, until they stood together outside the cage, a silent, terrified gaggle of wretches, all looking at Bas expectantly.

'What's your plan for getting us away from here, son?' Klein asked now. 'How will you get us to safety?'

Bas almost blurted, 'I only came for him,' but he stopped himself. Looking at these people, each hanging on to life and hope by the thinnest of threads, he knew he couldn't just turn his back on them. He had come into their lives, a light in the dark, and he could no more extinguish it now than he could abandon the boy who would give new meaning to his survival.

He turned and pointed to the broad crack in the dome up above. The closest of Taos III's moons, Amaral, was just peaking from the eastern edge of the gap, casting its silver light down into the hall, revealing just how many of the huge greenskin brutes lay sleeping there.

Bas's gut clenched. It could still go so wrong. One slip would bring slaughter down on them, and yet he was so close, so close to getting himself and the tattooed boy away from here.

Klein followed Bas's finger, his eyes roving from the gap in the dome, down the rough wall to the cold marble floor. He frowned, perhaps doubtful that some of his group would manage the climb. Nevertheless, he nodded and told Bas, 'Lead us out, son. We will follow.'

Thus, with the utmost care, the group picked its way between the ork fires, freezing in terror every time one of the beasts shifted or grunted loudly in its sleep. Crossing the hall seemed to Bas to take forever. This was foolish. Even if these people did get out, how slowly would they have to cross the bridges

he had laid between the rooftops? It would take forever for them to…

To get where? Where was he going to lead them?

He couldn't take them to any of his boltholes. Those had been chosen for the difficulty of their access, for their small size. They were meant to be inconspicuous, but there was nothing inconspicuous about a group of clumsy adults struggling to pack their bodies into such a tiny space. And the smell of these people! They smelled so human. Bas hadn't realised until now, standing there among them, just how strong people smelled. The greenskins would track them like hounds when they awoke. No doubt these people thought Bas smelled foul, standing there with dried ork feces rubbed into his skin, clothes and hair. But they would learn to do the same or they would die.

At the wall, the group huddled together and Klein spoke to them again.

'The boy will go first,' he said. 'All of you, watch him carefully. Watch how he ascends and try to remember the handholds he uses. We have to do this quickly, but not so quick as to cause any mishaps. Syrric,' he said, addressing the tattooed boy, 'you will go second. Once you and – I'm sorry, son, I don't know your name.'

'Bas,' said Bas.

Klein put a fatherly hand on Bas's head. 'Bas. And now we know the name of our saviour.' He smiled, and Bas saw that he, too, had had his teeth broken, no doubt by a blow from one of the greenskins. 'Bas, when you reach the top, you and Syrric will help the rest climb up, okay?'

For an instant, Bas imagined just taking Syrric and running. The duo would have far better odds alone. But no sooner had the thought come to him than he felt the beginnings of a sickening guilt. What would his grandfather have done? There had been no lessons about this. No tests. How he wished there had been. Had the Sarge ever made such a decision? Had Bas's education simply never gotten that far?

What should I do, grandfather? Bas silently asked the old man in his memories.

No sharp voice rose from the past to answer him.

He looked over at Syrric, and the boy nodded back at him in support.

'Right,' whispered the Klein. 'Up you go, son. Show us the way.'

Bas started climbing, not looking down, letting his hands and feet find the holds he knew were there. He scaled the wall without noise or incident and, at the top, turned to find Syrric only a few metres below him. As the boy neared the top of the wall where the dome opened to the air, Bas reached down and helped him up.

Below, Klein was helping the first of the adults, a woman with short hair, to begin her climb.

How frail they all looked. How shaky. Could they really manage it?

Bas heard a shout in his head.

No! Dara, no!

It was Syrric. He had seen or sensed something about to happen. From the desperate tone of his thoughts, Bas knew it was bad.

Surging from the back of the group, a woman began shouldering others roughly out of her way, screeching hysterically, ‘I have to get out! I have to get out of here! Me first! Let me up first!’

Her mad cries echoed in the great hall, bouncing from the domed ceiling back down to the ears of the sleeping greenskins. With grunts and snarls, they started to wake.

Klein tried to stop her as she surged forward, but panic had given her strength and he reeled backwards as she barged him aside. Then, from the bottom, she reached up and tore the short-haired woman from the wall, flinging her backwards to land with a sickening crack on the marble floor.

The short-haired woman didn’t rise. Her eyes didn’t open.

Bas saw the orks rising now, vast furious shapes given a doubly hellish appearance by the light of their fires. The first to stand scanned the hall for the source of the noise that had awoken it. Baleful red eyes soon picked out the pitiful human escapees.

Roars filled the air. Blades were drawn. Guns were raised.

Bas loosed a string of curses. There on the lip of the crack in the dome, he and Syrric could see it all play out below them. It would have been wise to flee then, and deep down, Bas knew that. But there was something about the inevitable horror to come that kept him there, kept him watching. He had to bear witness to this.

Was this his fault? Were they all to die so he could assuage his loneliness?

Dara scrabbled at the wall, desperately trying to ascend at speed, ignorant of the imminent slaughter her foolishness had initiated. Though she hadn’t been composed enough to map Bas’s path in her head, she made progress by virtue of the frantic nature with which she attacked the task.

She was halfway up when the others began to scream. The first orks had reached them. Heavy blades rose and fell, hacking their victims to quivering pieces. Fountains of blood, black in the moonlight, geysered into the air, drenching the greenskins’ leering faces. Deep, booming cries of savage joy sounded from a dozen tusk-filled maws. Bestial laughter ricocheted from the walls.

Bas saw Klein looking straight up at him, the last of the escapees still standing, hemmed in on all sides, nowhere to run. The orks closed on him, red eyes mad with the joy of killing. Klein didn’t scream like the others. He seemed resigned to his fate. Bas saw him mouth some words, but he never knew what they were. They might have been good luck. They might have been something else.

A dozen ork blades fell at once. Wet pieces hit the floor. Klein was gone.

Outside Government Hall, the commotion spread to the rest of the horde. Those asleep in Salvation Square came awake, confused at first, then eager to join whatever fracas was taking place within the building. They began streaming inside, fighting with each other to be first. Perhaps they could smell human blood. It was thick and salty on the air. Bas could smell it, too.

Dara was almost at the gap in the dome now, still scrabbling manically for every protruding stone or steel bar that might get her closer to freedom. She was within reach. Bas looked down at her. He could have reached out then, could have gripped her arms and helped her up the last metre, but he hesitated. This madwoman had sealed the fate of the others. She had killed them as surely as the orks had. If he tried to bring her with him, she would get him killed, too. He was sure of it, and the darkest part of him considered kicking her from the wall to plunge backwards, joining those she had condemned. It would be justice, he thought. A fitting revenge for the others.

But he didn't kick her. Instead, without conscious decision, he found himself reaching out for her, committed to helping her up.

Even as he did, he became aware of a strange whistling noise in the sky.

He didn't have time to wonder what it was. The stone beneath him bucked violently and he grabbed at the wall for support. There was a blinding flash of light that turned the world red behind his eyelids. Blazing heat flooded over him, burning away his filth-caked hair.

Dara's scream filled his ears, merging now with more strange sounds from the sky. Bas opened his eyes in time to watch her plunge towards the bellowing greenskins below. He didn't see her hacked to pieces. Syrric grabbed his shoulder and spun him around.

Look at the square, he told Bas.

From the stone ledge around the dome, the two boys could see everything. The night had been turned to sudden day by great pillars of fire that burst upwards. Buildings on all sides, half-shattered in the original invasion, were toppled now as massive artillery shells slammed into them, blowing chunks of stone and cement out in great flaming clouds.

Bas watched with wide eyes. Again and again, high-explosive death fell screaming from the sky.

The orks were arming themselves and racing for their machines. Bas saw half a dozen armoured fuel trucks blown apart like cheap toys when a shell struck the ground between them. Burning, screaming greenskins scattered in every direction, their arms pinwheeling as the flames gorged on their flesh.

The whistling stopped to be replaced by a roar of turbine engines. Black shapes ripped through the sky above Bas's head, fast and low. They were too fast to see properly, but the stutter and flare of their guns tore up the square, churning ork bodies into chunks of wet meat. Greenskin vehicles returned fire, filling the air with a fusillade of solid slugs and bright las-blasts. Missiles

screamed into the air on smoky trails as the aliens brought their vehicle-mounted launchers to bear. One of the black shapes in the sky was struck hard in the tail and began a mad spiral towards the ground. It struck an old municipal building not two hundred metres from Bas and Syrric. Both the building and the aircraft tumbled into the square in a cloud of smoke, flame and spinning shrapnel.

Bas grabbed Syrric's hand. 'We have to go!' he yelled over the noise.

He didn't wait for an answer. He pulled Syrric to the planks connecting the dome of their perch to the nearest roof and they crossed quickly, Bas first, then Syrric. Screeches from behind made Bas turn. Some of the hook-noses had scaled the wall inside the dome. They spotted the boys and gave chase, firing their oversized pistols as they came.

As soon as Syrric was over the first gap, Bas kicked the planks away. Then, grabbing Syrric's hand again, he ran.

Anti-aircraft fire poured into the sky, lighting their way across the rooftops. The shadowy shapes assaulting the orks from above were forced to pull out. Moments after they did, the artillery strikes started again. Bas was halfway across one of his makeshift bridges when a shell plunged into the building he was crossing towards. It punched through the tenement roof and a number of upper floors before it exploded somewhere deep within the structure. Bas watched in horror as the building in front of him began to disintegrate, turning to little more than loose stone. He turned and leapt back towards the edge of the roof where Syrric stared in horror, just as the planks beneath his feet fell away.

His fingers missed the lip of the roof. He felt his dizzying plunge begin. But small hands reached for him just as he fell, gripping his wrists and hauling him in towards the building. Bas struck the stone wall hard, winding himself, but the small hands didn't let go. He looked up and saw Syrric stretching over the edge, face twisted in pain, grunting and sweating with the effort of keeping Bas from plummeting to his death.

Bas scrabbled for a foothold and found a thin ledge, not enough to support his full weight, but enough to take some of the strain off Syrric.

Can you climb up?

Bas stretched and gripped the lip of the roof. Then, with Syrric pulling, he heaved himself up and rolled over the edge. There, with death averted once more, he lay panting, adrenaline racing through his veins. Syrric crouched over him.

We can't stay up here. Isn't there some other way?

The ground shook. More explosions rocked the town, striking just to the north of their position. Bas didn't have time to wait for the shaking to stop. As soon as he had his breath, he got up.

'The greenskins will be everywhere at ground level,' he said miserably, but,

looking at the empty space where the next building had been only moments ago, he knew that staying high would be just as dangerous. Besides, that building had been the only one linked to this. It looked like there was little choice. If they couldn't travel above ground, and they couldn't travel on the ground…

'There's one more way,' said Bas. 'Let's go.'

Bas began training under his grandfather after the fourth time Kraevin's gang beat him up. It was the worst beating yet. One of the smaller boys – an ugly, rat-faced lad called Sarkam – had actually stabbed Bas in the belly with a box-cutter. It was the sight of so much blood that brought the beating to an early end this time. Instead of strolling off in casual satisfaction, Kraevin and his gang ran, knowing this level of violence would mean serious trouble for them if they were caught.

Bas staggered home, both hands pressed to his abdomen, drawing sharp looks from everyone he passed. A rough-looking woman in a filthy apron called out, 'You need help, boy?'

Bas ignored her and kept on. He knew the Sarge would be waiting at the table with the medical kit laid out. He had warned Bas that the other boys might attack him today. He had just about healed from the last beating, after all.

But this time was different, in more ways than one.

Bas wasn't crying.

More important than that, he had actually fought back.

True, his unpractised attempts to retaliate had met with dismal failure, but they had caught the other boys off guard. For the first time, Bas saw an instant of doubt in their eyes. They knew fear, too, he realised. They loved to dish out pain, but they didn't want any coming their way.

That was when he knew his grandfather was the answer.

This time, while the old man stitched the wound in Bas's belly, Bas glared at him.

'Something you want to say to me, boy?' said the Sarge.

Bas's words came out as a growl that surprised even him.

'I know who you are,' he told the old man. 'I know what you did, how you fought. Sherridan told me. He called you an Imperial hero!'

A sudden scowl twisted those terrifying features. 'You think Imperial heroes live like this, you fool?' the Sarge snapped back. He gestured at the dank, water-stained walls of their home. 'Sherridan had no business saying anything. I'll bet he didn't tell you I was stripped of my medals. I'll bet he didn't mention that I was dishonourably discharged after forty bloody lashes! Sherridan sees what he wants to see. You hear me?'

'I don't care about that,' Bas shot back. He would not be denied. Not this

time. ‘You could teach me. You could help me, make me stronger. Make it so I could kill them if I wanted to.’

His grandfather held his gaze. For what seemed an eternity, neither blinked.

‘I can teach you,’ the old man said at last with a solemn nod. ‘But it’ll hurt more than everything you’ve endured so far. And there’s no going back once we start, so you’d better be damned sure.’

‘It will be worth it,’ hissed Bas, ‘to smash those bastards even just once.’

The old man’s eyes bored into his. Again, he nodded. ‘We’ll begin when you’re able,’ he told Bas.

And so they did.

It started simply enough. Bas drilled footwork for hours around the old dead tree at the back of the tenement. Slowly, the number of push-ups, chin-ups and sit-ups he could do increased from single digits to double. Within a month and a half, the old man had him into triple digits. Then they began training with weights, anything they could find whether it be rocks or old tyres or bags of cement.

Bas learned to wield sticks, knives, broken bottles, anything that could be used as a weapon. He became lean and hard like the grox meat they ate at every meal. He became faster, stronger, better than he had ever believed possible, and every bit of it was bought with sweat and blood, but never tears.

Tears were forbidden.

His grandfather was a brutal, relentless instructor. Every day was harder, more painful, more severe than the last. But Bas endured, his hatred burning within him, spurring him on. It wasn’t just hatred for Kraevin and his schoolhouse thugs. It was hatred against all the wrongs he had known. Even as his grandfather forged him into something new, something tough and independent, Bas learned a fresher, deeper hate for the old man. His mistakes, fewer and fewer as time went by, were exploited with merciless brutality, until Bas wondered who was worse: Kraevin, or the Sarge himself.

It hardly mattered. He saw the results. And others saw them, too.

Kraevin’s gang spent less time taunting him as the days passed. Sometimes, he saw them glancing nervously in his direction from the corner of his eye. He recognised that doubt he had seen before. The weeks since they had attacked him stretched into months. Bas started to wonder if they had given up for good.

Then, as he was walking home three days before Emperor’s Day, Kraevin and his gang ambushed him from an alley and dragged him in.

Bas lashed out immediately without pausing for thought and smashed one boy’s nose to a pulp.

The boy yowled and broke from the fight, hands held up to his crimson-smeared face.

Kraevin shouted something and the whole gang backed off, forming a

semi-circle around their target. Bas watched as they all drew knives. If they expected him to piss his pants, however, they were gravely mistaken.

‘Let’s have it!’ Bas hissed at them. ‘All of you!’

Reaching into the waistband of his trousers, he pulled his own blade free.

The Sarge didn’t know about this. Bas hadn’t told him he was now carrying a weapon. He had found it on the tenement stairwell one morning, a small kitchen knife stained with a stranger’s blood. After washing it and sharpening it while the Sarge was at work, Bas had started to carry it with him. Now he was glad of that. It was his equalizer, though the odds he faced here were still far from equal.

Kraevin didn’t look so smug right then, but he motioned and the boys lunged in.

Bas read their movements, just as the old man had taught him. The closest boy was going for a thrust to his midsection. Bas slipped it. His hand flashed out and cut the tendons in the boy’s wrist.

Screaming filled the alley and the boy dropped to his knees, clutching his bleeding arm.

Bas kicked him hard in the face. ‘Come on, bastards!’ he roared at the others. Again, he kicked the wounded boy.

This display was unlike anything the others were prepared for. They didn’t want any of it.

The gang broke, boys bolting from the alley in both directions, knives abandoned, thrown to the ground. Only Kraevin remained. He had never run from anything. If he ran now, he’d be giving up all his status, all his power, and he knew it. Even so, Bas could see it in his eyes: the terroriser had become the terrified.

Bas rounded on him, knife up, stance loose, light on his feet.

‘Bas the bastard,’ said Bas, mimicking Kraevin’s voice. ‘You’ve no idea how right you were, you piece of filth.’

He closed in, angling himself for a lightning slash to the other boy’s face. Something in Kraevin snapped. He dropped his knife and backed up against the alley wall, hands raised in desperate placation.

‘Bas, please,’ he begged. ‘It wasn’t me. It was never me. Honestly.’

Bas drew closer, ready to deliver a flurry of nasty cuts.

‘He said never to tell you,’ cried Kraevin. ‘Said he’d see us right for money and lho-sticks. I swear it!’

‘Groxshit!’ snarled Bas. ‘Who? Who said that?’

He didn’t believe Kraevin for a moment. The boy was just buying time, spinning desperate lies.

‘The Sarge,’ Kraevin gasped. ‘Old Ironfoot. He came to us after the first time we beat you. Honest, I thought he was going to murder us, but he didn’t. He said he wanted us to keep on you, keep beating you down. Told us to wait

until you were healed each time.'

Bas halted his advance. That couldn't be true. No.

But… could it? Was the old man that twisted? Why would he do such a thing?

'Talk,' he ordered Kraevin, urging him on with a mock thrust of his knife.

'Th... that's it,' stammered the boy. 'Two days ago, he found us and told us to ambush you. Said to use knives this time. I told him he was crazy. No way. But he tripled the money he was offering. My old man's got lung-rot. Can't work no more. I need the money, Bas. I didn't want to, but I had to. But it's over now, okay? Throne above, it's over.'

Bas thought about that for a second, then he rammed his right boot up between Kraevin's legs. As the bully doubled over, Bas kicked him again, a blistering shot straight to the jaw. Teeth and blood flew from Kraevin's mouth. He dropped to the ground, unconscious.

Bas sheathed his little knife in his waistband and looked down at the boy who had taught him the meaning of fear.

'Yes,' he told the crumpled figure, 'it is over.'

At home, he found the Sarge at the back of the tenement, leaning against the old dead tree, smoking a lho-stick in the sunlight.

'No medical kit this time?' Bas asked as he stopped a few metres from the old man.

The Sarge grinned at him. 'Knew you wouldn't need it.'

'You paid them to do it, didn't you?' said Bas.

The old man exhaled a thick cloud of yellow smoke.

'You've done well,' he told his grandson. It was all the confirmation needed.

Bas said nothing. He felt numb.

'Stay grounded, boy,' rumbled the Sarge. 'Stay focused. We're just getting started, you and I. You think you've bested your daemons, and maybe you have, for now. But there are worse things than childhood bullies out there. Never forget the fear and anger that brought you this far.'

Bas didn't answer. He stared at the dirt between his feet, feeling utterly hollow, consumed by a raw emptiness he hadn't known was possible.

'There's more to learn, boy,' the Sarge told him. 'We're not done here. Remember the chubby runt you used to be. Think of how you've changed, what you've achieved. I gave you that. Keep training, boy. Keep learning. Don't stop now. As much as you hate me, you know I'm right. Let's see how far you can take it.'

The old man paused, his brows drawing down, and added in a voice suddenly harsh and hateful, 'If you want to stop, you know where the damned door is. I won't give bed and board to an Emperor-damned quitter.'

Bas looked at his hands. They were clenched into fists. His forearms rippled with taut muscle. He wanted to lash out at the Sarge, to bloody him, maybe even kill him for what he'd done. But, for all he'd changed, all he'd learned, his hands were still a child's hands. He was still only seven years old, and he had nowhere else to go. Besting other boys was one thing, but the old man was right about greater foes. Bas had seen big, barrel-chested men from the refineries beating their wives and children in the street. No one ever stopped them. No one dared, despite how sick it made them to turn away. Bas always wished he was big enough and tough enough to intervene. The impotence inherent in his age and stature angered him. More than any daydreams of dispensing justice, however, he knew that training had brought focus and purpose to his life. His newfound strength, speed and skill had burned away that clinging shroud of fear he'd lived with for so long. Every technique he mastered brought him a fresh confidence his former weakness had always denied. He saw it, saw that he needed to keep growing, keep developing, to master every skill the old man offered and more. No. He didn't just need it. He wanted it. Right then and there, it was all he wanted.

There was nothing else.

He locked eyes with his grandfather, his gaze boring into him with cold fire.

'All right,' he spat. 'Show me. Teach me. I want all of it.'

A grin twisted the Sarge's scarred face. 'Good,' he said. 'Good.'

He ground his lho-stick out in the dirt at the base of the tree.

'Go change your clothes and warm up. We'll work on nerve destructions today.'

Two and a half years later, in the shadow of that same dead tree, a slightly taller, harder Bas – now ten years old – was working through a series of double-knife patterns while his grandfather barked out orders from a wooden bench on the right.

The sun was high and bright, baking the dusty earth under Bas's feet.

'Work the left blade harder!' the Sarge snapped. 'Watch your timing. Don't make me come over there!'

A deep rumble sounded over the tenement rooftops, throaty and rhythmic. It must have meant something to the old man, because the Sarge stood bolt upright and stared up at the azure sky, muscles tensed, veins throbbing in his neck.

Bas, surprised by the intensity of the old man's reaction, stopped mid-pattern and followed the Sarge's gaze.

Seven black shapes crossed directly overhead.

'Marauder bombers,' said the old man. 'And a Lightning escort out of Red Sands. Something's wrong.'

Despite their altitude, the noise of the aircraft engines made the air vibrate. Bas had never seen craft like these before. They had the air of huge predatory birds about them. They had barely disappeared below the line of tenement roofs on the far side before another similar formation appeared, then another and another.

The old man cursed.

'It was just a matter of time,' he said to himself. 'This planet was always going to get hit sooner or later.'

He limped past Bas, iron leg grinding, heading towards the tenement's back door. But he stopped halfway and turned.

'They'll be coming for me,' he said, and there was something in his eye Bas had never seen before. It was the closest thing to fondness the old man had ever managed, though it still fell far short. 'They always call on the veterans first,' he told Bas. 'No one ever truly retires from the Guard. I've done the best I could with you, boy. You hate me, and that's only proper, but I did what I had to do. The Imperium is not what you think. I've seen it, by the Throne. Terrors by the billion, all clamouring to slaughter or enslave us. And now it looks like they're here. Only the strongest survive, boy. And you're my blood, mark you. My last living blood! I've done my best to make sure you're one of the survivors.'

He paused to look up as more bombers crossed the sky.

'Come on inside,' he told Bas. 'There's something I want to give you before I go. May it serve you well in what's to come.'

They went inside.

A few days later, just as the old man had predicted, the Imperium came to call on him, and he answered.

It was the last time Bas ever saw him.

The shelling from the sky had opened great craters in the streets below. Through choking clouds of smoke and dust, over hills of flaming debris, the boys searched for a way into the sewers. Many of the massive holes were filled with rubble and alien bodies, but Bas quickly found one which offered access to the dark, round tunnels that laced the town's foundations. He had mostly avoided these tunnels during his time alone. Those times he had come down here looking for sources of potable water, he had encountered bands of scavenging hook-noses. Each time, he had barely escaped with his life.

There didn't seem to be any of the disgusting creatures here now, however. In the utter darkness, he and Syrric held hands tightly, using their free hands to guide themselves along the tunnel walls. They couldn't see a damned thing. Bas had no idea how or when they would find a way out, but he couldn't let that stop him. The tunnel ceiling rumbled with the sound of war machines on the move and explosive detonations. If he and Syrric were to survive the

journey to one of his boltholes, they would have to travel down here in the dark.

As they moved, Bas became sharply aware of the comfort he was drawing from Syrric's hand. He wondered if that made him weak. His grandfather had used that word like a curse, as if weakness was the worst thing in the universe, and perhaps it was. Bas hadn't lived this long by being weak. He knew that. But he wasn't so sure it was weak to want the company of your own kind. Syrric's presence made him feel stronger. His body seemed to ache less. The other boy was following his lead, depending on him. Here was the sense of purpose Bas had so desperately missed. Alone, his survival had been nothing more than an act of waiting, waiting for a time in which he'd find something to live for, to fight for. Now he had it: someone to share the darkness with, to watch his back. He had gotten Syrric out, just as he had intended. Despite the deaths of the others, it still felt like the greatest victory of his young life, better even than beating Kraevin.

Kraevin!

Bas hadn't thought of the former bully in quite a while. What kind of death had he suffered the day the orks came? Had he been hacked to pieces like Klein and the prisoners? Had he been shot? Eaten?

As Bas was wondering this, he spotted light up ahead.

'There,' he whispered, and together he and Syrric made for the distant glow.

It was moonlight, and it poured through a gap in the tunnel ceiling. An explosive shell had caused the rockcrete road above to collapse, forming a steep ramp. The boys waited and listened until Bas decided that the sound of alien battle cries and gunfire was far enough away that they could risk the surface again. He and Syrric scrambled up the slope to stand on a street shrouded in thick grey smoke.

Which way? Syrric asked.

Bas wasn't sure. He had to have a bolthole somewhere near here, but with all the smoke, he couldn't find a landmark to navigate by. It seemed prudent to move in the opposite direction from the noise of battle.

'Let's keep on this way,' said Bas, 'at least for now.' But, just as they started walking, a hoarse shout sounded from up ahead.

'Contact front!'

The veils of smoke were suddenly pierced by a score of blinding, pencil thin beams, all aimed straight at the two boys.

'Down!' yelled Bas.

He and Syrric dropped to the ground hard and stayed there while the las-beams carved the air just above their heads. The barrage lasted a second before a different voice, sharp with authority, called out, 'Cease fire!'

That voice made Bas shiver. It sounded so much like the Sarge. Could it be

the old man? Had he survived? Had he come back for his grandson after all this time?

Shadowy shapes emerged from the smoke. Human shapes.

Nervously, Bas got to his knees. He was still holding Syrric's hand. Looking down, he tugged the other boy's arm. 'They're human!'

Syrric didn't move.

Bas tugged again. 'Syrric, get up. Come on.'

Then he saw it. Syrric was leaking thick fluid onto the surface of the road. Arterial blood.

Bas felt cold panic race through his veins, spinning him, sickening him. His stomach lurched. He squeezed Syrric's hand, but it was limp. There was no pressure in the boy's grip. There was no reassuring voice in Bas's head. There was only emptiness, an aching gap where, moments before, the joy of companionship had filled him.

Bas stood frozen. His mind reeled, unable to accept what his senses told him.

Boots ground to a halt on the rockcrete a metre away.

'Children!' growled a man's voice. 'Two boys. Looks like we hit one o' them.'

A black boot extended, slid under Syrric's right shoulder, and turned him over.

Bas saw Syrric's lifeless eyes staring at the sky, that defiant glimmer gone forever.

'Aye,' continued the rough voice. 'We hit one all right. Fatality.' The trooper must have seen the tattoo on Syrric's head, because he added, 'He was a witch, though,' and he snorted like there was something humorous about it.

Bas sprung. Before he realised what he'd done, his grandfather's knife was buried in the belly of the trooper standing over him.

'You killed him,' Bas screamed into the man's shocked face. 'He was mine, you bastard! He was my friend and you killed him!'

Bas yanked his knife out of the trooper's belly and was about to stab again when something hit him in the side of the head. He saw the stars wheeling above him and collapsed, landing on Syrric's cooling body.

'Little bastard stabbed me!' snarled the wounded trooper as he fell back onto his arse, hands pressed tight to his wound to stem the flow of blood.

'Medic,' said the commanding voice from before. 'Man down, here.'

A shadow cast by the bright moonlight fell over Bas, and he looked up into a pair of twinkling black eyes. 'Tough one, aren't you?' said the figure.

Bas's heart sank. It wasn't his grandfather. Of course it wasn't. The Sarge was surely dead. Bas had never really believed otherwise. But this man was cast from the same steel. He had the same aura, as hard, as cold. Razor sharp like a living blade. He wore a black greatcoat and a peaked cap, and on that

peak, a golden skull with eagle's wings gleamed. A gloved hand extended towards Bas.

Bas looked at it.

'Up,' the man ordered.

Bas found himself obeying automatically. The hand was strong. As soon as he took it, it hauled him to his feet. The man looked down at him and sniffed the air.

'Ork shit,' he said. 'So you're smart as well as tough.'

Other figures wearing combat helmets and carapace armour came to stand beside the tall, greatcoated man. They looked at Bas with a mix of anger, curiosity and surprise. Their wounded comrade was already being attended by another soldier with a white field-kit.

'Gentlemen,' said the tall man. 'Unexpected as it may be, we have a survivor here. Child or not, I'll need to debrief him. You, however, will press on into the town as planned. Sergeant Hemlund, keep channel six open. I'll want regular updates.'

'You'll have 'em, commissar,' grunted a particularly broad-shouldered trooper.

Bas didn't know what a commissar was, but he guessed that it was a military rank. The soldiers fanned out, leaving him and the tall man standing beside Syrric's body.

'Regrettable,' said the man, gesturing at the dead boy. 'Psyker or not. Were you two alone here? Any other survivors?'

Bas didn't know what a psyker was. He said nothing. The commissar took silence as an affirmation.

'What's your name?'

Bas found it hard to talk. His throat hurt so much from fighting back his sorrow. With an effort, he managed to croak, 'Bas.'

The commissar raised an eyebrow, unsure he had heard correctly. 'Bas?'

'Short for Sebastian… sir,' Bas added. He almost gave his family name then – Vaarden, his father's name – but something made him stop. He looked down at the blood-slick knife in his right hand. His grandfather's knife. The old man's name was acid-etched on the blade, and he knew at that moment that it was right. It felt right. The old man had made him everything he was, and he would carry that name for the rest of his life.

'Sebastian Yarrick,' he said.

The commissar nodded.

'Well, Yarrick. Let's get you back to base. We have a lot to cover, you and I.'

He turned and began walking back down the street the way he had come, boots clicking sharply on the cobbles, knowing the boy would follow. In the other direction, fresh sounds of battle echoed from the dark tenement walls.

Bas sheathed the knife, bent over Syrric’s body and closed the boy’s eyelids.

He whispered a promise in the dead boy’s ear, a promise he would spend his whole life trying to keep.

Then, solemnly, he rose and followed the commissar, taking his first steps on a path that would one day become legend.

THE HERACLITUS EFFECT

Graham McNeill

The monster with the patchwork face was right behind him. He could hear it crashing through the overgrown forest with bludgeoning force, trampling the fruits of their invention with every giant stride. He kept running. Running was all he could do. He couldn’t fight such a terrible thing, it was too much.

Magos Third Class Evlame fled through the forest in panicked flight, a forest that had once been a place of wonder and miracles, a place that had literally blossomed as a result of their labours. Every day spent here had been a day spent with the thrill of discovery and pride in their achievements, but now it was a place of horror, a blood-drenched nightmare of dismembered bodies and death.

Evlame’s breath came in sharp spikes in his chest, his overlarge frame unused to such exertion and his heartbeat pounding in his ears as he ran. Massively wide leaves and sharp branches whipped past him, cutting his face and hands as he pushed through the forest. The ripe smell of new growth filled his nostrils and ruptured fruits, larger than his head, hung dripping from branches shredded with gunfire.

The sweet smell of pulped vegetation was almost overpowering, catching in the back of his throat as his lungs heaved in panicked breath after panicked breath. Breathless, Evlame paused to get his bearings, seeking something familiar in the landscape around him.

Swollen trees with trunks thicker than a Titan’s leg surrounded him, their tops lost in the claws of mist that hung in the stagnant, moist atmosphere. Drooping branches laden with vivid growths in a rainbow of colours hung almost to the ground and gleaming chemical atomisers stood amongst the trees like the silver sculptures he’d seen in shrine parks, their waving,

articulated limbs dispensing microscopic amounts of the Heraclitus strain into the atmosphere in controlled puffs of vapour.

A bright yellow generator hummed at the base of a towering, copper-barked tree laden with thick golden orbs that were wonderfully sweet and nutritious. The generator was stencilled with the number seventeen, which told him he was to the north of the Adeptus Mechanicus compound and home.

He heard the crunch of a heavy footfall beyond the limit of sight and froze in place as he tried to pinpoint the source. The reek of spoiled meat drifted on the wind, a rank, unpleasant odour after the fragrances he was used to in the forest. His eyes scanned left and right.

And then he saw it…

A glint of sunlight on armour, a reflection on dulled steel and a glimpse of his hunter's grey, nightmare face. Though he had only the briefest flicker of the features, he wished for no more complete a view, for the dead face was the horror of a badly maimed mannequin, the bloody remnants of a bomb blast victim.

Evlame turned and ran, knowing the genhanced vegetation underfoot and rampant growth of the forest would make stealthy movement impossible. He fled south, following the route of ribbed copper cables as they snaked through the humid forest like indigenous serpents. Pungent mulch carpeted the forest floor and Evlame felt like he was running in some terrible nightmare, where the monster is forever at your shoulder and your feet move as though through the most viscous glue.

Tears and snot covered his face as he blundered onwards, praying to the God-Emperor and every saint he could think of to deliver him from this terrible killer. He risked a glance over his shoulder, but could see nothing behind him. His foot connected with something solid and his world cartwheeled as he tumbled to the ground.

Evlame hit hard, the breath driven from his lungs by the impact and bright light exploded before his eyes. The cloying texture of fruit mash filled his mouth, as well as a pungent smell of opened meat. He spat seeds and fruit flesh, shaking his head as he pushed himself upright.

He knelt in an open clearing of enormous, ovoid fruit, most reaching to his chest in height and at least as wide – their enhanced growth rendering them swollen and ripe.

A headless body lay beside him, the ragged stump of neck still enthusiastically pumping blood onto the dark, almost black, soil. Another corpse lay amid the dripping carcass of an exploded fruit, its chest cavity ripped open as though an explosive charge had detonated within. Other bodies lay in similar states of terrible ruin – heads crushed, limbs removed or torsos ripped apart.

Evlame's mouth dropped open in mute horror, unable to take in such brutal,

visceral evidence of murder. He pushed himself upright and set off towards the habitat domes, following the twisting cables like a lifeline. Rasping breath, like that of a consumptive, hissed behind him and he whimpered in terror, awaiting the blow that would split him open as surely as the ripened, overlarge fruits that surrounded him.

Such a blow never landed and he pushed his burning legs onwards, trampling through the soft mulch of pulped fruit and bloody earth. He sobbed with every step, his limbs flailing and his eyes streaming with tears of raw, unmanning fear.

Through his tears he saw the gleam of the silver-skinned habitat domes between the thick trunks of the towering forest and aimed his flight towards salvation. Surely Magos Szalin would know what to do? An entire company of cybernetically enhanced Tech-Guard were stationed at the Golbasto Facility and he began to laugh uncontrollably at the thought of reaching safety, his hysteria bubbling up like a geyser.

Evlame emerged into the open and stumbled across the automated firebreaks and pesticide barriers that protected the facility from the rampant growth of the genhanced forest. After the gloomy, spectral twilight of the undergrowth, the glare of the planet's warm yellow sun was dazzlingly bright and he shielded his eyes as he staggered and swayed like a drunk towards the Adeptus Mechanicus experimentation facility, the domes blurred through his lens of tears.

He saw movement and heard voices. He wiped his sodden face with the sleeve of his robe and wept in joy as he saw scores of massively broad warriors in burnished battle plate, their bulk unmistakable as anything other than Adeptus Astartes.

The Space Marines had come!

Relief lent his battered limbs new strength and he ran towards the facility with fresh vigour, anxious to have these brave protectors of mankind between him and the monster that pursued him. Evlame ran like a man possessed, smelling an acrid chemical stink from the smashed domes and seeing flame-shot smoke as it billowed into the clear sky.

Bodies littered the ground and the skins of the domes were pocked with bullet holes.

Clearly the monster had not come alone…

But now the Adeptus Astartes were here, there was surely nothing to fear, for what could stand against such perfect warriors – their flesh enhanced by the artifice of the Emperor and fragments of His greatness encoded into their very bones. Such holy vision had served as the model for their work on Golbasto and Evlame longed to speak to these warriors of legend to tell them of the achievements wrought here.

'Over here!' he yelled, his voice hoarse and rasping after his lung-searing

run through the forest. ‘Help! It’s coming after me. There’s another one in the forest!’

The armoured giants turned at the sound of his voice, their massive, oversized weapons trained on him in an instant. He saw a confusing mix of armour marks and colours and laughed as he shook his head at their mistake.

‘No, no! It’s Magos Third Class Evlame!’ he shouted, the brief vigour lent to his limbs fading and his steps becoming more uneven. He laughed and waved his arms like a madman, simultaneously amused and terrified at the irony of nearly being gunned down by his rescuers. ‘I work here, I minister to the atomiser machines of the forest! I…’

His words trailed off as he dropped to his knees, his strength spent. He sank onto his rump, head tilted to the sun and his chest heaving as he sucked in shuddering breaths.

Evlame heard crunching footfalls and a chill fell across him as he was enveloped in the broad shadows of the towering warriors. He squinted into the glare of the sky and wiped the back of his hand across his tear-swollen eyes.

A trio of cruel faces cut from cold steel stared down at him, scarred and battle worn. One warrior’s face was that of a killer, hostile and unforgiving. His skull was partly shaven and a ragged mohawk ran across its centre. Another warrior in dark plate wore his long black hair in a tight scalp lock, hooded eyes deep set in angular, pale features.

Half the final warrior’s face was a ruined, knotted fist of crude augmetics, a glowing blue gem where his left eye ought to have been. His other eye glittered with cruel amusement and his close-cropped dark hair was smeared with blood spatters.

The one with the killer’s face itched to do him harm and Evlame felt a burgeoning horror swell within him as the truth of the matter began to dawn on him.

No Astartes these, but…

‘You work here?’ said the warrior with the ravaged face, squatting down on his haunches before him. Evlame nodded, his jaw slack with terror and he felt himself lose control of his bodily functions. The warrior reached out and took hold of his chin. Even in his fear-demented state, Evlame was Mechanicus enough to notice that the arm was fashioned from shimmering silver, a prosthetic quite unlike anything he had seen before. The digits were cold and smooth and articulated without recourse to any joints he could see.

The icy grip turned his head left and right, as though he were being regarded like a specimen in a jar.

‘Ardaric,’ said the warrior with the strange arm, ‘has Cycerin got everything we need?’

‘He’s almost done extracting the information from the senior magos,’ answered the warrior in the black armour with jagged red crosses painted

across his shoulder guards. ‘The cogitators were smashed before we got to him, but the fool didn’t think to wipe his own cranial memory coils.’

‘And the canisters we came for?’

‘Servitors are loading them onto the Stormbird as we speak.’

The killer with the mohawk said, ‘Kill this last one, Honsou, and let’s be on our way.’

The warrior named Honsou lifted his gaze to something behind Evlame. ‘Not yet, Grendel. I think I’ll let my new champion finish what he started.’

The warrior released Evlame and pushed himself to his feet. It took an effort of will for Evlame to tear his eyes from Honsou’s incredible silver arm.

He heard the whine of automatic targeting servos behind him and turned to see the incinerator units that had been used to contain the forest’s expansion aiming at a singular figure that marched across the scorched borders of the Mechanicus facility.

Evlame whimpered in terror as the patchwork-faced monster that had killed the rest of his colleagues walked towards him. Its pace was leisurely, though he could see a fire of agony in its storm-cloud eyes, as though its every step was painful.

Like most of the others in this terrible group, it wore Astartes battle plate the colour of bare metal with chevron trims of yellow and black. The closer it came, the more he could see its aquiline features were drawn in a mask of anguish.

Its skin clung to its skull but loosely, as though ill-fitting and not intended to clothe the skull beneath it. Wire stitching criss-crossed its ashen face and Evlame felt he was looking into the eyes of a madman staring through a mask of stolen flesh.

‘No…’ he whispered. ‘Please don’t… I never did anything to hurt you…’

The leathery-faced monster leaned down and said, ‘I live in pain. Why should you not?’

Travelling through the empyrean was something Honsou of the Iron Warriors never enjoyed, for the placing his fate in the hands of others and the lack of influence he could bring to bear should something go wrong was anathema to him.

The strategium of the *Warbreed* thrummed with noise, the pounding beat of distant hammers and far-off machines vibrating the deck plates with industrious motion.

The ship had belonged to Honsou’s former master and had been moored above Medrengard for a timeless age. Honsou and his few hundred warriors had travelled from the wrecked fortress of Khalan-Ghol to the impossible landmark of the Crooked Tower in order to claim the vessel as their own.

A twisted spire of jagged black rock, the numberless steps of the Crooked

Tower spiralled downwards into the bowels of Perturabo's deepest forges and soared to the lost stars that orbited the dead world of the Iron Warriors.

They had climbed for an age, each footfall a lifetime and a heartbeat in the same breath, and the blasted earth of Medrengard had fallen away until they climbed to the stars themselves. Blackness enveloped them and a host of starships surrounded them, drifting in the utter dark and still of space.

The sheer impossibility of their physical surroundings had not fazed Honsou, and he had not been surprised when the steep stairs had led straight to the open hatches of the *Warbreed*.

The mighty ship had once taken the fire of the warmaster to the followers of the false Emperor in days now ancient to those who had once defied them. Its guns had bombarded the last vestiges of life from Isstvan V and its orbital strikes had helped tear open the walls of the Imperial palace on Terra.

Its pedigree was mighty and its history proud, and Honsou could think of no finer vessel to take from the silent fleet berthed around the tower's summit.

Hissing vapours billowed and mighty pistons wheezed and ground up and down at the edges of the vaulted chamber, its walls arched with great girders of brazen metal and hung with ragged war banners of gold and black.

Cabals of hardwired crew submerged in vats of oxygen-rich oils regulated the workings of the ship and hissing mechanical creatures with multi-jointed legs drifted over the glistening pools with crackling cables trailing into the fluid.

The strategium tapered towards its front, the deck crew stationed here and plugged into the ship's vitals more like ordinary humans, tending to the ship's needs as it negotiated a passage between the stars through the swirling maelstrom of the immaterium. At the apex of the strategium stood the hulking, purple-robed form of Adept Cycerin, his mecha-organic flesh and kinship with the raw matter of the warp making him the perfect steersman.

'How much longer?' asked Honsou, his voice easily carrying the length of the strategium.

Cycerin turned his massive, machine-bulk to face Honsou, his swollen head buzzing with living circuitry and organic techno-viral strains. Slithering, blackened arms writhed like snakes from the tattered sleeves of his robes, the flesh and machine parts running like waxen mercury to form withered digits like mechanised quills.

Cycerin's green and yellow eyes brightened with a pulse of irritation as his hands described a series of complex motions in the suddenly misty air before him. Honsou stared at the plotting table before him as the adept's angular script appeared on the hololithic slate.

As it was every time he asked, the answer was frustratingly vague, but then what had he expected? Travel through the warp was unpredictable, even aboard a ship with a pilot uniquely qualified to ply its treacherous depths and

who possessed a sense for the currents of the immaterium keener than the most aberrant patriarch of the Navis Nobilite.

Once, Cycerin had been Adeptus Mechanicus, but following his capture on the far distant world of Hydra Cordatus, he had been elevated from his paltry hybridised form of man and machine to something infinitely greater. Strands of the Obliterator virus had been merged with his augmetics and his fundamental gene structure, rendering him into something post-human and far beyond simple cybernetics.

The techno-virus had made him superior, but it had also made him arrogant.

Honsou's memories of the Hydra Cordatus campaign felt as though they belonged to a previous life. Much had changed since then and his remembrance of the bloody siege had blurred into one unending hurricane of battle that had fanned the smouldering coal of his resentment into a roaring inferno of ambition.

Schemes of murder circled like carrion birds in his mind, threads woven from fragments of his new champion's fractured memories and the libraries worth of knowledge in Cycerin's cybernetic brain coming together to set them on their current course of revenge…

Many aboard the Warbreed thought him mad to pursue such a plan so soon after the bloody battle against Berossus and Toramino, but Honsou knew he would not be satisfied until he had inflicted the most wretched humiliations on the one enemy to escape him.

'If you want to hurt the fox, first strike at its cubs…' he whispered.

He resumed his pacing of the deck, his bearing that of a caged predator, his face a mask of irritation and anticipation. It chafed him to have set such grand designs in motion, but then be forced to wait while such mundane concerns such as warp travel forced delays upon them.

'Pacing won't make us travel faster,' said Cadaras Grendel, who stood behind him, his gleaming bolter held lightly in one scarred hand, an oiled cleaning rag in the other.

'I know,' said Honsou, 'but it gives me something to do instead of just waiting.'

'You mean instead of training with your new champion.'

Honsou stopped in his pacing and said, 'I tasked Ardaric Vaanes with his training.'

'And that's the only reason you're not down there in the battle deck?'

'Of course, what of it?'

'It's not him,' said Grendel at last. 'It's not Ventris. It has his likeness, but it's not him.'

'I know that,' snapped Honsou. 'I'm not stupid, Grendel.'

'I don't blame you for not wanting to look at him,' said Grendel, wiping the

cloth along the hard edges of the gun. ‘After all, he’s the spit of the only warrior to ever beat you.’

‘Ventris did not beat me!’ shouted Honsou, rounding on his captain of arms, a warrior who had formerly served his enemy, Lord Berossus. Honsou’s axe leapt to his hands, its edge lethal and hungry.

Cadaras Grendel didn’t flinch as the axe came up to his neck.

‘Whatever you say, Warsmith,’ said the warrior, pushing the blade of the axe away with the barrel of his bolter. The muzzle passed before Honsou’s face and he saw a smile crease Grendel’s face as he stared into it. ‘He didn’t beat you, but then… you didn’t beat him either. And it’s your fortress that’s a pile of rubble, eh?’

Honsou turned away from the confrontation, irritated that Grendel had managed to rile him with such ease. Ever since the destruction of Khalan-Ghol on Medrengard, Honsou’s temper had been on a short fuse. The merest slight against his victory over the combined armies of Berossus and Toramino filled his blood with a surge of killing rage.

In any case, Grendel was right.

Each time he looked upon the face of his new champion (the newborn as it insisted on being called) he could see the features of the warrior who’d defied him and then thrown his offer to join him back in his face.

Uriel Ventris and his companion were of the Ultramarines Chapter, but what crime they had committed to be banished to a daemon world in the Eye of Terror he didn’t know. However they had come to Medrengard, they had proved to be resourceful enemies.

They had survived the Halls of the Savage Morticians and freed the Heart of Blood, the mighty daemon imprisoned within the heart of Khalan-Ghol.

Honsou took a deep breath and said, ‘By all the twelve sigils of the Rapturous Ruin, you almost make me wish Forrix and Kroeger weren’t dead.’

‘Who?’

‘Former captains who also commanded elements of the Warsmith’s grand company back on Hydra Cordatus,’ said Honsou, before adding pointedly. ‘They’re long dead now.’

‘Did you kill them?’

Honsou shook his head. ‘No, though I would have if they hadn’t managed it themselves.’

‘What happened to them?’

‘Forrix went up against a Titan. He lost,’ laughed Honsou, his good humour restored at the memory of his rival’s obliteration by the great war-machine’s guns.

‘And Kroeger? What did he take on?’

‘I don’t know,’ admitted Honsou. ‘Forrix told me he vanished through some kind of warp rift, but when we broke down the siege works, we found a

body in his dugout.’

‘Was it Kroeger?’

Honsou shrugged. ‘Maybe, I didn’t bother to find out. Kroeger was gone, what did I care where? With them both dead, the Warsmith’s army and his fortress were mine.’

‘Until Toramino blasted it from under you,’ reminded Grendel with a viperous smile.

Honsou smiled grimly. ‘Aye, he did, but he hadn’t reckoned with the Heart of Blood.’

‘No one did. Not even you,’ said Grendel, his normally gruff voice hushed at the mention of the ancient daemon. Honsou could well understand Grendel’s tone, shuddering as he remembered rousing the daemon by kicking its head in rage at Ventris’s escape.

‘No,’ he said, ‘not even me.’

Fortunately, the creature had sensed that his flesh had once briefly hosted a creature of the warp and ignored him, instead wreaking its bloodlust on Toramino’s army beyond the walls.

The slaughter and destruction the daemon had unleashed was unlike anything Honsou had ever seen before, its ancient fury deeper than the darkest chasm in Perturabo’s lair. It had reduced everything before it utterly to ruin and Medrengard’s blazing black sun had gorged on the souls released into the dead sky.

‘Let’s hope you haven’t overlooked anything this time, eh?’ said Grendel.

‘I haven’t,’ promised Honsou.

‘We’ll see.’

‘One day I’ll kill you for your presumption,’ said Honsou. ‘You know that, don’t you?’

‘You’ll try,’ replied Grendel. ‘Whether you succeed… well, that’ll be an interesting day.’

Honsou ignored Grendel’s challenge and asked, ‘The newborn? You said it’s with Vaanes?’

Grendel nodded. ‘Aye, he and his misfits are training it on the battle deck below.’

‘Good.’

‘No,’ chuckled Grendel. ‘There’s nothing good about that thing at all.’

Three warriors surrounded the crouching figure in the centre of the chamber, their weapons raised before them. If their victim felt threatened, he gave no sign, his posture relaxed and his mien unconcerned at the potential violence to be unleashed against him. The three attackers were clad in armour, though no one suit resembled another in colour or repair.

One suit was a battered grey, another a faded white and the last a gleaming

black. All that bound the three in any visible form of confraternity were the red crosses painted on their shoulder guards, but even those unifying marks had largely disappeared as paint flaked or was scraped away by battle damage.

Though there were no visible signs of rank, it was clear that the leader of the three was the tall warrior in black armour: Ardaric Vaanes, formerly of the Raven Guard. Vaanes was tall and slender, his bulk massive compared to a mortal, but slight for a Space Marine. Possessed of the strength to shatter bones and bend steel, his speed and poise marked him as more than a simple weapon of brute force.

The warrior to his left, Jeffar San, had once been of the White Consuls, though he now reserved his most bitter hatred for his former battle brothers. Vainglorious masters had stripped his honour from him, yet fierce warrior pride had kept him alive through their attempts to destroy him. Proud and haughty, Jeffar San was a warrior who embodied what it was to be cast from superior clay, his elegant, rapier-like sword held in the guard position.

To his right, Svoljard of the Wolf Brothers – an ill-fated Chapter from the beginning – bounced impatiently from foot to foot, his axe gripped tightly in his meaty fists. Where Vaanes exemplified the swift and sure strike, Svoljard was the wild blow that cut a man in two with a flurry of wild slashes.

All three were killers of men and xenos, warriors whose craft had been honed on a thousand battlefields under a thousand suns and who had faced the darkest horrors of the galaxy.

Yet none could quell the loathing each felt for the crouching figure between them.

The newborn squatted on one knee, his head bowed as though in some meditative trance and his grey flesh reeking of spoiled food. Unlike the warriors around him, the newborn was unarmoured, clad only in the flesh sutured to his muscle and bone.

His fists were clenched at his side and his every breath fought for existence.

‘Begin,’ said Vaanes, twin lightning claws unsheathing from his gauntlets.

Svoljard moved first, howling with an ululating war cry and slashing his axe towards the newborn. His target moved without warning, the newborn leaping from his crouched position to somersault backwards over the blow. Vaanes moved to the side, his claws raised as the newborn landed. Svoljard was exposed, his reckless attack overbalancing him, but the newborn spun away from him and batted away Jeffar San’s swinging blade with the flat of his palm.

Vaanes saw his opening and thrust with his claws, the crackling energy that normally sheathed his blades deactivated for this training session. The newborn swayed aside from the blow and pistoned the flat of his palm

towards Vaanes. The former Raven Guard threw himself back to avoid the blow, but was too slow, the spoiled-meat smell of the newborn's flesh nauseatingly strong as it hammered into his chin.

Even as he reeled from the blow, he knew it had been pulled at the last moment. He shook his head clear of the newborn's stink, wondering briefly what Svoljard's preternaturally sharp senses must be enduring. Perhaps that was why he was fighting with such reckless abandon, the better to end this session quickly…

The Wolf Brother howled as he attacked, his axe slashing in complex arcs as it sought to find a home in the newborn's body. Vaanes cursed as he saw that Svoljard's wild blows had allowed the newborn to break from being surrounded. Jeffar San fought with precise skill, but his thrusts were being hampered by Svoljard's frenzy.

The newborn ducked a decapitating sweep of the Wolf Brother's axe and hammered his elbow into his attacker's side. Had any normal enemy struck such a blow, it would have barely registered on Svoljard, but ceramite plate cracked under the force of it and sent the Wolf Brother crashing to the floor.

Jeffar San had pulled back to marshal his next attack and Svoljard was completely exposed, his throat there to be ripped out.

But the newborn ignored his fallen enemy and spun to face Vaanes as the lightning claws descended to slash him open. Too slow, the newborn threw up his forearm to block the blow, and Vaanes's claws tore down his chest, opening his sheath of flesh and laying bare his glistening musculature.

The newborn howled in agony and dropped to his knees as Jeffar San lunged and thrust his blade between his ribs from behind. The tip of the weapon punched through the newborn's chest and a froth of stinking blood washed down his opened chest.

Svoljard rolled to his feet with a roar of anger and swept his axe high to cleave the newborn from top to bottom, but Vaanes retracted his claws and thundered his fist into the charging warrior's face. Svoljard crashed to the deck, his face a mask of anger and blood where Vaanes had broken his nose.

'Enough!' shouted Vaanes. 'It's over.'

'I'll kill you!' snarled Svoljard, spitting a wad of coagulated blood from between his fanged teeth. 'You shame me in front of his… pet.'

'You shame yourself with your anger,' spat Vaanes. 'Now clean yourself up before we go again.'

Svoljard spat more blood on the deck, but turned and stalked off to the benches at the side of the deck. Vaanes let out a relieved breath as he watched Svoljard's retreating back. Without the discipline he had been used to in his time with his Chapter, the Wolf Brother was becoming more feral and uncontrolled, his anger making him more of a liability than an ally.

'Be careful, Vaanes,' warned Jeffar San, appearing at his side and running a

hand through his long blond hair. ‘One day he will not hold his rage in check.’

‘I know,’ replied Vaanes sourly, ‘but I have you to watch my back, don’t I?’

The White Consul nodded stiffly and sheathed his sword in one smooth motion. ‘I swore an oath to do so on that dead world, did I not?’

Vaanes gave a short bark of bitter laughter and said, ‘We all swore oaths a long time ago, my friend and look where it’s got us.’

Jeffar San did not reply, but bowed stiffly before turning on his heel and marching towards his weapon rack. Vaanes sighed and hung his head as the last of his surviving warriors took his leave.

‘You antagonise the warriors who follow you,’ said a thick voice behind him. ‘I do not think that will foster their loyalty, or is there something I am missing?’

‘No,’ said Vaanes, turning to see the newborn standing behind him. A raw, sucking sound rippled from his flesh as the dead skin that clothed the newborn reknit itself whole once more.

A crawling yellow glow, like the last light of a wounded sun, seeped from the wounds he and Jeffar San had caused, the warp-born energies that had fuelled this… creature’s unnatural growth, keeping him alive despite injuries that would have killed a normal man thrice over.

Such grievous wounds would have put down even one of the Adeptus Astartes, but the newborn barely registered them now.

The newborn followed his gaze and said, ‘We travel through the realm of my masters. Here I heal quicker.’

‘And you already heal fast,’ said Vaanes.

‘The power of Chaos is everywhere and grows stronger every day.’

‘Spoken like a true pupil.’

‘What do you mean?’ asked the newborn, his curiosity genuine.

‘I mean that sounds like something someone told you rather than something you know.’

‘Is there a difference?’

‘Of course there is,’ said Vaanes, his patience wearing thin at the newborn’s insatiable curiosity. He had joined Honsou to train the newborn to fight, not to be his teacher of ethics and knowledge.

‘Tell me the difference.’

‘It means that you are being told a lot of things, but are learning very little,’ said Vaanes.

The newborn considered this for a moment, cocking his head to one side and chewing its bottom lip like a child thinking hard. Vaanes let his eyes drift away from the creature… he still couldn’t think of him as a person, not when he had been a child mere months ago.

The fact that he so closely resembled a man he hated didn’t help much either.

The last he had seen of Uriel Ventris had been in the mountains of Medrengard as the fool had been about to attack Honsou's fortress with a pack of rabid, cannibalistic monsters at his heel. Though Vaanes had been sure Ventris would perish within the fortress, it appeared that the resourceful captain had prevailed and helped bring down Khalan-Ghol.

'Do you hate me?' asked the newborn suddenly.

'What?' he asked.

'Do you hate me?' repeated the newborn. 'I think you do.'

'Hate you? I don't even know what you really are or what to call you.'

'I don't have a name,' said the newborn. 'I have not earned one yet.'

'You don't earn names, they're given to you when you're born.'

'I remember my birth,' said the newborn.

'You do?'

'Yes.'

'What… what was it like?' asked Vaanes, curious despite himself.

'Painful.'

Vaanes knew little about how creatures such as the newborn were created, save what Ventris had told him when he had sold the lie of honour to his warrior band at the Sanctuary. But he had learned enough to know that the newborn had been little more than a child when the transformation of his entire flesh had begun.

Biological hot-housing, daemonic magic and debased techniques of genetic theft had accelerated his growth with strands of geneseed ripped from the meat and bone of Uriel Ventris. Diabolical suckling within the womb of a daemonic host creature had nourished it and sagging skin carved from the bodies of slaves had clothed him.

Though he had the flesh and physique of a Space Marine, he had the mind of a neophyte.

'Painful…' said Vaanes. 'I imagine it was.'

'Was?' said the newborn, shaking his head. 'It still is. My every waking moment is pain.'

'I know what you mean,' said Vaanes.

'No,' said the newborn, stepping close to him with its teeth bared. 'You don't. I am the broken shards of a human being, Ardaric Vaanes. My every breath is pain. Every beat of my heart is pain. Everything is pain. Why should I be the only one to suffer like this? I want everyone to hurt like I do.'

'And you do a good job of that,' said Vaanes, meeting the angry stare of the newborn, and remembering the horrific, mutilating death of the magos on Golbasto.

'It is all I have,' spat the newborn. 'You have your name and a lifetime of memory, all I have are nightmares and the stolen memories of another.'

'You have Ventris's memories? I didn't know that.'

‘Not memories really,’ said the newborn, his anger diminishing. ‘More like fragments of half-remembered dreams. The world we travel to is one I see in those fragments.’

‘Do you know this world’s name?’ asked Vaanes, intrigued.

‘No,’ said the newborn, ‘but I know it is precious to him. An army of great and terrible hunger came here, but it was defeated.’

‘Is that all you know?’

‘I think so… I… I… know things of him and I feel the soul of his flesh within me, but…’

‘But what?’ asked Vaanes.

‘But everything I am taught by my masters of the power of Chaos tells me to reject such feelings. I am an instrument of the will of gods that were and ever shall be, a weapon to be used in their service and nothing more.’

‘Aren’t we all…’ said Vaanes, beckoning Svoljard and Jeffar San back to the centre of the battle deck. ‘But it does explain something.’

‘What?’

‘Why we keep beating you,’ said Vaanes. ‘It’s Ventris. Everything about him is part of you. The things that make him who he is are imprinted in your very flesh and as much as Honsou and Grendel try to beat that out of you, it’s always going to be there.’

‘Are you saying I am imperfect?’

Vaanes laughed. ‘That goes without saying, but Ventris’s childish sense of right and wrong, good and evil… they’re pulling you apart from the inside. You fight fair and that’s not how we do things around here.’

Svoljard and Jeffar San rejoined Vaanes and he jabbed his finger into the newborn’s chest as he said, ‘We fight again and this time no pulling of punches. You had Svoljard at your mercy and you didn’t finish him. Don’t make that mistake again. Understood?’

‘Understood,’ growled the newborn, casting a hostile glance at the Wolf Brother.

Once again, the three warriors surrounded the newborn and made ready to fight.

‘Now–’ began Vaanes.

Before he could finish, the newborn was in motion, his fist smashing into Svoljard’s jaw and tearing it off in a shower of blood and splintered bone. The stricken warrior dropped his axe and clutched at his ruined face. Blood jetted from the wound and a horrific, wet scream gurgled from Svoljard’s throat.

The axe fell and the newborn swept it up, spinning on his heel to smash it into Jeffar San’s breastplate. The blade clove through ceramite plate and ossified bone to lodge deep within the White Consul’s chest cavity. Jeffar San’s legs buckled and he collapsed to his knees, an awful mask of shock and pain twisting his proud features in horror.

Even as Vaanes registered the speed with which the newborn had moved, he leapt upon him, his bloody fists reaching for his neck.

Vaanes moved in tune with the newborn's attack, swaying backwards and buying himself precious moments of life. He twisted his body along the direction of its lunge.

Razor claws snapped from his gauntlets.

He punched up into the newborn's belly and heaved.

The impaled newborn sailed over him, landing in a crumpled heap on the deck.

Vaanes rolled to his feet as the newborn wailed in pain and Jeffar San fell forwards onto the deck with a solid thump.

Had the fight taken so short a time?

Vaanes drew back his lightning claws into a fighting posture and activated the crackling energy sheath with a thought. The newborn was in killing mood and Vaanes could afford to take no chances.

But it seemed the fight had gone out of the newborn as he pushed himself painfully to his knees. Blood and the familiar oily, yellow glow oozed from the mortal wound at his belly as it closed, but he seemed not to care.

'Was that better?' hissed the newborn, grinning at the suffering he had caused.

'Much better,' said Vaanes.

The Imperial battleship sailed away from the *Warbreed*, its enormous bulk a slab of bristling, ancient metal as it plied its stately course through the stars, oblivious to the enemy that passed beneath it. Its name was a mystery, but the threat it represented should any of its surveyors, auspex or escorts discover them was very real indeed.

Ever since Cycerin had brought the ship through the gates of the empyrean, they had followed a stuttering course towards their target, avoiding patrol flotillas, system monitors and listening posts scattered throughout the system.

Now the image of the planet filled the viewing bay, a frigid white orb with ugly blotches of unnatural colour spread over its surface like liver spots on the skull of a withered old man. Honsou neither knew nor cared for its name. That it was known and valued by Ventris was all that mattered.

Honsou smiled as he watched the image of the battleship recede on the plotting table, his fear that the ship would discover them diminishing along with its engine signature. The strategium of the *Warbreed* was subdued, as though their Imperial enemies might somehow hear them from so far away.

'They've missed us!' breathed Cadaras Grendel, gripping the edge of the plotting table with white knuckled hands. 'I don't believe it…'

Honsou nodded and said, 'That was the last one. We're inside their patrol ring now.'

Grendel smiled a predator's grin and shook his head in disbelieving amusement. 'Now all we have to do is worry about the planetary monitor ships. All it'll take is one of them to get so much as a sniff of us and we're dead.'

'That's why we have our guide,' said Honsou, nodding towards the strategium's prow.

Adept Cycerin stood before his iron lectern as always, his hands clasped either side of the newborn's head, who knelt with his back to the monstrously transformed magos. Ardaric Vaanes stood a little to one side of the lectern, grimacing in disgust at the sight of the organic plugs Cycerin's hands had become as they slithered within the back of the newborn's skull.

The newborn's skin rippled with a grotesque undulant motion as the bio-dendrites rooted around in his brain for the information they needed to survive this journey. His eyes fluttered behind tightly squeezed lids and his lips moved in a soundless mantra.

'Does that hurt it?' wondered Grendel.

'Does it matter?' countered Honsou. 'Ventris was here and he knows the deployment protocols of the ships and that means the newborn knows them. Maybe not consciously, but the deployments, the Veritas codes, everything. They're all in there. We need that if we're to get close enough to do what we planned.'

'True enough,' agreed Grendel. 'I'm all for whatever gets us out of here in one piece.'

'Likewise,' said Honsou. 'Though a little risk is never a bad thing, eh?'

'Sometimes I think you like risk too much.'

Honsou nodded and said, 'You might be right. I remember Obax Zakayo said the same thing when we attacked the artillery battery in Berossus's camp.'

'Sensible man,' said Grendel.

'Not really, he betrayed me.'

'He's dead then?'

'Yes, very dead,' agreed Honsou. 'You could learn from him.'

'I learn quick,' said Grendel, 'but you'll bite off more than you can chew one day.'

'Maybe,' shrugged Honsou with a grin. 'But not today.'

Ardaric Vaanes marched towards them along the central nave of the strategium, his attention switching between the image on the viewing bay to the pain of the newborn.

Honsou and Grendel looked up as he approached.

'Well?' asked Honsou.

'Cycerin says that one will do,' he said, pointing to a flicker of light above a point on the planet's equator. 'It's furthest from the ships and is above the

largest concentration of xeno vegetation.’

Honsou nodded and fixed his attention on the light, knowing it meant the first step to wreaking a great and terrible vengeance upon Ventris. What he did here would be a blatant challenge, a call to arms that a stickler like Ventris would not be able to resist answering.

The three warriors watched the pinpoint of light grow from a speck in the darkness to something more angular and blocky. As the distance lessened, the shape resolved into a gently spinning orbital defence platform, though the majority of its launch bays were angled towards the planet’s surface.

The defence platform hung in geostationary orbit above the planet’s equator above a loathsome stretch of purple that spread across a wide, ochre landmass.

‘Tell me something,’ said Vaanes, turning from the image of the orbital station. ‘Once you’d defeated Berossus and Toramino, why did you not stay on Medrengard?’

‘Khalan-Ghol was ruined, there was nothing left of it.’

‘You could have built another fortress. Isn’t that what you Iron Warriors do?’

‘I could have,’ agreed Honsou. ‘But fortresses are static and when everyone on the planet has armies geared for siege, it’s only a matter of time until someone attacks you. I made a mistake going back to Medrengard. I should have stayed out in the galaxy and carried on the Long War.’

‘That war was ten thousand years ago,’ said Vaanes.

‘To you maybe, but to the Iron Warriors it was yesterday, the blink of an eye. You think the passage of years matters to something as powerful as vengeance? When you dwell in a place where time itself is a meaningless concept, the defeats and glories of the past are only a heartbeat away. I fought alongside warriors who once bestrode the surface of Terra and marched with the primarchs at their head, and it galls me to see the pale shadows the great Astartes have become. You are weaklings compared to what those warriors achieved.’

Honsou felt his anger threaten to overcome his composure and forced himself to calm down as he pondered the strength of his fervour. Before the battles on Medrengard, he had no such high notions of the warriors who had fought in Horus’s war, openly mocking Forrix and Kroeger for their misty-eyed reminiscences of a campaign he had not taken part in.

He took a deep breath and looked back to the glinting form of the orbital platform.

‘Cycerin!’ he shouted. ‘Give them something to worry about.’

The magos withdrew his crawling plugs from the back of the newborn’s head and turned to face him. The newborn slumped forward, supporting himself on his forearms as his breath came in ragged, wheezing gulps.

Without answering Honsou, the magos slid his morphing limbs into the lectern and a pulsing hum travelled the length of the strategium. The lights dimmed as the magos became one with the *Warbreed* and bent his unknown powers to the misdirection of their enemies.

'What's he doing?' asked Ardaric Vaanes.

'Watch and see,' said Honsou.

The image on the viewing bay remained much as before, the station gently spinning before them as the *Warbreed* drifted closer, unseen and unknown. Then, slowly, the station's guns and surveyor arrays came to life, swivelling in their mounts to train on a distant portion of space.

Honsou glanced down at the plotting table as a flickering icon appeared, representing the location the nameless Imperial servants had just targetted.

As they watched, the platform came alive with vox-chatter, the words of its occupants crackling the length and breadth of the strategium as they barked from a freshly formed amplifier unit on Cycerin's chest.

The words were scratchy and overlaid with static, but the panic in them was unmistakable.

'…tress one, three omega! Contact in grid delta-epsilon-omega! Auger signatures indicate hostile xenos life form! Request intercept. On present course, contact will be in range in two hours. Any ships capable of rendering assistance please respond!'

Vaanes watched as the phantom icon drifted slowly across the plotting table towards the platform and said, 'That's nowhere near us.'

'Exactly,' said Honsou. 'And thanks to Cycerin's deceptions, that's where the planetary monitors will head. By the time they realise there's nothing there, we'll be long gone.'

Honsou turned from the image of the orbital platform and lifted his bolter.

'They're looking for help,' he laughed. 'So let's go give them some.'

Alarm bells echoed along the bare metal corridors of Defence Platform Ultra Nine, ear-splittingly loud as First Officer Alevov raced towards the embarkation deck. Calling it a deck gave it a sense of scale it did not possess, the pressurised chamber where crew transferred onto docked ships simply a vaulted chamber with bare bronze walls and numerous pipes and locking wheels that led to the various umbilicals.

Imperial Guardsmen raced to prearranged choke points, ready to defend the orbital platform against boarders, though Alevov knew such precautions were likely unnecessary. Given the heightened state of alert the fleet had maintained since the initial invasion, it was unlikely that the lone enemy contact would reach the platform intact.

Even so, it had been a stroke of luck to have the nearby monitor on station. They hadn't detected it, but as it was engine-on to the sun's corona that

wasn’t surprising. The Veritas codes were old ones, but were still genuine and permission had been granted for it to dock.

The captain’s offer of assistance had been gratefully accepted, for, as much as the soldiers on the platform seemed to know what they were doing, more bodies wouldn’t hurt in case something unexpected happened.

Alevov passed the turn in the defensive architecture leading to the embarkation deck and pushed past two blue-jacketed soldiers fixing a gun with a long, perforated barrel to a bipod.

He felt his ears pop as he entered the bronze chamber, making a mental note to have the enginseers check the pressure seals. A green light winked into life above a thick blast door and he breathed a sigh of relief.

The clank of metal on metal sounded from beyond the door as he took hold of the locking clamp and turned the wheel. Jets of stale atmosphere gusted from the door seals as air from different worlds mingled.

‘Glad to have you aboard,’ said Alevov as the door swung open. ‘Probably a bit unnecessary, but you can never be too careful, can you?’

‘No,’ said Honsou, stepping from the airlock, ‘but apparently you can be too stupid.’

Honsou raised his bolter and shot First Officer Alevov in the face.

The headless body slammed against the bronze walls of the airlock and the gun’s report echoed deafeningly in the confined chamber. Honsou moved swiftly forward, seeing two open-mouthed soldiers at the chamber’s exit with a heavy calibre weapon.

Shock and horror had paralysed them for a moment, but it was all Honsou needed. His bolter roared again and the soldiers were torn in two by a sawing arc of bolter shells.

‘With me!’ he yelled, slamming his back into the wall at the chamber’s door. He ducked his helmeted head through the doorway, seeing more of the blue-jacketed soldiers manning defended positions further around the curving corridor.

Honsou rolled around the door; his bolter raised to his shoulder and pumping out lethally aimed shots directed by his augmetic eye. Three soldiers flopped back, their chests pulped to ruptured craters by three shots.

Iron Warriors moved past him, deploying with grim, wordless efficiency to secure the passages leading to the platform’s hub. Honsou was pleased at the accuracy of his shots, for it had taken him a little time to retrain his body to fire the bolter left-handed and sync it to his newly grafted eye, but the results spoke for themselves.

Cadaras Grendel and Ardaric Vaanes moved past him, moving anticlockwise around the rim of the orbital and firing as they went. Grendel’s underslung melta gun trailed smoke and Vaanes’s lightning claws threw off

arcs of blue lightning, making the air taste of ozone.

He smelled the newborn before he saw it, despite the case of armour it wore about its body. Even his own helmet's filters couldn't keep the stench of it from him.

'Stay with me,' ordered Honsou. 'Kill anything that isn't ours.'

The newborn nodded and they set off after the sound of gunfire.

Cadaras Grendel grinned like a madman as he charged down the curving corridor, his teeth bared and his heart beating wildly in his chest. It had been too long since he had killed something and he itched to fight something worthwhile, though he suspected there would be precious little sport on this grubby little platform.

But Cadaras Grendel wasn't fussy; he'd kill whatever came his way.

He and Vaanes pounded down the corridor, its walls strobed by red warning lights and ringing with blaring klaxons. It was the symphony of battle and needed only the bark of gunfire and the screams of the dying to make it complete.

As if in answer to his thoughts, a ragged squad of soldiers rose from a defensive position before him and opened fire. Their weapons spat bright bolts of energy, daggers to fight a Titan, and Grendel laughed as he opened fire, the vox-unit on his armour broadcasting his demented, psychotic amusement as a howling yell of rebellion.

One soldier crumpled, his shoulder blasted away and his face shredded by exploding fragments of bone. Another ran screaming from the barricade, while the rest stood with grim stoicism in the face of Grendel's onslaught.

Las-fire spat, the impacts against his armour insignificant. His bolter fired again, a bark of shots that cut down a handful of the men in sprays of blood and shattered armour.

Vaanes had eschewed his jump pack for this close and dirty fight, but Grendel had to admit his speed was impressive nonetheless. The former Raven Guard was faster than Grendel and reached the barrier first, leaping forward in an arcing dive that took him over the barricade and into the midst of the soldiers.

Actinic blurs of silver steel flashed and squirts of blood sprayed the walls as Vaanes rolled to his feet, striking left and right with his lightning claws. Arms flopped to the metal decking and torsos sheared from bodies as the energised edges cut through armour, meat and bone with an electric hiss and spit.

Screams of pain and terror echoed from the walls, and in seconds the skirmish was over.

Grendel nodded in approval as he rounded the barricade to see Vaanes standing in a circle of blood, chuckling as he found it impossible to tell how

many had died given the profusion of dismembered body parts.

His amusement turned to glee as he saw a pair of soldiers huddled in the shadow of the barricade, clinging to one another and weeping in terror. Their blue uniforms bore the wreckage of their fellow soldiers' deaths and they were little more than mindless sacks of blood and pain now.

Grendel reached down and hoisted one of the soldiers from the ground, letting him dangle above the deck as his wrist was slowly crushed.

'Don't seem like much, do they?' he asked.

Vaanes didn't answer immediately, his helmet fixed on the carnage his deadly claws had wrought. For all the motion Vaanes displayed, he might as well have been a statue.

'Vaanes?'

'I heard you.'

Grendel shrugged and dropped the wailing soldier, who crawled away holding his shattered wrist close to his chest. Grendel let him get a few metres away before turning his weapon on him and unleashing a superheated blast of energy from the underslung melta gun.

The protective senses of his helmet dimmed momentarily as the white-hot blast engulfed the soldier and Grendel laughed as the glow faded and he saw the stumps of feet and charred skull lid that was all that remained.

He turned to Vaanes and said, 'I'll leave the last one for you.'

Fighting alongside the newborn was much easier when it wore a helmet, for Honsou was not forced to look upon the face of Ventris in the midst of a battle. The fight for the outer ring of the orbital platform was virtually over, the soldiers defending it no match for the relentless ferocity of an assault of the Iron Warriors.

Few soldiers were.

Honsou watched his champion kill their enemies without mercy, fighting with a skill and familiar style that took him a moment to recognise. The blows it struck were practiced and precise, the very image of those taught to the Adeptus Astartes… exactly how a warrior of the Ultramarines would fight.

The challenge of killing mortals with his bolter had grown stale, and Honsou now fought with his axe, cleaving a screaming path through his enemies. Truth be told, there was little more challenge in fighting them in close quarters, but it had the virtue of being bloody.

Honsou's axe growled as it slew, the monstrous entity within it feeding on the souls of the dead even as it feasted on the blood of their burst bodies. His blade reaped a fearsome tally, the blue-jacketed soldiers fighting on despite the impossibility of their victory. Honsou admired their courage, if not their ability.

He wrenched his axe from the golden breastplate of some kind of officer,

the axe protesting with a ripple of dead eyes across the blade's glossy surface. A tremor of rage passed along his arms from the weapon and Honsou snarled as he exerted the force of his will to quiet the daemon within.

The sounds of battle were diminishing throughout the station and Honsou knew the battle was almost won. Even as he relished the victory, he saw a ragged scramble from the end of one of the spoke passageways that led to the central hub. One soldier carried a stubby tube on his shoulder, into which another man stuffed a finned missile.

Honsou wanted to laugh at the desperation of the weapon, before realising that the detonation of such a missile would explosively decompress the entire outer ring and send everyone within hurtling into space.

He tried to move, but his limbs would not obey his commands and he looked down in anger at the axe that shuddered in his grip, its will to dominate pushing back against him.

'Now is really not the time!' he snarled through gritted teeth, fighting to force the essence of the daemon back into the darkly shimmering depths of the blade.

A bloom of noise, light and smoke erupted from the soldiers and, though it was surely impossible to see such a fast moving object, Honsou saw a needle-nosed missile streaking towards him.

Honsou felt the daemon withdraw into the weapon and end the battle for control, but knew it was far too late to avoid the missile. He threw his arm up before him in an instinctive gesture of defence.

The force of the impact hurled him from his feet and he felt a terrible, leeching power within him, as though a loathsome, dark force tapped into his life-force. His head slammed against the wall and he looked down to see the smoking, hissing fins of the missile embedded in the rippling silver of the arm he had taken from the Ultramarines sergeant.

Light pulsed in the depths of the arm, flitting fireflies of energy that spoke of technology wrought in an age long forgotten and a race of such malice that his own petty evils were insignificant when measured alongside theirs. Even as he watched, a fiery orange line hissed around the circumference of the portion of the missile that protruded from his arm and it fell to the deck with a clatter of metal.

Honsou stared in wonder at the unblemished surface of his arm, looking up as the equally astounded soldiers reloaded the weapon.

He scrambled to his feet, but quickly saw there was no need for haste as the newborn launched himself towards the soldiers and began their butchery. Until now, Honsou had only seen the newborn kill with the mechanical precision of the Adeptus Astartes, albeit employed with a vicious joy no Space Marine would condone, but his champion now fought with brutal savagery, every blow excruciatingly mortal and delivered with fluid economy

of force.

No movement was wasted, no blow more powerful than required and no opening left unexploited. Within seconds the soldiers were dead and the battle over.

Honsou joined the newborn at the scene of the slaughter as more Iron Warriors secured the spoke corridor. Specialists with shaped charges moved down its length and prepared to blow the doors to the central hub. Within moments, the orbital platform would be theirs.

Honsou put a hand on the newborn's shoulder, feeling his hostility towards his new champion diminish in the face of the obvious relish taken in causing death.

'Ardaric Vaanes is training you well,' he said.

Ardaric Vaanes inclined his head to the last trooper. The man's face was a mask of tears and blood, his eyes glazed as his head shook back and forth in terror. Cadaras Grendel stood with his shoulders squared, the threat and challenge of his body language plain.

'He's dead already,' said Vaanes.

'What?'

'I said he's dead already. He's no threat to us anymore.'

'So? What's that got to do with anything?' said Grendel, moving to stand inches in front of him. 'You not got the stomach for killing a man unless he's got a gun pointed at you?'

'I just don't see the need anymore.'

'The need?' said Grendel. 'Who said anything about need? Kill him. Now.'

Vaanes met Grendel's angry stare, the challenge and hostility evident even through the masks of ceramite that separated them. The sound of battle surrounded them, the fighting pushing ever closer to the hub of the orbital platform, but Grendel was ignoring it, intent on pushing Vaanes and seeing what he was made of.

'I don't think you've got the guts, Vaanes,' said Grendel. 'I think maybe you're still working with the Imperials. Honsou thinks so too, I can tell he doesn't trust you.'

'He doesn't trust you either,' pointed out Vaanes.

'No, but I don't try and pretend like I won't betray him someday. He and I, well, we got ourselves an understanding.'

Grendel turned away from Vaanes and scooped up the last surviving trooper. He held him up before Vaanes and said, 'Go on. Kill him. Kill him or I'll kill you, I swear.'

Vaanes took a breath, wondering if he would have to fight Grendel now. The warrior had been spoiling for it ever since he had joined Honsou's band, but as he tensed his muscles in readiness for action, his eyes caught a glint of

silver on the dangling trooper's uniform.

An honour badge pinned to his collar.

Droplets of blood had stained the uniform around it, but not a single drop sullied the badge itself and the image of a stylised silver 'U' upon a rich blue background was unmistakable…

Ultramarines.

Picked out in gold behind the symbol of the Ultramarines was the numeral IV, and Vaanes felt a surge of anger as he realised the meaning of the symbol. It was a campaign badge awarded to those who had fought alongside the Fourth Company of the Ultramarines.

Vaanes leaned down and said, 'How did you get this?'

The soldier didn't answer, his mouth working in a monotone wail of pure terror, his eyes squeezed shut as though he could escape the terror of his situation by keeping it from sight.

'How did you get this?' shouted Vaanes, gripping the soldier's jacket and tearing him from Cadaras Grendel. Hysterical babbling was his only answer and Vaanes screamed his question again, his right fist pulled back and ready to strike, the fizzing crackle of the lightning energy loud in his ears.

'Do it…' hissed Grendel, and the urge to kill this man, to hurt him, to maim him and inflict suffering beyond measure was greater than anything Vaanes had ever known. Vaanes heard a sibilant whisper in his ear as though an unseen speaker's voice was hidden in the rising buzz of his lightning claw, a voice only he could hear.

The sensation was not unpleasant, a silent urging and a silken pressure on his mind that promised new wonders, pleasures undreamed of and the ecstasy of experience. All this and more were encapsulated in the wordless whisper and Ardaric Vaanes knew without understanding that this was the offer and the price of the bargain he had struck with Honsou on Medrengard.

His vision narrowed until all he could see was the Ultramarines honour badge, the winking silver and gold mocking him with their purity and lustre. The face of Uriel Ventris appeared in the forefront of his mind and he cried out in anguished rage.

The lightning claw slammed forward, punching through the trooper's chest and exploding from his back. The blow continued and his fist followed the claws through the man's torso, pulverising bone, heart and lungs on its way through the substance of his body.

Vaanes tore at the body until his hissing claws had reduced it to scraps of torn meat, a ruined gruel of smashed bone and offal. The breath heaved in his lungs and he stepped back from the wreckage of the man's remains and felt a wave of acceptance pour through him, his limbs filled with energy and exhilaration.

He heard Cadaras Grendel laughing and felt the killer's gauntlet slap him

on the shoulder guard. Words were spoken, but he didn't hear them, too caught up in the wonder he had just experienced.

Vaanes stared down at what he had done, the bodies around him so torn that their very humanity was obliterated. Finally, he understood the lie he had been living since the shame that had driven him from the Raven Guard.

There was no self-delusional status he could impart to salve his own conscience and no middle ground between loyalist and traitor. In the Long War, such labels were meaningless anyway – there were only victors and defeated.

At last, the truth of what he had become was apparent in this baptism of murder and blood.

Ardaric Vaanes welcomed it.

The central control room of Defence Platform Ultra Nine reeked of blasting charges and blood. With the doors blown, the men inside had no chance of life and had made the best job they could of disabling the systems and calling for reinforcements, but Honsou knew the nearest Imperial ship was many hours distant.

Adept Cycerin stood before the smashed consoles, a morass of writhing cables snaking from the cavity of his bio-mechanical chest to mesh with the inner workings of the smashed consoles.

The doomed mortals had been thorough in their vandalism, but Cycerin had made swift work in undoing the damage, and his unique talents allowed him to coax the required life from the smashed systems without difficulty.

'Is everything ready?' asked Honsou, impatient to see the results of his labours bear fruit.

Cadaras Grendel shrugged as he ran his eyes over the buckled and las-shot console. Red lights winked on surviving, brass-rimmed dials and sparks fizzed and sputtered.

'Hard to say for sure, but we swapped over the missiles' payload,' said Grendel. 'All but one is loaded up with the stuff we took from Golbasto. It's up to Cycerin now.'

'Why all but one?' asked Ardaric Vaanes and Honsou caught a subtle change in the warrior's voice, a shift in tone of a warrior who has at last come to know himself.

'The last one is a message to Ventris.'

'What does it say?'

'It's not what it says,' said Honsou, 'it's what it represents.'

'And what's that?'

'That you don't walk away from a fight with Honsou without paying a price.'

A salvo of sixteen orbital torpedoes surged from the planetside launch bays, followed by another rippling salvo seconds later. Another three salvos launched until all but one of the platform's entire payload of missiles was expended. Each missile dropped away rapidly from the platform, the blue-hot coals of their engines firing for long enough to put them in a ballistic trajectory towards the planet's surface.

They swooped downwards like hunting raptors, their formation breaking up as the spread pattern implanted into each warhead by Adept Cycerin took hold of each one. The missiles diverged until their contrails were spread around the planet like a glittering spiderweb.

Heat shields burned with conical fire as the missiles plunged through the atmosphere, emerging into the crystal skies of the planet. Hurried defences scrambled to lock onto the missiles, but launched from low orbit, they were already travelling too quickly and were too close to be engaged with any hope of success.

As the missiles reached a predetermined altitude over the planet's surface, each one exploded and spread its viral payload into the air. Vast quantities of the experimental Heraclitus strain were released into the atmosphere in doses billions of times greater than had been employed on Golbasto.

All across the planet, a terrible rain fell, the genius of Magos Szalin of the Ordos Biologis wreaking terrible damage as it went to work on the indigenous and xenos vegetation.

A few short years ago, this world had suffered the horror of invasion, monstrous swarms of ferocious alien killers rampaging across its surface. A great war had been fought; in space, in the air, on land and finally in the very bowels of a living spacecraft that had travelled from another galaxy for uncounted aeons.

Though the invasion had been defeated, the dreadful legacy of the alien invaders remained to taint the planet's ecology forever. From pole to pole, horrific spires of dreadful alien vegetable matter towered over the landscape, slowly choking the life from the natural landscape.

The alien flora had subsumed entire continents, a rapacious instinct to devour encoded in every strand of its genetic structure. Nutrients were leeched from the soil and used to create hyper-fertile spore growths that drifted on the heated currents of the air to seed new regions and pollute yet more land.

Only rigorous burning policies ensured the planet's survival – for a world of the Imperium could not simply be abandoned, not after all the blood that had been shed in its defence. The shining steel cities, islands in a sea of alien growth, still produced masses of munitions and armoured vehicles for Imperial wars throughout the subsector.

Salvoes of anti-plant missiles, slash and burn pogroms and pesticide

overflights were a matter of routine since the defeat of the invasion.

Such things were thankless tasks, but necessary for the planet's continued survival.

But all that was rendered moot in the face of Magos Szalin's creation.

Developed from a partial fragment of ancient research conducted by Magos Heraclitus, the bio-toxins were intended to increase the growth rate of crops on agri-worlds. Magos Szalin had taken the next step and pioneered techniques designed to increase the productivity of such worlds a thousand fold.

Now that work was put to the ultimate test, mixing its monstrous potential for increased growth with an alien organism that was at the apex of its biological efficiency.

Within seconds of the Heraclitus strain being released into the atmosphere, the alien growths reacted to its touch, surging upwards and over the planet's terrain. Slash and burn teams were instantly overwhelmed by mutant growths, poisonous plant life expanding kilometres in seconds as the virulent growth strain sent its metabolism into overdrive.

Huge amounts of nutrients were sucked from the ground and released as enormous quantities of heat, raising the ambient temperature of the world in a matter of moments. Oxygen was sucked greedily from the atmosphere by horrifyingly massive spore chimneys and the planet's protective layers were gradually stripped in unthinking biological genocide.

This was not the rapid death of Exterminatus, but ecological death of worldwide proportions.

Panicked messages were hurled out into the immaterium and only those with the money, influence or cunning escaped on hastily prepped ships that fled the planet's destruction.

But these were few compared to the billions left behind and, weeks later, as the last of the planet's atmosphere was stripped from it by the hyper-evolved alien biology, stellar radiation swept the surface, killing every living thing and laying waste to all that remained.

Months after the launch of the missiles, nothing remained alive, the deadly alien vegetation killed by lethal levels of radiation and the frigid cold that gripped the planet without its protective atmosphere.

All that now remained of the planet was a dead, lifeless ball of rock, its surface seared and barren, with only the skeletal remains of its blackened cities left as evidence that human beings had once lived upon it.

The silver-skinned drop-ship fell through the airless vacuum of the planet. A host of Marauders and Raptors followed it down, though nothing lived here now. The drop-ship's retros screamed as the pilot brought it in on final approach, the skids deploying just before it landed in the midst of dead plant

matter and scorched alien trees.

A drogue arm deployed to test the external environment and once it retracted, the pressure door on the side of the craft opened and a heavy ramp extended to the surface.

Cautiously, for none aboard truly felt safe, a squad of Adeptus Mechanicus Tech-Guard clad in heavy environment suits – similar in function and design to the Terminator armour employed by the Adeptus Astartes – emerged and descended to the planet's surface.

Following the group was a figure whose heavy armour was swathed in vivid red robes emblazoned with the black and white cog symbol of the Adeptus Mechanicus.

His name was Magos Locard and this was not the first time he had come to this world.

With quick, precise gestures, Locard directed the Tech-Guard to collect samples of the dead plants and the underlying strata. Diggers and corers rolled down from the drop-ship and Locard watched them as they gathered information that might offer some clue as to what had caused this catastrophe.

Despite the many augmentations applied to his flesh, Locard was not so far removed from humanity that the fate of this world did not cause him great sadness. Like many others, he had fought to save it and had been instrumental in what he had thought was its salvation.

Now all that was ashes and Locard felt a great anger build within him.

Whoever had done this would pay.

A Tech-Guard soldier approached Locard and said, 'My lord, we've found it.'

Locard followed the man as he waded through thick piles of ashen vegetation to the source of what had led them to this exact place. Though the planet was now bereft of life, a constantly repeating signal had reached into space, its plaintive voice almost lost in the void, but shrill and insistent, demanding attention.

The vegetation thinned and Locard realised he was walking in a deep trench carved by the impact of something that had fallen from the skies.

'Here, my lord,' said the Tech-Guard, backing away from Locard.

Locard saw a battered silver tube, perhaps ten metres in length – an orbital torpedo, though his exo-armour's auspex told him there was no ordnance or explosives loaded in the warhead. This was the source of the signal and Locard knew that someone had wanted them to find this.

He walked along the length of the torpedo towards the payload bay and deployed bolt-clasps from the forearm of his armour. One by one, he removed the bolts of the payload bay and hurled it aside when he unscrewed the last one.

The inside of the bay was dark, but his enhanced ocular implants could

easily make out what it contained. He frowned and reached inside the bay to remove its contents.

He turned to the Tech-Guard next to him and handed him a cracked helmet, the paint chipped and one eye lens missing. The helmet was a deep blue and bore a symbol on the forehead that was known to Locard.

The inverted omega of the Ultramarines Chapter of the Adeptus Astartes.

‘I don’t understand,’ said the Tech-Guard, turning the helmet over in his hands.

‘Nor I,’ said Locard, turning and marching from the missile. ‘Not yet.’

As the Tech-Guard followed Locard he said, ‘What happened to this place?’

‘This place has a name, soldier,’ snapped Locard. ‘Imperial citizens died here.’

‘Apologies, my lord, I meant no disrespect,’ said the Tech-Guard. ‘What was it called?’

Locard paused, casting his gaze across the blasted wasteland that was all that remained of a once proud Imperial world that had stood defiantly before the horror of a Tyranid invasion.

‘It was called Tarsis Ultra.’

FLESH

Chris Wraight

Fifty years ago, they took my left hand.

I watched, conscious, heavy-headed with stimms and pain suppressants. I watched the knives go in, peeling back the skin, picking apart muscle and sinew.

They had trouble with the bones. I had changed by then and the ossmodula had turned my skeleton as hard as plasteel. They used a circular saw with glittering blades to cut through the radius and ulna. I can still hear its screaming whine.

They were simply following protocol. Indeed, they were further along the path than I was and there was something to be learned from the way they operated.

I kept it together. I am told that not everyone does.

It took three weeks for the new mechanism to bed down. The flesh chafed for a long time after that, red-raw against the metal of the implant.

I would wake and see it, an alien presence, bursting from the puffed and swollen stump of my left arm. I flexed iron fingers and watched micropistons and balance-nodes slide smoothly past one another. It looked delicate, though I knew it was stronger than the original had been.

Stronger, and better. Morvox spent a long time with me, explaining the benefits. He cast the issue in terms of pragmatism, of efficiency margins. Even back then I knew there was more to it than that.

This was an aesthetic matter. A matter of form. We were changing ourselves to comply with the dictates of taste.

Do not mistake this for regret. I do not regret what has been done to me. I cannot regret, not in any true sense.

My iron hand functions competently. It serves, just as I serve. It is an implement, just as I am an implement. No praise can be higher.

But my old flesh, the part of me that was immolated in the rite, overseen by those machine faces down in the forges, I do not forget it.

I will, one day. Like Morvox, I will not remember anything but the aesthetic imperative.

Not yet. For now, I still feel it.

I

From the Talex to Majoris, then over to the spine shafts and the turboclimbers. Levels swept by, all black, mottled with grime. Out of Station Lyris, and things got cleaner. Then up past the Ecclesiast Cordex, taking grav-bundles staffed by greyshirts, and into the Administratum quarter. That looked a lot like real grass on the lawns, baking under hololamps, before up again, through Securum and the plexiglass domes of the Excelsion.

Then things were really sparkling. Gleaming ceramics, floor-to-ceiling glass panels. You could forget the rest of the hive, the kilometres of squalid, close-pressed humanity, rammed into the angles between spires and manufactoria.

Right at the top, right where the tip of Ghorgonspire pierced the heavy orange fug of the sky, it felt like you'd never need a gland-deep dermoscrub again. You could imagine that everything on Helaj V was pristine and smooth as a Celestine's conscience.

Raef Khamed, being a man of the world, was not prone to think that. He stalked up to Governor Tralmo's offices, still in his Jenummari fatigues, still stinking from what had happened in 45/331/aX and from the journey up. His lasgun banged against his right thigh, loose in its waist-slung holster. It needed a recharge. He needed a recharge. He'd emptied himself out on those bastards, and they just kept coming.

The two greyshirts flanking the doors saw him coming and snapped their heels.

'Jen,' they said in rough unison, making the aquila.

'She's in there?' asked Khamed, pushing the door open.

'She is,' came a voice from inside the chamber. 'Shut the doors behind you.'

He went in, and did as he was told.

Khamed stood in a large circular chamber. The floor was veined stone, grey and pink. False windows lined the walls, looking out on to false meadows and

false skies. A bonestone statue of Sanguinius Redemptor stood by the walls, pious and gloomy.

There was a desk at the far end, but it was empty. Set off to one side, three low couches had been set around a curved table.

In one of the couches sat Governor Planetary Anatova Tralmo, tight-skinned from a century of rejuvenat and with oil-shimmer hair. Next to her was Astropath Majoris Eridh, milk-eyed and staring.

'How goes it?' Tralmo asked as Khamed sat down. She winced a little as his grimy fatigues marked the cream surface of the couch.

'Awful,' said Khamed, not noticing. 'Bloody awful. I'm not even going to try to describe what I saw this time.'

The Governor nodded sympathetically.

'Then you'll like this, I hope. Eridh?'

'A response,' said the Astropath, looking at Khamed in that eerie, sightless way of his. 'Two cycles back, just deciphered and verified.'

Khamed's weary face lit up. He'd begun to doubt there'd be one.

'Throne,' he said, letting his relief show. The time for bravado was long gone. 'At last. Regiment?'

'It's not a Guard signal, Jenummari.'

'Then what? Who?'

Eridh handed him a dataslate with a summary of the transmission, elucidated into verbose Helaj vernac.

Khamed looked at it, and his muscles tensed. He read it again, just to be sure. He discovered he was holding the slate rather too tightly.

If he'd been less tired, he might have hidden his response better. As it was, when he looked up, he knew he'd given everything away. For the first time, he noticed the air of tight expectation on Tralmo's face.

Khamed had always liked her. Tralmo was tough. She didn't shake easily and had been good during the difficulties.

Just then, she looked like she was going to throw up.

'How long have we got?' he asked, conscious of the sudden hoarseness in his voice.

'Less than a standard Terran,' replied Tralmo. 'I want you to meet them, Raef. It's protocol. We should keep this military to military.'

Khamed swallowed. He was still holding the slate too tightly.

'Got you.'

Bitch.

The docking bay doors were a metre thick. They dragged open, grinding along rust-weakened rails. Outside, the platform was open to the elements. On Helaj, the elements were always hateful.

Tracer lights winked in the orange gale. Further out, deeper into the sub-zero atmospheric bilge, more lights whirled. The storm roared, just as it

always did, grumbling away like a maddened giant turning in its sleep.

There was another roar over the platform, closer to hand than the storm, and it came from the blurred outline of a ship. The thing was a brute, far larger than the shuttles that normally touched down at the spire summit.

Khamed couldn't make much out through the muck – his visor was already clouding up – but the engine backwash was huge. As he'd watched it come down on the local augurs he'd seen rows of squat gun barrels along its flanks, gigantic thruster housings and glimpses of a single infamous insignia.

That hadn't made him feel well. He was on edge. His hands were sweaty even in the thick gloves of his environment suit. His heart hadn't stopped thumping.

His men, twelve lostari lined up behind him, weren't any better. They stared into the raging clouds ahead, their weapons clutched tight, held diagonally across their body armour.

We're all soiling ourselves. Throne of Earth, trooper – get a handle on this.

The roar transmuted into a booming thunderclap, and the ship pulled away, back into the raging cloudscape. Its dark outline faded quickly, though the noise of those engines lingered for much longer.

New shapes emerged from the smog-filth, resolving into clarity like a carcharex out of the acid sea.

Five of them.

The Imperial Guard garrison in Ghorgonspire was over a hundred thousand strong. They'd made no progress against the incursion for six local lunars, which converted into a lot longer if you went with Terran.

Five of them. Five.

'Formal,' hissed Khamed over the vox.

His men snapped their ankles together and stared rigidly ahead.

The quintet approached. Khamed swallowed, and looked up.

Their armour was night-black and plainer than he'd expected. There were white markings on the shoulder-guards, but the finish was matt. Blunt, uncomplicated.

There was no getting away from the size of them. He'd been warned what to expect from Namogh, who'd witnessed a squad of Argent Sabres twenty years ago while on an exchange placement off-world.

'You never get used to it,' he'd said, his ugly face thoroughly disapproving. 'You think, *that's a machine. It has to be*. But in there, there's a man. And then it moves, all that plate, tonnes and tonnes of it, and you know it can move quicker than you can, it can kill you quicker than you can blink, and then you think: I was right the first time. It is a machine, a nightmare machine, and if we need to make a thing like this to keep us alive, then the universe is a scary place.'

Their armour hummed. It was barely audible over the roar of the storm, but

you knew it was there. Just like the ship Khamed had seen, the power stored up in those black shells was obvious. They didn't need to hide it. They didn't want to hide it. They strode – *strutted* – up to him, every movement soaked in menace and confidence and contempt.

Khamed bowed.

'Welcome to Helaj V, lords,' he said, and was disgusted to hear how his voice carried a tremor even over the tinny transmission of his helm vox. 'We're grateful to have you.'

'I think that unlikely,' came the response. It was machine-clipped. 'But here we are. I am Brother-Sergeant Naim Morvox of the Iron Hands. Brief me as we descend, then the cleansing will begin.'

'They come up from the underhive. We isolate the spearheads and respond with contagion-pattern suppression.'

Khamed had to trot beside the stalking figure of Morvox as he tried to explain the situation. The Iron Hands Space Marine made no effort to slow down and kept up a punishing, metronomic stride. Behind him, the other four giants matched pace. Their heavy treads clunked on the polished surface of the transit corridor. Khamed's own men trailed in their wake.

'With little success,' observed Morvox. His voice. It was a strangely muted sound to come out of such a monstrous mouthpiece. Like all the Iron Hands squad, Morvox kept his helm on. The faceplate was a blank, dark mask.

'We've succeeded in keeping them from the upper hive,' replied Khamed, knowing how weak that sounded.

Morvox was approaching the honour guard: fifty lostari in greyshirt trim, ranked on either side of the corridor, guns hoisted.

'But you have not eliminated the source.'

'Not yet, no.'

From somewhere, Khamed heard Namogh's voice call the troops to attention, and their ankles slammed together. It wasn't done smoothly. The men were nervous.

'I need access to your hive schematics,' said Morvox, ignoring the troops and carrying on down the corridor. 'When did it happen?'

'8.2 Standard Terran lunars ago,' replied Khamed, shrugging an apology as he sailed past Namogh's position. His deputy looked even more irritated than usual. 'Insurgents control fifty-five percent, all lower hive. We have no access to the levels below the base forge.'

'And I'll need full asset inventory. All troops are under my command. What is your name?'

Only now. Now you ask.

'Raef Khamed, Jenum–'

'You will remain with me. We will commence assault as soon as I have the

data. Your men will be mobilised by then and I will order their deployment.'

'Very good. The men stand read–'

'Warn them they will need to be.'

They passed from the long corridor, through a pair of slide doors and into an octagonal command node. The walls were lined with picts. There were cogitator banks along the near flank, attended to by servitors bearing the cog-skull of the Mechanicus. Hololiths shimmered over projection pillars showing various cross-sections of the Ghorgonspire.

Morvox stopped walking. He said nothing, but his squad immediately fanned out and began to assimilate information from the picts. One of them pushed a servitor aside and extruded a dataclaw from a compartment in his gauntlet. None of them spoke out loud, though Khamed guessed that there was plenty of chat over closed channels.

'Leave us now,' ordered Morvox.

Khamed hesitated for a moment. Only minutes had passed since the docking bay doors had opened. This was all happening very quickly and he'd expected... well, he didn't know what he'd expected.

'Your will, lord,' he said, bowing.

He withdrew from the command node and blast doors slid closed behind him. He turned, and saw Namogh waiting for him.

'So?' the deputy asked. Orfen Namogh looked out of place in ceremonial armour, and it fitted him badly. Then again, the deputy only looked comfortable with dirt smeared on his face and a lasgun stock wedged against his shoulder.

'We asked for help,' said Khamed. He suddenly felt weary. He hadn't slept for twenty hours. 'We got it. Get everything together – we're going in again and they're in charge now.'

It took longer than he expected. The Iron Hands didn't emerge from the command node for over seven hours, during which time Khamed snatched some sleep, reviewed tactical readouts from the containment operation, and shared a meal of dried multimeat and tarec with Namogh.

'We're going to have to work with them, Orfen,' said Khamed, chewing through the gristle methodically.

'No,' said Namogh bluntly. 'No, we're not. You don't work with them. They order you into shitholes. You go down them. That's the way it works.'

'Fine. But stow your attitude. I don't want it getting down to the grunts.'

Namogh laughed, and took a swig of tarec. He had flecks of meat all over his big, yellow teeth.

'Don't worry. They're all crapping themselves already. And I haven't said a thing.'

A bead on Khamed's starched collar blinked red. Despite himself, he felt

his stomach lurch.

‘What are we afraid of?’ he muttered, getting up and retrieving his helmet.

‘You heard of Contqual?’ asked Namogh, wiping his mouth and following Khamed out of the hab. ‘You heard what they did there?’

Khamed brushed his uniform down and put his helmet on, twisting the seal as he walked.

‘You shouldn’t believe what you read, Orfen,’ he said. ‘There’s a lot of crap on the grids.’

‘One in three. That’s how many they killed. Punitive measures, they called them. And those poor bastards were on our side.’

Khamed opened the blast doors from the officers’ quarters and strode out into the antechamber of the command node. He kept his shoulders back, head straight. The little things were important.

‘Like I said. There’s a lot of crap out there.’

He opened the doors. Morvox was waiting on the far side of them, vast and mordant.

‘We have what we need,’ said the Iron Father. ‘Now we go in.’

Out of the Excelsion, moving at a clip, and into the long bunkers of Securum, lit by gloomy strip-lumens. Administratum was amusing, with scholiasts looking terrified at the sight of the black giants striding through the lexchambers. Then down into the vaults of the Cordex. Some of the priests had tried to perform some kind of benediction on the Space Marines there, but had been simply brushed aside, just like everyone else.

After that, the dirt got bad. The air got hot. The floor got sticky, and the aircon wheezed like a phenexodrol junkie. There were men waiting at Station Lyris, arranged in ranks of a hundred. They looked pretty good, kitted out in full staff grey and assault armour. There wasn’t much blood to be seen. The floors must have been swabbed.

‘Will you address them?’ asked Khamed, not really knowing whether that would be good or bad for morale.

‘No,’ said Morvox, and kept moving.

He never stopped moving. He just kept going.

Then you think: I was right the first time. It is a machine, a nightmare machine.

It was the implacability that was so unsettling. They looked almost invulnerable, to be sure, and their armour-hum was eerily threatening. But it was the sense you got, the sense that they would just keep on going, that got to you.

A mortal would know when to quit, even a dogged one like Namogh.

They wouldn’t. Ever.

‘How do you want the lostari deployed?’

‘You have orders on the tac. For now, just try to keep up.’

Then down again, past the station bulwarks and along service runners towards the core hab clusters. The light got worse. The shafts got smaller and less well repaired. Loops of cables hung down from the roof, and moisture pooled in dark corners. Defective lumens guttered behind panels of iron mesh.

They were getting to the heart of it. Half a kilometre down in Ghorgonspire was like being a long way underground. The nearest patch of sky was buried under a lot of rockcrete. The air that coughed through the circulation systems was humid and smelled of human excreta. Major power grids had gone down early on in the difficulties, and battlefield gen-units struggled to keep the lumens in operation.

Khamed switched on vision-aug in his helmet. The men in his lead unit, twenty of them, did the same. They were all practically running in the wake of the Iron Hands, none of whom had broken their striding rhythm.

‘This is Node 4R,’ announced Morvox, coming up to a massive, closed siege gate at the end of the corridor. On either side of it, teams of greyshirt sentries waited warily, weapons hoisted. ‘We will cleanse it. Consolidate in our wake. Are you prepared?’

Khamed was already out of breath. He shot a quick glance back down the crowded corridor. His lead unit was in readiness. Behind it, stretched out in the gloom of the long tunnel, were more squads coming into position. He could see some of them ramming energy packs into their lasguns and strapping helmets securely. They were as prepared as they would ever be.

‘On your command,’ he said, nodding to Morvox.

‘We do not need your fire support. Do not join the assault. Secure the ground we clear. You will be given new orders on completion.’

Something was exchanged over a private channel, and the Space Marines unlocked their sidearms. Four of them, Morvox included, carried huge, boxy guns with blunt barrels and a chunky protruding magazine. They looked more like grenade launchers than regular firearms.

The fifth hoisted a truly massive weapon – an artillery piece with a core housing the size of a man’s torso. It took both hands to hold it and there was a grip over the main carriage. A loop of ammunition hung underneath, stiff and chain-linked.

That wasn’t all. They had blades. Some of them were like the short stabbing swords Khamed’s own men used, albeit twice as big. Others weren’t. Two of the giants carried massive rotary saws in their free hands, each one shaped like a gigantic broadsword.

Those weapons were ludicrous. Outsized, industrial-scale killing implements, dreamed up by some crazed enginseer and borne by superhumans. Khamed knew that he would have barely been able to lift one of those guns, and yet they hefted them lightly, one-handed.

He swallowed dryly. He also knew what was on the other side of the barrier.

‘Open the gate,’ he voxed.

And so the doors opened, grinding against metal, punishing old and arthritic gears, gradually exposing the chamber beyond and framing a window on to Hell.

II

Land Engine. Long for its class – a kilometre from sensorium fronds at the head to waste grinders at the arse. Vast, swaying, crowned with parapets of dusty smog that rolled down the side armour. Faint yellow lights studded weathered plate, tiny in the howling storm.

It rocked against the wind. Gigantic suspension coils flexed with the movement, supporting the thousands of tonnes of superstructure and its long, long train of drive mechanics, processing tracks, forges, crew habs and weapon banks.

All the time, the engines growled. On and on. They never stopped.

It was making good speed: 0.3 kilometres an hour, Medusan measures. The drives were operating noisily, making the floors tremble and shaking the black dust from the intakes.

Outside, it was blowing a gale, thick and black and grimy. There were voices on the wind, wailing.

On Medusa, it was always blowing a gale, thick and black and grimy. On Medusa, there were always voices on the wind.

Ahead of the Land Engine, the plain stretched away in a morass of cracks and sharp-stepped rock. On the far horizon, red lightning jumped down from the smogline.

Haak Rejn sat back in his metal lattice chair and rubbed his eyes. He felt the metal of his right optical implant snag on his skin.

There were picts around him in the sensorium chamber – a narrow control unit perched right out at the fore-left corner of the lead crawler unit. The screens were close-packed and flickering orange. Runes burned dimly, summarising feedback from the *Mordecai*’s seven thousand augur pinpoints. His implant helped him make sense of them.

It also gave him headaches. The implant burned the whole time, dull and hot. The damn thing was like a chunk of molten metal in his skull. But he didn’t complain. It had never occurred to him to complain. Neither had it occurred to him to complain when they’d flank-wired him into the lattice

chair, nor when the flesh of his thighs had withered away to straws from lack of movement, nor when he'd found he could no longer sleep except after a double shot of dousers and a course of binreflex exercises.

Very few people on Medusa saw the point in complaining. It wasn't that kind of place.

Something flickered on one of the picts. Rejn blinked blearily and reached over to it. He turned the gain up and calibrated his implant with it.

'Throne,' he swore, and ramped up the feed. 'Traak, you getting that?'

A thousand metres away, on the far side of the *Mordecai*'s lead unit, a commlink crackled into life.

'Yeah.' Traak's voice was sluggish, like he'd been trying to snatch a nap. 'I know what I'd like to think. Put a crawler down?'

'Good. I'm on it.'

Rejn's right hand, the one that could still move, worked the input vectors. His left, the one that terminated in a bunch of steel cables, twitched as his neural link communicated with the *Mordecai*'s Soul. It took a few moments for the protocols to clear.

Acknowledgement come back over the grid. From somewhere a long way down, he heard metal grind back against metal. There was a shuddering movement, and then a heavy crash. He switched to another pict, one that watched the port flank of the Land Engine's lead unit.

A hatch had opened near the base of the unit between two tread housings. A ramp extended from it, gouging a slow furrow in the rock below as it made contact.

A four-tracked crawler rolled down. Its angular, ugly frame rocked as it hit the plain. Exhaust columns belched black soot, and then it was off, lurching across the uneven surface.

Rejn switched to the crawler feed. Static rushed across the pict before clarifying. He saw the shape of a man resolve out of the blinding duststorm. The figure was still on his feet, leaning into the wind, limping badly. His ragged clothing was covered in plains-dust, making him look like so much charred meat.

The crawler reached his position and ground to a halt. The man staggered up to the back of it and hauled himself in. The crawler swung round and headed back to the ramp.

Rejn switched to an interior cam. The man was slumped in the corner of the crawler's load bay.

'Life signs,' ordered Rejn.

A series of indicators ran down his nearside pict. All low, all borderline viable.

Tough bastard. He'd make it, if they got him up to the medicae in time. Rejn punched the order into the grid and heard the click as the Soul

registered.

‘Any markings?’ asked Traak, no doubt looking at the same feed.

‘Not yet,’ said Rejn, zooming in and scanning across the dirt-streaked face. Whatever the man had been doing, it had nearly killed him. Half his storm armour had been ripped away. ‘He’s not one of ours.’

‘Can you patch an ident?’

‘Yeah, just give me a second, dammit.’

Rejn watched as the crawler came back onboard. He ran a request and got clearance for a deep scan. The augurs calibrated, and a line of laser red ran down the man’s body in a long sweep. The temple-stud got picked up and a fresh burst of data loaded on to the grid. Rejn looked at it carefully.

‘Anything?’

Traak was getting annoying.

‘Nothing to get excited about,’ replied Rejn, preparing to shunt the data up to medicae and close the crawler hatch. ‘Gramen clan, long way from home. Manus only knows what he’s doing out here.’

‘And a name?’

‘Morvox. Doesn’t mean much to me. You? Naim Kadaan Morvox.’

Land Engine. Smaller than the *Mordecai* but taller and more heavily armoured. It had no clan markings on the hull and its flanks were black. No lights blinked across the carapace, and the steep sided flanks were free of ore intake ramps.

As it inched its way across the desolate plain, the storm hammered uselessly against it. It didn’t sway.

Deep within the core, far into the sarcophagus of metal and rockcrete and machinery, there was a half-lit chamber, perfectly square. The floor was black stone. The walls were lined with an organic mass of piping. The roof was vaulted, crowned with an iron boss and studded with weak downlights.

A man knelt in the centre of the chamber. He was naked, and the light glistened from the sweat on his skin. His shaven head was lowered in submission. Around him were robed figures, tall and broad-shouldered. They wore metal masks.

The grind of engines made the walls tremble.

One of the robed figures stepped out. He looked down at the kneeling figure for a long time, saying nothing.

When he spoke at last, the voice did not match his huge frame. It was thin and flat, as if run through overzealous audio filters.

‘Of all the aspirants from Gramen, only you survived the trial of the plains. What lesson is there in this?’

The kneeling figure neither responded nor moved.

‘Well?’

‘I do not know, lord.’

‘There is no lesson. You are not chosen. You are not unique. Some years, none come back. Some years, many do.’

The kneeling figure kept his head down. His muscles trembled slightly from holding position. His physique was impressive – tight, lean flesh over a tall frame. There were many scars on that flesh. Fresh wounds too.

‘You may prosper in the trials to come. You may die from them. In all this, do not look for fate. Do not look for significance. There is only what functions and what does not.’

‘Yes, lord.’

The robed giant withdrew a long steel blade. It was not a fighting blade – too clean, too fragile. It had a look of a surgical instrument, albeit one with a ceremonial purpose.

‘You will learn this. You will learn that the path of your life is not unique. It has purpose only as part of a whole. You are an element within a system. You are a piece within a mechanism.’

The blade came closer. The kneeling man extended his left arm, holding it rigid before him, fist clenched. His head stayed bowed.

‘As time passes, you will see the truth of this. You will wish to discard those things that remind you of how you are now. You will forget that you were the only survivor of the trial. You will only remember the trial itself. You will remember the process. You will be the process.’

The giant kneeled in front of the naked man, and placed the blade against the flesh of the forearm, halfway between wrist and elbow. The cutting edge rested on the sweat-sheened skin.

‘This is the first mark of that process. Do you wish it to continue?’

The question was incongruous. The journey had already been started, and there were no choices left. Perhaps the question was a hangover from some older rite, a rite where personal determination had mattered more than it did now.

‘I wish it,’ came the response.

The blade pressed into the skin, carving deep. It slid to the right, leaving a clean cut in the muscle before slipping out. The man emitted the faintest intake of breath at the pain. Blood welled up quickly, thick and hot.

He was still mortal. His control was not yet perfect.

The giant stood up, letting the blood run down the blade, and withdrew.

‘That is the mark,’ he said. ‘That is where the greater cut will be made.’

The blade passed from view.

‘Rise, Aspirant Morvox. You are no longer what you were. From this point on, you will be a battle brother of the Iron Hands Clan Raukaan, or you will be nothing.’

III

The siege gates opened.

They exposed a long, wide hall beyond. It was almost totally dark, lit only by flares of orange gas from a broken supply conduit. The ceiling was lost in a writhing morass of gloomy mechanics. Bracing pillars, heavy columns of black iron, studded the rust-streaked floor.

They came out of the shadows, as if released by some soundless command. Dozens of them, bloated and chattering. Some hauled their distended stomachs along the ground, leaving trails of glittering pus in their wake. Others were emaciated, nothing more than sacks of leathery skin and splintered bone. Some of the bodies had fused together, creating sickening amalgams of men with multiple limbs, suppurating flesh and weeping organs hanging in chains. Some had talons, or bone outgrowths, or dull black teeth, or wickedly spiked spine ridges.

Only the eyes were the same on all of them. They glowed in the dark, lime green and as bright as stars. No pupils studded those eyes, just blank screens of eerie witchlight. As the gates opened to the full, the eyes narrowed. Faces, marked with fangs and hanging jaws and long lines of clumsy sutures, contorted into a mix of hatred and joy.

They scuttled into combat like spiders. They wanted it. What debased existence they possessed hungered for it in a way that they would hunger for nothing else ever again.

Khamed, still in the relative safety of the corridor outside the hall, watched them come, a weary sickness in his stomach. He'd been fighting those monsters for months. Every week, he'd fallen back a little further. Every week, a few dozen more of his men hadn't got back to the rally points in time.

And back then he'd always known that the next time he saw them the shambling horde would have more tattered grey uniforms hanging from hunched shoulders, and there would be more remnants of faces he recognised.

He gripped his sidearm with sweaty hands, keeping it in position, ready to go in again when the order came.

Then the Iron Hands got to work.

They didn't move fast. Khamed had heard that the Emperor's Angels could fight like daemons, hacking and whirling and tearing their foe apart in an orgy of destruction. These ones didn't. They walked out calmly, spreading out in front of the siege gates, opening fire from their massive weapons in long, perfectly controlled torrents.

Khamed just watched. The more he watched, the more he appreciated the truth of the legends he'd heard. For the first time in months, he dared to hope

that the Spire would be saved. It was then that he realised just how strange that emotion – hope – had become to him.

The giants' firearms were neither las-tech nor solid ammunition. Khamed realised what they were as soon as the first volley went off. The Iron Hands used explosive charges, primed to ignite on impact. The noise of their discharge was phenomenal. They maintained a withering wall of fire, tearing apart the oncoming ranks of walking dead in an orgy of slime and fluid. The muzzle flashes lit up the hall in a riot of sharp electric light, exposing the tortured faces of their victims in brief, snatched freeze-frames.

The heavy weapon that one giant carried two-handed thundered like nothing Khamed had heard before. Its operator, placed right in the centre of the squad formation, wielded it calmly, drawing the devastating column of destruction across the enemy in a slow, deliberate sweep.

The enemy were not just killed. They were obliterated, blasted apart, torn into tatters of flapping skin and powdered bone. Bitter experience had taught Khamed that you couldn't down them with a flesh wound – you had to take them out with a head-shot or knock their torsos into pulp. That wasn't a concern for the giants. They walked into the hall, methodically firing the whole time, laying down a maelstrom of destruction, not letting a single mutant get out of the path of their awesome, silent vengeance.

Then, suddenly, the deluge stopped. The echo of the massed volley died away. The hall sunk back into gloom. The Iron Hands remained poised to fire, their weapons held ready. They had advanced halfway across the space. Everything in front of them had been killed.

Khamed stayed where he was for a moment, ears ringing, stunned by what he had just witnessed. Then, cursing himself, he remembered his orders.

'Follow them in,' he snapped over the comm to his men. 'And look like you know what you're doing.'

He stepped over the threshold, sweeping his lasgun warily up and around. His boot nearly slipped and he looked down. The floor was covered in a thick carpet of bubbling sludge. It was moving. Some of it was bloody; some looked like sewage. An eyeball, swollen and yellow, floated past him, carried down into foaming drainage ducts by the current.

They'd been rendered down into soup. Flesh soup.

Ahead of him, the Iron Hands were calmly reloading. One of them took out what looked like a handheld sensor and tapped on it with a blunt armoured finger.

'Raef Khamed,' said Morvox. There was no inflexion there, nothing to indicate the extreme violence the giant had just unleashed. 'The area is cleansed. We will progress to Nodes 34, 45, 47 and then assess. Immolate this chamber and secure it. Deployment patterns are on the tac.'

'As you command, lord,' said Khamed, his voice sounding very quiet after

the wall of noise.

The Iron Hands hadn't waited for the acknowledgement. They pressed on, heading deeper into the dark reaches of the lower hive. Already, from far below, sounds of scratching and screaming were massing.

Namogh's voice crackled over the comm.

'You need backup, Jen?' he asked. His voice sounded worried. 'We've got a lot of static at your position.'

'No,' said Khamed, knowing that he sounded distracted and not really caring. 'No, maintain your position. I think we're good. Throne, I actually think we're good.'

It got harder. The lower levels had been dens of disease and corruption for years, and the mutants had had time to turn it into a paradise of pustulation.

The walls were alive with curtains of viscous slime. Growths burst out of air-con ducts, corpulent and luminous. Quasi-human mutants shambled up from the depths, heedless of their losses, jaws wide and ringed with filed-down teeth. They screamed like mockeries of children, stretching warped vocal cords beyond their tolerances. Khamed saw one grotesque long-necked mutant scream itself to a standstill, its throat overflowing with a bubbling cocktail of phlegm and clots. Morvox aimed a single shot and the creature's head exploded in a shower of sticky, whirling gobbets, silencing the shrill chorus from its owner.

As they descended, the layout of the tunnels changed. Ceilings closed in and walls narrowed. The slurry of excreta was ankle-deep at the best of times, knee-deep at the worst. There was no reliable light – just the sweeping lumen beams from helmets, exposing the breadth of the horror in fragmentary pools of surgical illumination.

Every mutant coming for them had once been a human inhabitant of the hive. Every contorted face had once run the full gamut of human laughs and tears. They had been technicians, lectors, machine operators, arbitrators.

No one knew exactly when it had started. The first signs had been small ones – increased workload at the medicae stations, reports of infection in the scholae, power-loss in the deep hive and rioting across the semi-policed hinterlands running out to the ore-plains.

The authorities hadn't been slow to act. Tralmo was sharp, and had never been negligent. There had been quarantines, shipments of antibiotics, blockades of crime-controlled sectors and curfews across the Ghorgonspire.

But by the time the 1324th lostari 'greyshirt' Imperial Guard had been mobilised to restore order, it was already out of hand. The situation had changed from a public health problem to a fight for survival, and so it had stayed for months.

They never got to the bottom of what had caused it. The originator was,

presumably, buried far down in the depths, squatting in the dark places under Ghorgonspire that had long been lost to the contagion. The Holy Emperor alone knew what was down there, pumping bile and energy into the ruined bodies of those it had corrupted.

Such speculation was useless. The Iron Hands moved with purpose. They punched through the ragged columns of mutants like a blade through rusty armour, tearing and burning and hacking and blasting. They never sped up, never slowed down. Step by step, metre by metre, they reclaimed lost ground, operating like silent golems of myth.

In their wake came the mortal troops, reinvigorated by the example they had in front of them. Exhausted lostari found the will to take the fight to the mutants. Volleys of lasfire suddenly found their marks more often. Objectives were isolated, taken and consolidated. With the indomitable example of the Space Marines in front of them, the 1324th lostari of Helaj V stood up, and found they were stronger than their desperation had made them believe.

They descended from level to level in orderly bursts of activity, clearing out connecting chambers of filth and pressing on into the tunnels beyond. Flamers came next, boiling off the stinking layers of slime and acid and charring the metal beneath. Obscene sigils were scored from the walls. Power was restored. The mark of the Imperium was reinstated.

At the forefront, as ever, were the Iron Hands, the Emperor's holy Angels of Death.

And as they killed in those terrible, industrial quantities, never had a moniker seemed so apt.

The eyes came out of the darkness as if swimming up from the frigid abyss. They swarmed, flocking at the invaders, locked into snarls and yells of utter mindless hatred. As they neared, limbs became visible. Limbs with hooks run through them, or stitches running down them, or iron pins shoved up under the necrotic skin and bulging like parasites.

Khamed shrugged off his tiredness and shouldered his lasgun. He moved smoothly, aping the frictionless methods of the Iron Hands who fought ahead of him, and drew a bead on the lead mutant.

He fired, and his las-beam cracked off, impacting between a pair of staring green eyes and cracking the skull into hemispheres.

Another kill.

And then he was moving again, marshalling his squad and pushing them forward. He swept his muzzle round, looking for mutants crawling across the roof or punching their way through sewer outlets.

They were deep down and the air was hot and seamy. No light existed save for the mess of helmet lumen beams, and every trooper was now on full infrared. The chamber was just like a hundred they'd already cleansed –

close, claustrophobic, stuffed with a crawling mass of suppurating terror.

It had ceased to matter. Khamed had begun to forget his life had ever involved anything different. The undead poured towards him, snapping fangs and loping on all fours into contact. He reacted passionlessly, efficiently, optimising his shots and taking time over the targeting. He could rely on the Iron Hands to take out the mass of them – he was there to mop up the stragglers and the outriders.

He swung round just as three skinny mutants, their bulbous heads bobbing on scrawny necks, bolted from cover and out toward the leftmost Space Marine of the Iron Hands squad. Each one was carrying heavy projectile weapons and let off a flurry of lead as they splashed through the ankle-deep lake of effluvium.

Khamed got his aim and fired, missing the lead mutant by a finger's width. In the time it took him to curse, wipe his eyes and re-aim, it was over.

The Iron Hand didn't seem to move fast. He seemed to move with the same unearthly, ponderous manner as his brothers. But, somehow, he got his weapon up and fired off a round before the mutants had taken another step. The bolt crashed through the neck of the first, tearing the muscles open and leaving the head lolling on stretched sinews like an amulet. It exploded in the chest of the second, blowing open a ravaged ribcage into splayed splinters.

Then the sword, the mad sword with its insane rotary blades, swept round in a heavy lash, whipping out sticky fluid from previous kills. The surviving mutant tried to dart under it, aiming to get close enough to use a rusty killing blade it held in its left hand.

The Iron Hand adjusted the weapon's descent and the sword whirred into the mutant's leading shoulder. It burrowed down, carving its way through diseased muscle bunches and flinging out gouts of boiling, frothing blood. The mutant screamed for a fraction of a second, locked in agony as the juddering blades ate through its bony frame and minced what was left of it into a marrow-flecked broth of body fluids.

The Space Marine hauled the sword free, breaking the ruined body of his prey into two pieces as it was withdrawn. Then he turned, implacable as ever, and kept on fighting.

He'd never said a word. He'd not changed a thing. No hurry, no fuss.

Nightmare machines.

Khamed laughed.

The Jenummari laughed as he brought his own weapon round and splashed through the filth, looking for new targets. It was a laugh of disbelief, a laugh of wonder that killers of such intensity existed in the universe. It was a laugh of fear, and of relief that they were on his side. He had last laughed six months ago, and the noise of it was unfamiliar in his parched throat.

'Keep up, you dogs!' he snapped over the comm.

He wasn’t scared anymore. His body pumped with adrenaline. He was beginning to enjoy himself.

That, of course, was his first mistake.

It was fast as well as strong. Its hide was pale brown, like old leather. It had four heavy arms, perhaps grafted on to the torso by some demented chirurgeon. Its face was long, stretched by weights nailed to its distended chin. The skin of its cheeks was ripped and weeping and its clustered eyes bled witchlight.

As it crashed through the slurry, it howled like a dog. Its hands clenched pairs of gouges, each dripping with virulent, glistening fluid. Long, lank hair flailed around it as it came, and trails of livid saliva hung down from a bloodstained jaw.

It veered sharply, crashing its way through a knot of its own warped kin. They were crushed underfoot as it came, trampled into the mix of blood and mucus that bubbled underfoot.

For once, the Space Marines missed the main target. They were all occupied, pinning back the tide of raging, screaming fury that hammered against them. Their guns slammed back into their armoured fists, spitting the surge of reactive rounds that cracked and boomed into the oncoming wall of corrupted flesh.

Khamed saw the mutant come in his direction, and the laughter died in his mouth. One of his men got a shot, and a las-beam whipped across it.

It didn’t drop. It launched itself into the close-packed press of lostari, limbs whirling, roaring a strangled cry of ecstasy and fury.

Khamed tried to swivel round to get an angle, but slipped. He crashed back to the ground, bracing himself with his free arm, only to see three of his men taken out by the mutant. It went for their throats, biting through the neck armour and shaking their limp corpses. Las-beams seared into it, ripping away whole strips of skin, but that didn’t slow it down much. It rampaged through the knot of men, shrugging off anything that hit it, scattering the survivors. Then it turned and saw Khamed.

It smiled.

The mutant leapt at him, all four arms extended. Khamed fired again, hitting it once in its massive chest. Then he was scrabbling back through the scummy fluid, desperately trying to clear some distance.

The mutant stumbled from the las impact, then regained its feet. It lurched down and grabbed Khamed’s trailing boot. Khamed felt the vice close around his ankle and thrashed to escape, kicking wildly.

He stood no chance. The mutant pulled him back savagely, gurgling, readying its blades for the plunge that would rip his stomach open. Khamed was wrenched back, dragged through the liquid and along the chamber floor.

Frothy slime splashed across his helmet, running across the visor and clouding it in a film of brown.

Khamed fired again, blindly, and heard the snap of the lasbeam as it shot harmlessly into the roof. Then the gun was knocked from his grasp. He tensed for the bite of the gouges, knowing that they would plunge low, right into his gut.

Then something huge exploded above him, throwing the slime up in waves. The grip on his ankle released. Khamed pulled himself out of the grime and shook the screen of filth from his visor.

The mutant was gone. Its lifeless body was crumpled up against the metal wall, pumping black blood solidly. In front of Khamed loomed an Iron Hand, filling his field of vision, vast, black and indomitable.

'Can you fight?' came the voice from behind the visor.

It wasn't Morvox. The tone wasn't as metallic, not as heavily filtered. It almost sounded human, albeit far more daunting and resonant than any human Khamed had ever encountered.

'Yes,' he said, shaking himself down and bending to retrieve his lasgun. 'Yes, I can.'

'Then do so,' replied the Space Marine, turning away from him and striding back to the main fighting. The chamber was still full of the sounds of combat. Fresh lostari were piling in to replace those felled by the mutant, but there was no sign yet of the horde of bloated horrors relinquishing the chamber. The clamour of bolter detonations, howls and screams just kept on going.

Khamed watched the Iron Hand go, his heart thumping hard. He realised his hands were shaking, and clenched his fists to stop it.

Then do so.

He hefted his lasgun again, checking to see if the fluids had interfered with the mechanism. The simple things helped.

'Very well,' he muttered, still trembling. He braced himself and looked for a target. 'I will.'

The noise of the assault died away. The Iron Hands began to move on, wading their way toward a long access shaft. They maintained the same pace as before, never speeding up, never slowing down.

The same punishing pace wasn't possible for the mortal troops. They needed rotations, rest periods, resupply and medicae treatment. After hours of fighting, almost without respite, Khamed's turn had finally come.

Namogh's force-signal flashed across his helmet display, indicating that he was moving into position to relieve him. Khamed turned to the Space Marine who had rescued him, still the closest to hand of the quintet. For some reason, it felt more natural to address that one than Morvox, who in any case had already stalked off into the dark ahead.

‘My deputy will provide fire support beyond this node,’ Khamed announced. His voice gave away his extreme fatigue. The adrenaline from the last encounter had drained away, leaving him feeling empty. ‘This detachment needs to rotate.’

The Space Marine turned to face him. His facemask was streaked with blood and bile, making him look even more grotesque than normal. There was a pause, possibly due to some internal comms between the squad.

‘We will maintain the assault,’ the Iron Hand replied. ‘Order relief forces to follow us down when they get here.’

The Space Marine turned to move off, then stopped. He looked Khamed up and down.

‘How long have you been on your feet?’

‘Fifteen hours, lord. The same as you.’

The Space Marine nodded slowly.

‘Fifteen hours.’ There was a strange noise from the vox grille. On a human, it might have been a laugh – a strange, attenuated snort. From one of the giants, Khamed wasn’t willing to assume anything.

‘We forget where we come from, sometimes,’ said the Iron Hand. The tone of voice was almost reflective. ‘You fought well, human. Tell the others they fought well.’

Khamed didn’t reply at once, stunned by the unexpected compliment. Then suddenly, from nowhere, encouraged by the unlikely candour from the Angel of Death, he dared to ask for more.

‘I will, lord,’ he said. ‘But I have no name to give them.’

Again, the noise. Perhaps irritation. Perhaps amusement. Perhaps warning.

‘Ralech,’ came the reply, before the Space Marine strode off to join his brother warriors. ‘Ralech Grond, Clan Raukaan, Medusa. Tell them that.’

‘He said that?’

Khamed nodded between gulps of stimm-laced water. He was enjoying Namogh’s expression – a cross between disbelief, horror and disapproval.

‘I don’t believe it.’

Khamed put the canteen down. He was sitting on an old iron crate, shoulders hunched and head low. He could already feel oncoming sleep crowding out his thoughts. The chamber was full of men, exhausted ones from his command being replaced with fresher ones under Namogh’s.

‘He was almost… normal.’

‘Crap.’

‘I’m telling you.’

Khamed watched the survivors of his platoon limp back up toward the transit shafts at the rear end of the chamber. Their armour was caked in filth and blood. Some couldn’t walk unaided and hung like sides of meat from the

shoulders of their comrades. He'd be joining them soon.

'I think they change,' said Khamed thoughtfully. 'The leader – Morvox – he's further down the road than the others. They forget.'

Namogh spat into the floor-slurry, and the spittle spun gently away toward the drain meshing.

'You've taken a hit, Jen,' he said, shaking his head. 'They don't feel nothing. They'd throw us into the grinder without a blink.'

'I'm not sure.'

'They ain't human.'

'Not now, no.'

'We're *nothing* to them. Just spare parts.'

Khamed looked up at his deputy. Namogh was as adamant as ever. His ugly face was twisted with distaste. There was anger there, to be sure, but also fear. Khamed couldn't blame him for that. The Iron Hands scared everyone, even the mutants.

'I don't want to believe that, Orfen,' said Khamed quietly. 'They are sons of the Emperor, just as we are. We fight together.'

'Crap. You're delusional.'

'But what changes them?' asked Khamed, ignoring Namogh. He remembered the way Grond's voice had sounded. 'Why do they change? I'd like to know that.'

IV

The knife went in, moving across the flesh of the arm, tracing a thin line of blood.

Morvox watched it. He had an almost uncontrollable urge to seize the nearest medicae servitor by its desiccated throat and slam it against the walls of the apothecarion.

That had been predicted. He fought the urge down. The hormones in his body, the ones introduced during the changes, made him belligerent in the face of injury.

The servitors carried on, heedless of the turmoil in their patient. They moved on tank tracks around the metal chair Morvox had been clamped into. Their faces were shiny curves of steel, dotted with sensoria. Their limbs were entirely augmetic and terminated in a dozen different surgical devices. They chattered to one another in a basic form of binaric. It was a soft, low clicking backdrop to their grisly work.

The skin was peeled back, exposing raw muscle. The ligatures below the

bicep tensed. The knives went in again, parting the muscle mass.

Morvox watched it happen. He watched the rotary saw whine through the bone. It had only just finished growing into its new, improved form. Amputating it seemed wasteful.

They broke the bones. He watched his hand fall away, clutched in the claws of a metal servitor. He watched the blood run out of the wrist, steaming as it cooled in its steel bowl. He watched sutures run across his severed forearm, rebinding the muscles and stabilising them. He watched the drills go in and the pre-augmetic bindings lock on to his broken bones.

There was hours of work to come. Rods would be implanted, running nearly up to his elbow. Braces would encircle the pronator, studding through the skin of his forearm. Neural relays would be dropped into place, and nerve-sockets, and tendon housings. And then, finally, they would drill in the new hand, the mark of his Chapter, the sign of fealty to the primarch and to the ideals of Medusa.

He would watch it all. The procedure was the mark of passage, the signal of his transition from mortal to superhuman. When it was complete, it would make him stronger. He knew this. It was fact, as revealed by Iron Father Arven Rauth, and so could not be doubted.

But, even though he knew it to be true, even as he watched the rods go in, bisecting the muscles that had kept him alive out on the ash plains, he did not yet believe it.

One day, like the Iron Father who had retrieved him from the trials, Morvox would not remember anything but the aesthetic imperative, the desire to purge the machine of the flesh that impeded it. One day, Morvox would no doubt pass on the ways of Manus to another, believing it with both hearts, no longer regretting the loss of a part of himself.

But not yet.

For now, he still felt it.

There were more trials. Long years as a neophyte, learning the ways of the Adeptus Astartes. A hundred worlds, all different, all the same.

He saw them first as a Scout, learning to use his enhanced body without the full protection of power armour. He enjoyed feeling his augmented muscles flex. He revelled in the strength of his new sinews. He could run for hours without fatigue, or lay in wait for days without the need for sustenance. He was a miracle, a scion of demigods.

The disquiet grew slowly. He noticed during an engagement with the greenskin how quickly his iron hand functioned, how elegantly it curled into a punching fist, how efficiently it was able to turn the cutting blade. He moved his close combat weapon to his left hand after that, trusting in its ability more than the natural flesh of the right.

It was after the Valan Campaign when he was elevated into the ranks of the Clan proper. His carapace protection was returned to the foundry and, for the first time, he was bolted into the hallowed shell of power armour. He remembered the cool touch of the interface nodes against his carapace, how the ceramite skin worked in such perfect conjunction with his own.

He remembered the first time the helm was lowered over his face, sealing him off from the universe in a cocoon of dense protection. He remembered how it made him feel. He flexed the gauntlets, watching the ceramic plates move over one another, watching the artificial perfection of the curves.

'What do you feel?' came a familiar voice.

Morvox looked at Rauth. His vision was mediated by the datastream of the helm's lensfeed.

There were a number of answers to the question. He felt powerful. More powerful than he had ever been. He felt honoured, and unworthy, and impatient for the next engagement. He felt all of these things.

'I feel…' he began, looking for the right words.

The Iron Father waited patiently, locked behind his own mask.

'I feel… imperfect,' said Morvox, landing at last on what he wanted to say. He looked down at his left hand and his emotions clarified. 'I feel flawed.'

Rauth nodded.

'Good,' he said.

Medusa was a planet of scarcity, of wastes, of darkness. Mars was a planet of wonder, of abundance, of dull red light that bled from a horizon of a million foundries.

The translation took several months, during which time Morvox trained incessantly. He read the rites of the Machine over in his mind until the words cycled in his sleep, burning themselves on to his unconscious mind like a brand. He learned the lore given him by the Iron Father perfectly, making full use of the eidetic function he'd possessed since his mind had been transformed. By the time he'd arrived, he felt almost prepared for what awaited him. All that remained was anticipation.

As the drop-ship fell steadily through the thin atmosphere, Morvox watched the landscape resolve into detail beneath him. Every metre of surface was covered in an industrial landscape of dark iron, belching red smoke from soaring towers. Structures ran up against each other like jostling herd beasts, massive and obscure. He could see transit tubes run across the face of gigantic factories like arteries on a flayed corpse.

The drop-ship flew low on its approach vector. It passed huge trenches, alive with glittering light, glowing at their bases from the magma that pooled there. There were clusters of cyclopean refineries, dark and shrouded in boiling walls of smog. Huge areas looked semi-derelict. Fields of tarnished

steel ran away toward the horizon, marked by trenches and studded with arcane citadels. There were cages, each the size of a hive spire, within which vast war machines – superheavy vehicles, Titans, even starships – were being slowly assembled.

As the drop-ship slowed its descent ready to be received by its iron docking cradle, Morvox had a final glimpse of the Martian landscape at close quarters. Every surface was covered in a layer of red dust. The metal beneath was near black with age and corrosion. Nothing living was visible. Everything was ostentatiously artificial.

Morvox thought it was beautiful.

The vessel came to rest, and the airlock doors hissed open. Beyond them was a cavernous hall lit by long red strips of subdued neon. The air was dry and tanged with rust. The sound of hammering echoed up from deep vaults.

A single figure waited for him. It was human – of a sort. Deep green robes covered what looked like a skeleton of plasteel. No face was visible under the cowl, just a long iron snout from which wheezing breath issued.

Morvox's helm feed added extra information. He knew that the figure's rank was Magos, and that her name had been Severina Mavola on accession to the priesthood in 421.M38. He knew that her body was now 67 percent augmetic and that she hadn't communicated verbally for nearly a century.

He also knew that she had once written poetry in the manner of Hervel Jho, but doubted that she retained the capacity. Service to the Machine God demanded nothing less than full commitment.

+Naim Morvox,+ she canted in Martian-accented binaric. +Be welcome to Mars. I trust your journey was efficient.+

Few non-Mechanicus personnel could communicate directly with a Magos when they chose to speak natively, instead relying on intermediaries or translating cogitators.

The Iron Hands however, as in so many other ways, were different.

+Most efficient, Magos,+ he replied. +I am eager to learn.+

Mavola motioned for him to join her.

+You wish to become Iron Father,+ she said, walking with him into the colossal hall. Her gait was smooth, giving no trace of the artificial nature of her musculature. +You know the process will be arduous.+

+If it were not, it would not be worth aspiring to.+

+You will be on Mars for ten years. In those years, many of your battle brothers will lose their lives. When you return, Medusa will be a changed place.+

+I know this.+

The Magos stopped walking. Behind her, a vast caldera boiled with molten metal. Servitors, some as large as Sentinel walkers, laboriously tilted it over, ready for the casts below to be filled.

+We will show you mysteries that we show no other Chapter of the Adeptus Astartes. We extend this privilege in honour of Manus. Know now that the value of the instruction is almost without price.+

Morvox looked at her carefully.

+Almost?+

Mavola didn't elaborate. She turned on her heel, and resumed her fluid walk across the hall.

+Come now,+ she said. +To the forges.+

When he returned to Medusa, almost eleven years after he'd left, it was as the Magos had warned him. Clan Raukaan had experienced a decade of near-constant action, and many faces he'd known well had been gathered into the Emperor's Rest. Iron Father Arven Rauth was now Clan Commander.

To replace losses in the ranks, new aspirants had been inducted from across the planet throughout the decade. Morvox was escorted to his appointment with Rauth by one of them, a raw recruit named Ralech Grond. The youth still had his natural hand intact and almost no sign of augmetics. Morvox couldn't decide whether he envied that or not.

Once Grond had left them, Morvox and Rauth stood alone in the inner sanctum of the Land Engine *Diomedes*. Both wore their armour, though the commander's skull was bare, revealing a pattern of steel markings across the synthetic skin like a circuit board.

'The training was successful?' he asked.

'As I judge it, lord. The Mechanicus reports are on the grid.'

'Much modification?'

Morvox raised his right arm. The ceramite of his vambrace slid back, exposing a deep well within. It looked like the entire forearm had been hollowed out and lined with nanotronics. Rauth examined it carefully.

'Unusual,' he said. 'What purpose did they have in this?'

Morvox withdrew the arm. As he did so, the covering clicked shut. From the outside, there was no indication that his right limb was anything other than normal.

'They did not tell me.'

'Nothing at all?'

'No. I assume it will become apparent.'

Rauth nodded.

'They do nothing randomly. Anything else?'

'No. I am ready to serve. It has been too long since I wielded weapons on the field. I'm eager to employ my new aptitudes.'

'You are not Iron Father yet,' warned Rauth.

'I know. On the day I left Mars, I asked for the Magos's prediction of when that day would come. She gave me a definite answer.'

Rauth's eyebrow raised. It was a curiously human gesture on a generally

expressionless face.

‘She told me I had incurred a debt on Mars,’ said Morvox. ‘They do not give up their secrets for free. A time will come when that debt must repaid. Only then will I earn the rank – at least in their eyes.’

‘Presumptive of them. What kind of debt?’

Morvox looked down at his hands. Both were metal now, as was much of the rest of his limb structure. That ongoing augmentation would only accelerate now. He was beginning to forget his life out on the plains, back when he’d been nothing more than human muscle and blood. All that remained was the process, the long march to perfection, just as he’d been warned.

‘I do not know,’ he said.

V

Time was measured by chrono in the lower hive. There was no daylight to announce the dawn and no nightfall to bring the days to a close – just the endless cycle of artificial light, delivered via grimy lumens and flickering pict screens.

Except that these were all smashed now. In their absence, the deep dark was oppressive and eternal. The troops measured time in shifts, in hours-long assaults on the enemy. Only the chronos, ticking away like heartbeats in the dark, recorded the time they’d been down there.

Four days, Helaj-medium, before they encountered the beast. Four days of back-breaking slog and grind. More men died during those four days than had died in the last month of attritional defence.

The assault was driven by the Iron Hands and there was no respite. They fought their way down the transit shafts, clearing them with flamers before sending grenades down into the squealing hordes. Then the boltguns would open fire, tearing the corroded flesh of the mutant into scraps and strips of bloody pulp. The Iron Hands waded through seas of grasping hands, carving through them with the chainswords. They went in close, using those massive armoured gauntlets to choke the half-life from their prey. They stayed long, using ranged fire to blow out kneecaps or crack open skulls. Whatever the tactic, the result was the same.

In their wake came the lostari, the ragged, exhausted mortal defenders of Helaj, mopping up in the aftermath and killing whatever got around the spearhead. The rotations began to blur and timekeeping slipped, but they kept stumbling onward, deeper and deeper, down toward the heart of the sickness.

Khamed was rarely away from the heart of the action, despite the need for down-periods. The more he fought, the more he watched the Space Marines fight, the more he hated to be away from the front. He could see why myths built up around such warriors. For the first time, the panegyrics on the grid seemed less than ludicrous. All the fear, the terrible fear that he'd suffered since learning that it was to be the Iron Hands responsible for the purging of Ghorgonspire, had gone. It was replaced by a wary awe.

Sure, they looked grim and sounded worse. They fought without pause or pity, but those were the qualities demanded by the task. They spoke rarely and had little patience for mortal weakness, but Khamed couldn't blame them for that. If he'd been in their position, he'd have felt the same way.

He managed to stay close to Grond. They exchanged few words during the engagements – just enough to keep the linked forces in coordination. Morvox seemed to have delegated responsibility for mortal-liaison to the lower-ranked Space Marine, which suited Khamed fine. Though Grond's huge presence could never have been mistaken for merely human, at least he sounded slightly like one.

Perhaps that was an illusion. Perhaps what lay under that facemask was nothing but gears and diodes.

But Khamed didn't believe that. Not entirely.

The purging of a narrow hab-block had been completed and the flames were dying down. The empty doorways of the hab-units gaped like maws. As Khamed and Grond strode toward the far end of the main access corridor, their boots crunched through a floor of powdered bone.

'My deputy still resents your presence here,' Khamed said.

Grond didn't reply. His armour was covered in a thick layer of filth. In proper light, it would have been a dirty brown.

'He's heard… stories,' continued Khamed, knowing he was pushing his luck. 'He mentioned Contqual.'

Did the Space Marine break stride, just a fraction, then? Maybe not. Hard to tell.

'He said you killed one in three. After the fighting was over. Is that true?'

Grond kept walking for a while, then stopped. His massive armoured head turned slowly.

'Suppose it were true,' said Grond. 'Would you disapprove, human?'

Khamed looked up at the facemask, guessing he'd pushed things too far.

'I wasn't there.'

'No. You weren't. You are here. Do not concern yourself with other worlds. They are the Emperor's concern, and ours.'

The tone was cold. Khamed instantly regretted his question. He felt ashamed and foolish.

‘I’m sorr–’

Grond held his hand up. For a moment, Khamed thought the gesture was something to do with him. Then he realised the Iron Hand was listening to something on his internal comm.

‘Prepare your men,’ ordered Grond, resuming his stride toward the hab-block access corridor.

Khamed scurried to catch up with the Space Marine.

‘What is it?’

‘Objective. Morvox has found it.’

Two levels down, and the air was hot and wet. Rebreathers wheezed against the filmy low-oxygen mix, struggling as particulates clogged the intakes. Slime was everywhere, coating the walls completely and obscuring whatever patterns had once been on the metal. The surface shone pale green where the lumen beams swept across the viscous matter, studded with bleeding sores.

They had to fight all the way down. Mutants had clustered tightly in the narrow access routes, and fought with a redoubled fervour. They hurled themselves on the blades of the Iron Hands, perhaps hoping to bring them down through weight of numbers.

The Space Marines maintained the pace as they always did, striding calmly into the onslaught, firing without pause. Bolters blazed, ripping holes in the torrent of diseased bodies. Screams echoed down the long corridors, throaty and gargled with phlegm. Khamed’s men came in their wake, backing up the main advance and picking out anything that somehow escaped the rage of bolter rounds.

Smaller mutant breeds scampered and darted through the hail of fire, eyes alive with feral hatred and teeth bared. Khamed saw one spring from the bile-cloaked shadows and launch itself at one of his men. He took the shot and watched it slam into the far wall. There was a sickening squelch as the diminutive body plunged into the mucous layer and slid down into the bubbling miasma below.

Khamed tried not to notice the residual pigtails clinging to the otherwise clean-plucked skull, nor the tattered remnants of its dress flap weakly before it was swallowed by the filth.

They kept going. Step by step, they carved their way through the mob. And then, finally, they reached the heart of it.

A huge chamber opened up before them. Khamed knew what it was from the schematics – an old Mechanicus bunker, long disused even when the hive had been functioning normally. It was down in the heart of the underhive, one of the many forgotten relics of a distant past. Once, perhaps, there had been Tech-priests there, doing whatever it was they did in their strange sanctums of industry.

Now it had all been changed. The high roof throbbed with pulsating veins of lurid bile-fluid. The expansive hexagonal floorspace swam with lapping slurry. Lines of what looked like saliva hung down in loops and the air drifted with tiny spinning spores.

Ranks of mutants splashed towards them, all distorted into lumpen, bloated bags of stretched-tight skin. They staggered into combat carrying rusted shards of metal or looted lasguns, howling in a mix of lust and agony, stumbling over one another in their haste to reach their foes.

But that wasn't what held Khamed's gaze.

'Hold your nerve!' he roared over the comm.

Around him, his men lined up and picked their targets. Las-fire cracked across the chamber, prompting fresh screams and gurgling cries.

The mutants began to tumble into the slime as they were felled. But they weren't the primary target any more. They were so much chaff, so much fodder. The real reason they were there reared up behind them.

It was massive. It filled the far end of the chamber and its vast, blubbery body ran up against the walls. The skin was translucent. Growths were visible beneath it, pulsing in sacs of pus. It was shaped like some obscene grub, warped and malformed into a veritable mountain of trembling, glistening flesh.

A face, sore-encrusted and sloppily fat, perched atop slick folds of blubber. It was still vaguely human, though its features were distorted horribly – a single eye stared out from a muscle-white face, red-rimmed and weeping. The mouth opened far wider than it should have done, exposing concentric rings of teeth and a huge, lashing tongue.

Many limbs extended from the mass of that expanded torso, some shaped into tentacles with grasping suckers, others twisted into claws. As the Iron Hands advanced towards it, the limbs lashed out, grappling for purchase.

It stank. Even through his helmet's filters, Khamed nearly choked on the stench. With his eyes streaming, he did his best to direct his troops. The creature screamed like its progeny, though the sound was even more disturbing – high and unearthly in a bizarre mockery of a woman's voice.

Khamed saw Grond go in, flanked by his battle-brothers. There was no hesitation. The Iron Hands plunged in close, firing the whole time from their bolters, stabbing holes in the vast flank of the obese monster. The translucent skin shook and burst as the bolts went off. Yellow liquid shot out from the wounds, thick and steaming. It cascaded down the black armour of the Space Marines, washing off the patina of days like a deluge of acid.

'Follow them in!' bellowed Khamed, feeling his heart beating like a drum.

He was scared. He could feel his muscles tensing up, locked into stiffness. Panic welled up in his gullet, and he fought to keep it down. The monster in front of him radiated such a wave of sickness that it nearly dragged him down

into it.

He gritted his teeth, knowing his men would all be feeling the same. This was what the Iron Hands had come to show them. The horror could be fought.

'For the Emperor!' he cried, swinging his lasgun round and cracking off another beam. It hit an oncoming mutant in the face and ripped its cheek away, exposing rotten sinews and bone. 'Fight, you dogs! Fight!'

The Iron Hands had closed in by then, and the swords came out. The blades shone in the darkness, lit up by disruptor fields. For the first time, the Space Marines' movements broke from uniformity. They span on their ankles, shifting to evade the lash of the tentacles, before chopping through the curtains of flab. They remained silent, working with cool expertise, moving their limbs with exactitude.

The beast was the first opponent capable of truly contesting their will. It raged against them, flailing and whipping. One of the Space Marines was slammed back on to its back by a lightning jab from the claws. It crashed to the floor, rolling across the slime before coming to a halt. The mutants were on it in a second, hacking and chopping.

The Iron Hand powered back to its feet, scattering the corrupted bodies around it as it rose. The bolter juddered as it was drawn around in a tight arc, blasting the mutants to slivers. Then he charged back into contact with the beast, just as silent as before, just as implacable. By then two more of the Iron Hands had been forced on to the defensive, rocked by the furious response from the bloated horror before them.

Khamed advanced cautiously, maintaining a steady rate of fire. His entire platoon was in the chamber, and the flicker of their las-beams lit the walls up. For the first time, it felt like his contribution might make a difference. The horde of lesser mutants began to thin out, exposing the monster at their heart.

'Aim for… that!' he roared, striding through the clinging fluid and feeling it slop over the lip of his boots.

The thicket of las-beams concentrated, cracking against the beast's hide and puncturing the wobbling epidermis. It wailed under the barrage. The las-beams alone would have done little to trouble it, but combined with the fury of the Iron Hands bolter fire and bladework, they had an effect.

The downed Space Marines cut themselves free. One of them – Morvox, perhaps – fought his way up to the folds of neck-flesh, slicing and plunging with his crackling energy weapon. Another took the killing claws off the end of a tentacle with a savage swipe from his sword.

Slowly, purposefully, they were killing it. Barbs snapped out, wrapping around necks and limbs, but they were snapped off. Bile streamed from the beast's mouth, acidic and searing. It splattered against the hard armour and cascaded to the floor in fizzing lumps. The heavy bolter kept up its drumming, thunderous roar, punctuated by staccato bursts from the sidearms.

The residual mob of lesser mutants was beginning to lose cohesion. They blundered around, no longer advancing with any purpose.

‘Pick your targets!’ shouted Khamed. ‘Headshots! Maintain barrage on the beast! Do not give–’

Then it happened. The skirts of flesh shrunk back, withdrawing into a shivering kernel. The screaming reached a fresh crescendo of hate-laced desperation. The beast thrashed around in its death-agony, jaws splayed and bleeding, tentacles writhing. It bled from a thousand wounds, each of them pouring with jelly-like tumours. The bolts kept punching into it. The blades kept biting, crackling with disruptor energy.

Its face went white. Its eye stared wildly, straining from the single socket. Veins stood out from the white skin in a lattice of purple, throbbing and tight with incipient destruction.

For a second longer, it still burned in agony.

Just a second.

Then it exploded. The beast blew itself apart, rocking the structure above and around it to the core. A tide of rubbery flesh rolled out like a breaking wave, surging across the chamber and rushing up the walls. Greasy, fist-sized hunks of gristle peppered the chamber. Flaps of skin sailed into the air, trailing long lines of sputoid blood and plasma. Semi-formed organs sailed high, falling apart in mid-air and breaking into slabs of quivering muscle.

Khamed was knocked from his feet by the storm, just like the rest of his men. He crashed on his back, felled by a rain of slapping body parts. He hit the filth hard and body-hot fluid ran through the chinks in his armour.

Repelled, he staggered back to his feet, shaking himself down. He wiped his visor and dirty streaks of red ran across it.

Ahead of him was a crater of gelatinous meat, laced with sticky globules of nerve-endings and lymph-nodes. It shivered as the fluid cascaded over it, running over the floor and swaying with the current.

And amid the ruin of the beast, the five Iron Hands stood. Their armour dripped with sludge. Their guns were silent. For the first time in days, the howls of the mutants were gone. The only sound was the echo of the explosion and the slap and gurgle of the gore-tide as it ran against the walls.

Khamed watched them, feeling the weakness in his overtired limbs.

‘Throne,’ he whispered, hardly daring to believe it. ‘Throne of Earth.’

Khamed looked around him. His men – those that had survived – were dead on their feet. All were exhausted. A few had collapsed into the foul water and stayed there. Despite that, despite everything, most of the rest carried themselves with more pride that at any time over the past six months. They knew what they’d achieved.

Khamed let a smile crease across his grimy face.

‘Namogh,’ he voxed, hoisting his lasgun over his shoulder. ‘Get your grunts down here.’

‘Progress?’ came the reply. He sounded worried.

‘Pretty good. Fast as you can.’

Khamed killed the link and limped over to where the Iron Hands were congregating. All five of them were still standing in the centre of the beast’s gigantic cadaver. Four of them, Grond included, were calmly reloading their weapons. The fifth, Morvox by the look of his armour, had waded deeper into the slough of burned flesh and was rummaging around in the heap of entrails and fluid.

‘You have our thanks, lord,’ said Khamed, coming up to Grond and smiling broadly. ‘We could not have done this without you.’

Grond didn’t turn to face him. He was looking intently at Morvox. They all were. Intrigued, Khamed followed their gaze.

After some more searching, the Sergeant seemed to find what he was looking for. He straightened up, clutching something in his left hand.

It was a tube, formed from dark metal. Khamed couldn’t make much out in the dim light – it was less than twenty centimetres long, blunt and rounded at the ends. There were markings on it, but nothing he could make out clearly.

Morvox turned back and strode toward them. As he did so, the armour of his right forearm opened. The vambrace panel came apart in two halves, exposing an empty space where the limb should have been. Morvox stowed the tube inside the receptacle and closed the shell of ceramite over it again.

Khamed frowned. For some reason, he felt suddenly worried. There had been no mention, at any time, of a mission to retrieve an object from the underhive.

‘What is this, Grond?’ he asked.

The Iron Hand didn’t reply. Morvox spoke instead.

‘Our task is complete, mortal,’ came the metallic voice, as eerily thin as ever. ‘Our ship has been summoned from orbit. The cleansing is over.’

For a moment, Khamed didn’t believe what he was hearing. He stumbled over his response.

‘But, with respect, lord–’ he began. As the words left his mouth, his earlier euphoria was replaced with a cold dread. ‘There are hundreds of mutants left alive. We have cleansed less than half of what we came for. There may be more such beasts. We need you.’

Morvox’s dark facemask loomed over him. Khamed suddenly realised that the other Iron Hands were all facing him. They said nothing. They were like images in a cathedral, cold and dead.

‘You make demands on us now, human?’ Morvox asked. There was no emotion in the question, but somehow it conveyed a sense of absolute, utter menace.

Khamed swallowed, and felt his fists clench uselessly. He felt ridiculous, like a child stealing in on some adult affair and demanding attention. Stubbornly, from somewhere, he found the will to protest.

'No demands,' he said, disgusted at how timorous his voice sounded. 'But, lord, we cannot defeat the enemy that still remains. You cannot leave us now.'

'You speak as if your battle here is the only concern we have. You know nothing of the war that burns across the galaxy. You know nothing of the demands on us. If you wish to be worthy of preservation, then guard this ground. The Emperor protects those who resist.'

Then Morvox pushed past him and began to stalk back the way he'd come, back through the thousands of shafts and chambers and up into the inhabited zones. One by one, his squad turned to follow him.

Khamed watched them go in desperation. He knew, just as they surely did, that for them to leave now was little short of murder. The mutants would rally. Mortal troops alone were no match for the horrors that still squatted in the underhive – something that had been proved time and again over the past six months.

'Grond!' he cried, reaching out to clutch at the Iron Hand who had saved his life. 'You cannot mean this! The Spire can be cleansed! Do not leave us. Mercy of the Emperor, do not leave us!'

Grond looked at him just once. Khamed stared up into the softly reflective surface of the helm's lenses. He realised then that he had no idea what kind of creature existed behind that mask. No idea at all.

'Can you fight?' asked the Space Marine.

The question needed no answer. Khamed knew what the responses were. Perhaps Grond had tried to warn him of this the first time he'd asked it. The Iron Hands only cared about strength.

Namogh had been right. Old, cynical Namogh.

Khamed hung his head, and let his hand slip from the Space Marine's arm. He could already hear scrabbling from the levels below. The mutants were stirring again.

Grond strode off to join his battle brothers, not giving Khamed another glance. All five of them walked past the lostari in the chamber, ignoring the looks of disbelief from the human troops. Their heavy footfalls gradually receded as they passed through the connecting chambers and headed on up.

Khamed only raised his head when Namogh's squad burst into the chamber.

'What the hell's going on?' demanded the deputy. 'We just marched past your beloved Space Marines, and they're all going the wrong–'

He stopped short. Perhaps something in Khamed's empty expression told him all he needed to know.

'We're on our own,' said Khamed, and his voice was hollow.

For a moment, Namogh was lost for words. He looked at Khamed, then back at where the Iron Hands had gone, then back at Khamed.

‘Those… bastards,’ he spat. ‘Those damned… bastards.’

The troops in the chamber, all of whom had heard the exchanges with Morvox, began to disintegrate. Some collapsed, empty-eyed and limp. Others started weeping. None of them ran. They knew there was nowhere to go.

Namogh managed to get a lid on his fury, and fixed Khamed with an urgent glare. His indignation made him speak too fast.

‘What are we going to do, Jen?’ he blurted. ‘What are we going to tell Tralmo? What the hell am I going to tell my men? Holy Terra, what are they thinking, running out now? Why the hell come here, if they didn’t intend to finish this thing off? What’re we going to do?’

Khamed only half listened. He had no answers. He could hear the first screams of fury and lust from the tunnels below. The mutants were coming already. Soon they would be in the chamber, rushing through the slime, eyes shining with hatred.

Khamed felt a deep, horrifying weariness suffuse his limbs. His whole body ached. He’d pushed himself to the limit, and there was nothing left to give.

We’re nothing to them. Just spare parts.

‘Gather your men,’ he said, unhoisting his lasgun and checking the charge. ‘We’ll make a stand three levels up. Call in the reserves – if we can get the siege doors closed, we might hold some ground for a while.’

Namogh looked at him as if he were mad.

‘You think we’ll hold them? You really think we stand any kind of chance? What’s different this time?’

Khamed shook his head grimly.

‘Nothing’s different, Orfen,’ he said. ‘Nothing. Except, perhaps, for one thing.’

He looked away, past the stinking morass of the beast’s carcass and down the tunnels beyond. He could feel the tide of unreasoning madness building down there. He knew it would not respect defiance. It respected nothing. It would just keep on coming.

Can you fight?

‘I now know how the universe operates, my friend,’ he said bleakly. ‘For a while, I had dared to hope otherwise. I believed that this place might have some significance for them. That we might.’

He laughed bitterly.

‘Better to die knowing the truth, do you not think?’

VI

The probe made a 98-percent efficient descent from orbital platform 785699 to the receiving station in sector 56-788-DE of Forge 34 Xanthe manufactorium-schola-astartes. The statistics were logged on the grid and interpreted by the usual team of lexmechanics, after which three anomalies were corrected and allowed for, resulting in a two percentage point increment, to the satisfaction of all involved.

From the docking claw, the contents of the probe were conveyed by servitor nineteen levels down, past the major foundry zones and into the dense ganglia of shrines known colloquially in the sector as 1EF54A.

The cargo was transferred to Tech-Priests after a soak-test for data contagion and wrapped in three layers of soft dust-repelling cloth. The mark of the Machine God had been embroidered on the material in gold thread.

Thus clad, it went through six further pairs of hands, only two of which had any organic flesh left on the bones. More tests were performed, and ledgers filled out, and records made for the core lists.

Then, finally, the cargo reached its destination. It came to rest on an obsidian tabletop in a room lit by dark red tubes. For a long time, it lay there alone, untroubled and untouched.

Several local days later, Magos Technicus Yi-Me, once called Severina Mavola, entered the chamber and carefully unwrapped it. A tube lay at the centre of the cloth, its glossy surface reflecting the light of the lumens.

Yi-Me studied it for a long time. She use her basic optical replacements, as well as seventeen additional sensors built into her plasteel cranium.

Deep within her, in a part of her body that had remained relatively unchanged throughout all the years of biosurgery, a sensation of deep pleasure blossomed. If she’d still had lips, she would have smiled.

The artefact was powerful. Powerful, if the initial readings were confirmed, beyond even her expectations. It would certainly suffice for the task she had in mind, and perhaps for many more in the years ahead. Lucky, that it had been discovered. Lucky, also, that it had proved possible to retrieve.

She bowed her head, silently acknowledging the service rendered by the one who had once been her pupil.

+Debt paid,+ she canted, knowing he couldn’t hear her, but enjoying the irony of addressing him nonetheless. Such tropes were a staple of the Jho school, something she still appreciated. +Naim Morvox, Iron Father: debt is paid in full.+

A hundred worlds. All different, all the same.

As I bring the light of the Emperor to each of them, knowing that every foe I face could me the one that ends me, a single encounter remains prominent in my thoughts.

Helaj V, the Ghorgonspire. I remember the mortal there, the one named Raef Khamed. Even in sleep, sometimes, I see his face.

He expected much of us, once he had forgotten to fear. We could never match that expectation, not if we had eternity to accomplish the task and infinite resources to bring to bear.

Even so, I left the planet troubled. I never discussed it with Morvox. He would not have tolerated dispute from me, and that was before he was Iron Father. It seemed to me that our task was not finished, even though the objective was secured and our goals satisfied.

I remember how the mortals fought. I remember how they rose up when we were with them. Back in the warp, where dreams are ever vivid, I heard them plead for us to return. Or perhaps I heard their screams.

We never went back. I do not know what fate befell them. Maybe they prevailed. Maybe they were lost.

For many years, that troubled me.

Now, it does not. I understand what Morvox was doing. He had been purged of sentiment by then, just as I will be. He saw the greater pattern, and followed it. Such is the galaxy we inhabit. Resolve will preserve us; sentiment will see the light of humanity extinguished.

And so we allow ourselves to become this thing. We allow ourselves to become the machine. We are the result of a necessity, of the process.

The alternative is weakness.

I see this now. I see the truth of what I have been told by Morvox. Perhaps Helaj was the last time that I doubted. I am stronger now. I feel the imperfection within me, and long to purge it. In time, Emperor willing, I will go to Mars and learn the mysteries, just as he did.

Not yet. For now, there is too much of my old self, my old corruption. The flesh remains, impeding the progress of the machine.

I still feel the ghost of my old hand, the one they took away to mark my ascension into Raukaan. Far less, it is true, but I feel it nonetheless.

I wish never to feel it again. I wish to forget the face of Raef Khamed, to forget that there is hope and disappointment in the universe.

This is my task, the reason for my existence, and nothing else will suffice. I will work at it. I will persevere. I will purge the weakness of the flesh.

I will be Ralech Grond, Iron Hand, or I will be nothing.

EVEN UNTO DEATH

Mike Lee

The Wolf Scouts flew like spectres down the dark, tangled paths of the forest, their heightened senses keen as a razor's edge. Red moonlight shone along the edges of their blades, and death followed in their wake.

Guttural howls and roaring bursts of gunfire rent the night air all around them, echoing off the boles of the huge trees. The orks were everywhere, boiling up from hidden tunnels like a swarm of ants and crashing through the undergrowth in search of the Space Wolves. With every passing moment the cacophony of noise seemed to draw more tightly around the small pack of Space Marines, like a shrinking noose. Skaflock Sightblinder tightened his grip on his power sword and led the Wolf Scouts onward, racing for the landing zone some fifteen kilometres to the east.

Ork raiders had been terrorizing the worlds of the Volturna sector since the end of the Second Battle of Armageddon, slaughtering tens of thousands of the Emperor's faithful and putting entire continents to the torch. Their leader, a warlord known as Skargutz the Render, was as cunning as he was cruel. He never lingered too long on any world, pulling back his forces and retreating into the void before help could arrive. The Imperial Navy was left to chase shadows, and with every successful raid the warlord's reputation – and his warband – grew in stature. When the orks struck three systems in as many years, the sector governor appealed to the Space Wolves for aid. A rapid strike team was assembled and slipped stealthily into the sector. Fast escorts patrolled likely targets, waiting for the call to action. Skaflock and his men had been on one such frigate, the *Blood Eagle*, when astropaths on the forge world of Cambion reported that they were under attack. They and nearly a dozen other small packs of scouts had been unleashed onto the world via drop

pods, to pinpoint enemy positions for the lightning assault to come. The scouts had slipped close to scores of landing sites and ork firebases, leaving behind remote-activated designator beacons that would allow the fleet to unleash a devastating initial bombardment within moments of arrival.

The operation had gone according to plan, right up to the point the fleet reached orbit and the initial assault wave began its drop. Then everything went to hell.

The night air trembled beneath the roar of huge turbojets as a Thunderhawk gunship made a low-altitude pass over the forest, but the assault craft held its fire, unable to tell friend from foe in the darkness below. Skaflock bit back a savage curse and tried his vox-caster again, but every channel was blanketed in a searing screech of manufactured noise. He had little doubt that the fleet couldn't pick up the designator beacons through the intense vox jamming, it was even possible that their surveyors were blind as well. He couldn't reach the fleet, much less the assault force his team was supposed to link up with; everyone had been cut off. Instead of catching the ork raiders unawares, they had stepped into a trap.

How, Skaflock's thoughts raged? How could we have been so blind?

The game trail the Wolf Scouts were following angled downwards into a narrow, twisting gully split by a shallow stream. With the wind at their backs and the thunder of the gunship passing overhead, the Space Wolves had no warning as they leapt into the gully and found themselves in the midst of an ork hunting party.

For a moment the orks didn't realize who had fallen in amongst them in the darkness. The hesitation was fatal. Skaflock's nerves sang with bloodlust and adrenaline – to him and the rest of the Wolves it was as though the greenskin raiders were moving in slow motion. Without breaking his stride the Space Wolf decapitated two orks with a single sweep of his blade and buried his armoured shoulder into the chest of a third with bone-crushing force. The air was filled with startled cries and shrieks of pain as the rest of the pack joined the fray, and suddenly the panicked orks were shooting and chopping at anything that moved.

Two heavy ork rounds flattened against Skaflock's power armour. As a member of the great company's Wolf Guard he was better protected than the scouts under his command, and the impacts barely fazed him. Blood sizzled off the power sword's energy field as he leapt at a cluster of orks further down the gully. The first of the greenskins raised a crude axe, aiming a blow at Skaflock's head, but the Space Marine ducked beneath the swing and cut the raider in two. Before the body had hit the ground Skaflock was upon the second ork, smashing his bolt pistol across the raider's knobbly skull and stabbing it through the chest. The ork pitched forward with a moan – doubling up on the searing blade and trapping it with its death throes.

Skaflock leant against the ork, trying to push it off the blade and narrowly avoided the third greenskin's swing. The crude axe glanced off his right shoulder plate and opened a long, ragged cut on the back of his unprotected neck. A second blow bit into his side, driving the axe's chisel point through the breastplate and into the flesh beneath. Baring his teeth at the pain, Skaflock spun on his heel, tearing his sword free and bringing the blade around in a glowing arc that separated the ork's head from its shoulders. For a few heartbeats the body remained upright, steam rising from the cauterized stump of its neck, then the axe tumbled from nerveless fingers and the corpse pitched over onto the ground.

Within moments, the battle was over. The six Wolf Scouts under Skaflock's command were veterans of more than a dozen campaigns, as skilled with sword and axe as they were with stealth and guile. Nearly two dozen orks lay dead or dying in the gully, staining the stream with their blood. As Skaflock watched, Gunnar Dragonbane, a giant of a man even by Space Marine standards, sent the last of the orks sprawling with a mighty sweep of his axe.

The greenskin landed in a heap, then rolled over onto its back, a grenade clenched in each bloodstained hand. Without thinking, Gunnar brought up his bolt pistol and shot the ork through the head.

Skaflock snarled as the distinctive *crack* of the bolt pistol echoed through the trees. 'I said no shooting!' he cried. As if in answer, the forest erupted in eager cries as the orks sought out the source of the gunshot.

Gunnar let out a rumbling growl, spitting a pair of shiny black pits into the crimson-tinged stream. The huge scout had a habit of chewing lich-berries; how he kept himself supplied on the long missions off Fenris was a mystery to everyone in the pack. A single berry was poisonous enough to kill a normal human in ten agony-filled seconds. Gunnar claimed the taste improved his disposition. 'Let them come,' he snarled, hefting his axe. 'We've plenty of cover and darkness on our side. We should be hunting *them*, not the other way around.'

'We're not here to hunt orks, Gunnar!' Skaflock snapped. 'We've got to link up with the assault team and guide them off the landing zone to a more defensible position – provided we aren't overrun by ork patrols in the meantime. Now, move out.' Without waiting for an answer, the Wolf Guard leader broke into a run, leaving the scouts to fall in as he sped on.

The orks were right on their heels. Skaflock heard the greenskins stumble into the gully moments behind them, and then the chase was on. Bursts of wild gunfire tore through the forest around them, kicking up plumes of dirt or blowing branches apart in showers of splinters. The Wolf Guard increased his speed, pushing his augmented muscles to the limit. Only his enhanced eyesight and agility allowed him to dodge the treacherous roots and low-hanging branches that lay in his path. Slowly but surely, the Wolf Scouts

began to pull away from their pursuers, melting into the darkness like shadows.

The sounds of battle called to the Space Wolves like a siren song, growing in intensity. Every few moments Skaflock closed his eyes and focused all of his concentration on the maelstrom of noise, picking out the distinctive notes of different weapons with a practiced ear: storm bolters, boltguns, plasma weapons and the distinctive hammering of crude ork guns.

After fifteen minutes the sounds of the Imperial weapons began to falter; Skaflock bared his fangs in a soundless snarl and drove himself on. Two minutes later he could no longer hear any plasma weapons being fired. Four minutes after that all he could hear were bolters pounding in rapid-fire mode. Then slowly, minute by minute, the bolter fire dwindled away to nothing.

Not long afterwards the wind shifted, blowing from the north-east, and they could smell the blood on the air. The woods had grown silent. Skaflock abandoned all pretence of stealth for the last two kilometres, breaking into a sprint and praying to Russ that his senses had somehow deceived him.

The Wolf Scouts charged headlong into the broad meadow they'd designated as the assault team's drop zone. The gently sloping, grassy field was now a wasteland of mud, ravaged flesh and spilled blood. The black silhouettes of the drop pods reared like tilted gravestones in the crimson moonlight, wreathed in plumes of greasy smoke from the blazing hulls of ork battlewagons.

The dead lay everywhere. Skaflock's mind reeled at the slaughter. The orks had struck from three sides, charging right into the exhaust flames of the drop pods as they settled to the ground. The Space Wolf packs had been cut off from one another even before the drop ramps opened.

The rest of the pack gathered around their leader, staring bleakly at the scene of carnage. Hogun stepped forward, shaking his head mournfully. 'It's a disaster,' he whispered, his voice bleak.

'It's a defeat,' Skaflock said flatly. 'The orks have turned the tables on us for now, but that's the way of war. We've seen worse, Hogun. All of us have.'

'Skaflock's right,' Gunnar said. The expression on his face was bitter, but he nodded solemnly. 'We've been through harder scrapes than this one and won out in the end. We'll just fade back to the mountains and wait for the rest of the company–'

Before the Wolf Guard could finish, the night air trembled with a distant howl of rage and pain that echoed among the derelict drop pods.

As one, the veteran scouts looked to their leader. Skaflock flashed a rapid set of hand signals and the pack fanned out into skirmish order, sweeping silently towards the source of the noise.

The howl came from the far side of the drop zone. As the scouts crept

closer, Skaflock caught sight of a dozen Space Wolves – Blood Claws, judging by their youthful features and the markings on their bloodstained armour. They stumbled and staggered through the piled corpses, flinging green-skinned bodies left and right as they searched frantically among the dead. Many of the young Marines had removed their helmets, and their faces were twisted with grief.

Skaflock waved the scouts to a halt and stepped forward. 'Well met, wolf brothers,' he called out. 'We feared there were no survivors.'

Heads darted in Skaflock's direction. Several growled, showing their teeth. One Blood Claw in particular, who had been crouched beside a pile of corpses, rose to his feet. He was tall, and pale with rage, a still-healing gash running from high on his right temple diagonally down into his blood-matted beard. His bolt pistol was holstered, but the deactivated power fist covering his right hand clenched threateningly as he glared at Skaflock and his pack.

The Blood Claw took a step towards the Wolf Scouts. 'All too few,' he snarled, 'thanks to the likes of *you*!' The words dissolved into a bestial roar as the Space Wolf lunged at Skaflock, his eyes burning with hate. The sudden attack caught the scout leader unawares. Before he could react the Blood Claw closed the distance between them and smote Skaflock on the breastplate of his armour with a sound like a hammer against a bell. The Wolf Scout went sprawling, stunned by the impact. Had the power fist's field been active his chest would have been crushed like an egg.

The red-haired Space Wolf pounced on Skaflock in an instant, knocking him back against the ground. 'Cowards!' he roared, nearly berserk with fury.

Pinned beneath the Blood Claw's bulk, Skaflock barely rolled aside as the Marine's huge fist smashed into the mud mere centimetres from his head. 'Did you slink out of the woods to view your handiwork, or to pick over the bodies of the dead like carrion crows?'

Skaflock felt the Blood Claw's left hand close around his throat. Surprise gave way to a killing rage, rising like a black tide in his chest. Unbidden, his hand tightened on the hilt of his power sword, thumb reaching for the activation switch.

'Remember your oaths, men of Fenris! Russ cannot abide a kinslayer, and the Emperor's eyes are upon you!'

The shout came from the shadow of one of the drop pods, ringed with the bodies of huge, armoured orks. Recognition struck Skaflock like a hammer blow, but it was the Blood Claw who spoke the name first.

'Rothgar!' The young Marine scrambled to his feet, heedless of the power sword pointed at his chest.

The great company's wolf priest stepped slowly into the moonlight. At once, Skaflock could see that the priest was very gravely injured. Rothgar's Terminator suit was rent in half a dozen places, and the jagged tip of a dead

ork's power claw jutted from his chest. His face was deathly white, and drops of red glistened in his grey beard. It was a testament to the wolf priest's legendary prowess that he lived at all.

'Well met, Sightblinder,' Rothgar said, showing blood-slicked teeth. 'Late to the battlefield, thank the primarch. What is your report?'

'We've been lured into a trap,' he said simply. 'Once the assault teams began their descent the damned orks started jamming all the vox frequencies somehow.' The Wolf Scout bit back a curse. 'You and these Blood Claws look to be all that's left from the team that landed here.'

'Our pod suffered a malfunction on the way down and we landed some ten kilometres north of the drop zone,' the red-haired Blood Claw said. 'The woods were crawling with ork patrols. We had to fight every step of the way to make it here. Two of our brothers and our Wolf Guard leader were slain.'

'The orks had more time to scout the area than we did. If we could find the best drop zones in each sector, so could they,' Skaflock said. 'But I've never known a greenskin to show such patience and forethought. There's more at work here than meets the eye.'

Rothgar's eyes narrowed conspiratorially. 'This Skargutz has ambitions, I think. He's no Ghazghkull, but he's no mere warboss, either. I think he's got his sights set on uniting the ork warbands in this sector under his banner. If he can prove to them that he can strike anywhere he wants *and* get the best of any force the Imperium can throw at him, they'll join his mob without hesitation.'

'And now that he's bloodied us, he'll pull out of Cambion with whatever plunder he's gathered and start rousing the other warbands.' It was a clever move, as much as it galled Skaflock to admit it.

Skaflock forced his anger and guilt aside and tried to find a way to salvage the situation. 'All right,' he said, addressing the wolf priest. 'The orks have us cut off for now, but our fleet isn't going to sit idle. With every pass they make over the planet their surveyors will have a clearer picture of where the ork landing sites are hidden. The orks can't keep this jamming up forever – they need the vox channels to coordinate themselves almost as much as we do. Most likely they will wait until they think the power cells on our designator beacons have run dry, then they'll begin their pullout. In the meantime, Kjarl here can watch over you at one of our campsites while my pack and I locate the main ork camp. When the jamming lifts, we can contact Lord Haldane and coordinate a counter strike before Skargutz can escape.'

Kjarl shook his head in disgust. 'Have you no idea what's happened?'

'How could he?' Rothgar said darkly. When he turned to Skaflock, his expression was even more pained than before. 'Have you ever known Haldane Ironhammer to let another lead an assault in his place? He dropped with us in the first wave, lad. Your lord lies somewhere among the fallen.'

Lord Haldane and his Wolf Guard had made their stand on a low hillock just to the side of their drop pod. They'd fought like wolves at bay, like heroes of old, but one by one they had been overcome.

Haldane's Terminator armour hadn't been hacked apart, as Skaflock had expected. It had been hacked *open*. The body of the wolf lord was nowhere to be seen.

Tears of rage coursed freely down Kjarl's face. 'What have they done with our lord?'

The Space Wolves parted as Rothgar moved slowly and painfully among them. The pain in his eyes as he surveyed the scene had nothing to do with his injuries. 'They have taken him,' he said hoarsely.

'Why?' Kjarl said.

'The orks must mean to give him as a trophy to their leader,' Skaflock replied, biting back his rage. 'A wolf lord's head would be a tremendous prize for an ambitious warboss like Skargutz.'

'Then it's a blood feud, by Russ!' Kjarl raised his fist and howled a challenge to the sky. The rest of the Blood Claws followed suit, the intensity of their cries raising the hairs on the back of Skaflock's neck.

'The filthy greenskins have defiled our lord.' Kjarl roared. He turned to Rothgar. 'Hear me, priest, I swear that I and my pack will find Lord Haldane and reclaim the honour of our company, and woe to any ork that steps in our way.'

'Don't be a fool,' Skaflock said coldly. 'You won't get more than a kilometre before the orks kill you.'

The Blood Claws snarled in wordless anger. Kjarl turned on the scout leader, his power fist raised. 'Keep your gutless bleating to yourself,' he snarled. 'This is a matter of honour – something you clearly know little about.'

Skaflock advanced on the Blood Claw. 'I know that you've been on this planet less than an hour, and I've been here for three months. I know approximately how many orks there are in this sector. I know their tactics, their equipment, the location of their bases and the routes they're likely to take. I know *exactly* what your chances are, charging about on an ork-held world and lashing out at every foe that presents itself.'

The vehemence in Skaflock's voice took Kjarl aback for a moment. 'What would you have us do then? Cower in the bushes and let them get away with this? What about your duty to Haldane?'

'Don't lecture me about my duty, whelp,' Skaflock said darkly. Meeting Rothgar's eye, he knelt by Haldane's armour and solemnly took up the wolf lord's axe. 'If we hope to reclaim Haldane's body we will have to swallow our anger and put our lord's honour before our own.' He raised the axe before the wolf priest. 'I swear on this axe that I will find Haldane and do what must be

done.’

The wolf priest held Skaflock’s gaze for a long moment, and then Rothgar nodded slowly. ‘I hear you, Skaflock Sightblinder,’ he said, ‘and I hold you to your oath.’

‘And *I* swear,’ Kjarl hissed, ‘to tear your head from your shoulders if you fail.’

Skaflock grinned mirthlessly. ‘If I fail, I doubt you’ll have the chance, but so be it,’ he said. ‘For now, you and your men gather weapons and ammunition from the dead: flamers, grenades and spare bolt pistol rounds.’

Kjarl glared at the wolf scout, but beneath the forbidding gaze of the wolf priest he swallowed his pride. ‘We will not be long,’ he growled, and issued orders to his pack.

Skaflock turned to Rothgar, but the wolf priest raised a gauntleted hand. ‘I will abide here, Sightblinder. Do not concern yourself about me. Russ knows I’ve survived worse than this.’ With his other hand he drew the Fang of Morkai from his belt. ‘Whatever else, I still have my duty to the dead.’

‘As do we, Rothgar. As do we.’

Haldane’s blood made his scent easy to follow. Even where countless ork feet had trampled across the wolf lord’s trail, Hogun’s sharp eyes picked out dark spots of crimson to mark where their fallen leader had gone.

Skaflock had assigned a pair of Blood Claws to each scout, taking Kjarl and another young Blood Claw for himself. After several kilometres the trail led out of the woods and down into a narrow, twisting valley dominated by isolated stands of stunted, twisted trees. Here the ork trail was easy to follow, and Skaflock knew at once where they were headed.

‘There’s a firebase up ahead,’ he said to Kjarl as they loped stealthily along the valley floor. ‘A small one. We scouted it out a couple of weeks ago. It’s probably where they’re staging all of the patrols in this sector, so there will likely be a lot of traffic. I expect the orks carrying Haldane will commandeer a vehicle there to carry their trophy to Skargutz.’

Kjarl glared resentfully at Skaflock. ‘We’ll see,’ he said darkly.

Half a kilometre from the firebase Skaflock waved the scouts off the trail, following a path that led to higher ground and offered a commanding view of the ork encampment. Hogun and Kjarl lay to either side of Skaflock as he scanned the firebase from a stony ledge using his magnoculars.

‘No sign of Haldane. If he was still there the orks would be showing off the body,’ Skaflock said, passing the magnoculars to Hogun. ‘There is something interesting though, a convoy of large trucks unloading fresh troops. And I don’t recognize their clan markings.’

‘What does this have to do with Haldane?’ Kjarl hissed impatiently.

‘This sector has the largest number of major ork landing sites on the

planet,' Skaflock explained, 'so we always suspected that Skargutz himself was somewhere nearby. We never could find him, though. At the time, we thought that was pretty strange, but now it's clear they must have set up a hidden base to conceal the vox jammers and shelter the bulk of their reserve troops from the initial bombardment.' The Wolf Guard studied the ork trucks thoughtfully. 'I'll bet he's still there, waiting for word that the ambush was successful, and those trucks will lead us right to him.'

Kjarl let out a snort. 'And how do you expect the trucks to get us anywhere once we've killed the drivers?'

Skaflock frowned. 'Killed the drivers?'

'You don't expect they'll survive once we've stormed the base, do you?'

'We aren't storming the base, Kjarl. We're sneaking onto those vehicles as they head back to their base.'

'*Sneaking.*' Kjarl's lip curled in distaste. 'Cowering like a craven is more like. This is not the way the sons of Russ are meant to behave.'

'I won't speak for you, Blood Claw, but I'll behave any way I must if it gets me one step closer to my goal. And so will you, so long as I'm in command.' Skaflock's stare was hard as adamantine. 'Tell your men we're going to *sneak* down to the firebase's northern gate. Pistols will be holstered and flamers doused. Combat will be avoided at all costs. Understood?'

'Understood,' Kjarl said contemptuously, and slid down the slope to where the rest of the group waited.

Hogun watched the young Space Wolf go. 'A good thumping would knock sense into that lad,' he muttered.

'No time for that now. I want you to round up our melta bombs and set up a diversion on the southern end of that base.'

'Good as done,' Hogun said, handing back the magnoculars and heading down the slope.

Skaflock gathered the Space Marines and made for the road north of the firebase in a single, widely spaced group. The Space Wolves reached the dirt road almost a kilometre north of the base, then began working south until they were within less than a hundred metres of the base's crude gate. There they separated into their three-man teams and settled into cover near the road's edge.

The firebase itself was simple and rugged. An irregular perimeter of packed earthen ramparts five metres high was topped with razor wire and littered with small mines. Rough, uneven watchtowers composed of scrap metal and cannibalized shipping containers rose behind the ramparts, sprouting a lethal assortment of heavy guns and wandering searchlights. The noise within the earthen walls was tremendous, a discordant roar of shouting voices, revving engines, machine tools and occasional bursts of gunfire.

Barely a few minutes after the Space Wolves had settled into place, Hogun

seemed to materialize out of the darkness at Skaflock's elbow. 'Three minutes,' he reported, then went to take his place along the line.

Kjarl eyed the ork base expectantly. 'What now?'

'When the bombs go off, the orks will think they're under attack. I expect that whoever is running that mob in there is going to send the trucks back to Skargutz for more troops.'

Before Kjarl could reply a string of blue-white flashes ran along the base's southern perimeter, followed by the sharp *crack* of the melta charges. Streams of wild tracer fire fanned and corkscrewed into the air. 'Get ready,' Skaflock called to the Marines.

Within minutes, the scrap metal gate at the northern entrance was pulled back with a tortured shriek of twisted metal, and eight huge ork trucks lumbered onto the road in a billowing cloud of blue-black exhaust.

Skaflock turned to Kjarl. 'We'll wait for the last three trucks, then I'll give the signal–'

The Wolf Scout's instructions were cut short as a stream of heavy ork rounds whipsawed through the air over his head. Skaflock's heart clenched as he ducked his head and stole a look at the firebase to his left.

The watchtowers had somehow spotted the three Space Marines at the far end of the line. Searchlights transfixed the Space Wolves from three separate directions, and the orks in the towers opened fire with every weapon they had. Skaflock watched as one of the Wolf Scouts rose to a crouch and drew his bolt pistol in a single, fluid motion. He snapped off two quick shots, destroying two of the searchlights in a shower of sparks, but as he pivoted to fire at the third a burst from an ork gun blew his head apart in a shower of blood and bone. The two Blood Claws leapt to their feet as one, drawing their weapons and charging at the enemy encampment.

'No,' Kjarl roared, surging to his feet. Skaflock tackled him before he was fully upright.

'Stand your ground,' Skaflock cried, shouting into the maelstrom.

'My men–'

'Your men are already dead, Kjarl,' Skaflock said. At the firebase the Blood Claws had made it into cover beneath the reach of the guns, but a mob of orks was already charging from the gates, their crude axes held high. 'You can either die alongside them or remember your obligation to your lord. Which will it be?'

With a wordless snarl Kjarl shoved Skaflock away and readied himself to move.

The last three ork trucks were coming up fast. Skaflock gauged speed and distance, then shouted 'Now,' and bolted for the road.

The Space Wolves rose in a ragged line and rushed at the ork transports, leaping for struts and flanges on their armoured flanks. Kjarl landed easily to

Skaflock's right, both men glaring balefully back at the firebase dwindling in the distance.

The ork trucks roared along dirt roads and broken trails for nearly two hours, then abruptly turned onto an old, sharply sloping roadway littered with rocks and debris. The small convoy climbed steadily up the side of a mountain for several minutes, then turned suddenly into the mountainside itself. The trucks' huge engines thundered in the tight confines of the tunnel as the convoy descended deep into the bowels of the mountain. The vehicles finally came to a stop in a cavernous, dimly lit chamber reeking of exhaust fumes and echoing with the bedlam of an ork warband at work.

Skaflock slowly eased himself from the truck's undercarriage and lowered himself to the ground. Peering left and right, he could see that the ork trucks had been driven into an enormous staging area crowded with other vehicles, piles of crates and gangs of grease-stained gretchin mechanics. Illumination in the cavernous space was poor, creating dark alleys between stacked crates and pools of shadow cast by the looming vehicles. Skaflock rolled out from under the truck to the right and dashed into cover between two stacks of looted shipping containers. The Wolf Guard kept moving, trusting that his brothers would track his scent as he worked his way towards the edge of the broad cavern.

Dark shapes emerged from the shadows, weapons held ready. Kjarl was the first to reach Skaflock, his eyes searching the shadows. 'Where are we?'

'We're in an old mine, somewhere south of the landing zone,' Skaflock said. 'There's scores of them honeycombing the mountains in this region. The orks are probably tapping the mine's abandoned reactors to power their jamming system.' The Wolf Guard sought out Hogun. 'Do you have the scent?'

The scout nodded. 'His blood's like a beacon. Not much further to go, I think.'

'All right.' To the assembled Marines, Skaflock said, 'Stick to your teams. No shooting until I give the signal. Hogun, you're on point. Gunnar, cover the rear. Move out.'

Moving quickly and quietly the Space Wolves made their way around the perimeter of the cavern and down a rough-hewn passage running deeper into the side of the mountain. Few of the mine's lamps still functioned, and the darkness served them well in the wide tunnels. They passed numerous side passages, abandoned lifts and galleries; on several occasions the Space Marines had to find an alternative route to avoid mobs of orks along their path. Each time Hogun led them unerringly back on track.

This sector of the mine had been given over to offices and dormitories for the indentured miners who once laboured in the tunnels below. Up ahead, the

Space Wolves began to hear the raucous sounds of a celebration, and Skaflock felt a cold, black rage welling up in his heart.

The passageway ahead ended in a broad double doorway, opening onto a huge rectangular space carved from the living rock. Once it had served as a dining hall for the miners, but now it was packed with orks feasting on the plunder of Cambion. Several hundred greenskins tore at haunches of bloody meat and drank from steel casks of ale, roaring drunken boasts of their fighting skill.

The far end of the chamber was given over to a raised dais, where priests of the Ecclesiarchy once exhorted the faithful as they took their meals. Now it supported a crude throne of black iron, where an enormous, armoured ork sat, surrounded by his bodyguard.

A man's bloody body lay at the foot of the throne, wearing only the black undergarment of a Space Marine. As the Space Wolves watched, Skargutz the Render laid an armoured boot on Haldane's dead chest, like a hunter posing with his prize.

The Marines made not a single sound, but Skaflock could feel the fury seething from them like heat from a forge. Kjarl's eyes were fixed on Skargutz, his fangs bared. 'Here it ends,' he said, his power fist crackling into life.

Skaflock nodded solemnly. 'The time for stealth is done at last,' he said, slipping into the tongue of their homeland. 'Now is the time for broken swords and splintered shields, for red ruin and the woeful song of steel. Haldane's eyes are upon us; his honour lies in our hands. Let no man falter until the deed is done.'

Raising Haldane's frost axe high, Skaflock charged through the doorway, and suddenly the hall was filled with the howl of Space Wolves.

The orks nearest the doorway stared in shock at the sudden appearance of the Space Marines. Skaflock leapt forward, swinging the frost axe in a wide arc and carving through the torsos of the three greenskins before him. Grenades flew overhead and bolt pistol shells tore through the packed ranks of orks. With an angry hiss, a half-dozen streams of liquid fire immolated scores of shrieking greenskins; their grenades and ammunition detonated in the heat, adding to the carnage.

An ork clambered over a table wielding an axe and Skaflock shot it in the face. The range was so close the mass-reactive shell had no time to arm, blowing the greenskin's head apart and bursting in the chest of the ork behind. Another of the foul creatures charged him from the right; the Wolf Scout ducked under the greenskin's wild swing and cut the ork's legs out from under it with a backhanded stroke of the axe.

Pandemonium swept the hall. The greenskin mob recoiled from the fire and slaughter around the doorway, many shooting wildly into the backs of those

who tried to put up a fight. A heavy bullet smashed into Skaflock's shoulder, cannoning off his armour and half-spinning him around, but the impact barely halted his headlong charge. The orks gave way before him, those that did not move fast enough were shot point-blank or split like a melon by a stroke of the axe. Dimly, Skaflock was aware of Kjarl close by his side, protecting his flanks and firing bolt pistol shells into the retreating mob.

Suddenly the ork retreat stopped, surged backwards, then parted like a wave, and Skaflock found himself face-to-face with Skargutz's bodyguard.

With a roar, the armoured orks opened fire at the oncoming Space Wolves. Two more rounds smashed into Skaflock's chest, flattening against his breastplate, and men screamed behind him as more bullets found their mark. Skaflock raised his bolt pistol and fired at an approaching bodyguard, but the shells bounced harmlessly off the ork's armoured skull. Then the two sides crashed into one another and all semblance of order dissolved into a chaotic melee.

Skaflock leapt at the bodyguard before him, swinging the frost axe at the ork's claw-tipped arm. The keen blade sheared through the metal joint and the flesh beneath, severing the arm at the elbow in a fountain of blood. The ork bellowed in pain and the Wolf Scout put a bolt pistol shell into its gaping maw, blowing out the back of its skull. He ducked around the armoured form as it toppled to the ground, only to be struck in the chest by a blow that drove the air from his lungs and racked him with searing waves of agony. Skaflock fell to the ground, convulsing in pain as a lithe, black-armoured form stepped over him, levelling a long-barrelled pistol at his head. The alien's face was hidden behind a helmet shaped like a leering skull. Its black, chitinous armour was painted with runes of clotted gore, and squares of expertly flensed skin flapped like parchment from fine hooks hung about its waist. A detached part of Skaflock's mind recognized the scraps of flesh as the skinned faces of human children.

The Wolf Guard's mind reeled. A dark eldar? Here? He'd heard tales of exiles from the hidden world of Commorragh offering their skills to warlords in exchange for plunder – usually paid in living flesh for the sadistic xenos to sate their lusts upon. Skaflock realised now where Skargutz had got his powerful jamming devices from, and was horrified to think of how many innocent lives the foul xenos would claim in return.

'You offer me such poor sport,' the dark eldar said. The words came out as a liquid rasp, bubbling wetly from mutilated lungs. The xenos lashed the air with a long, barbed whip of darkly glimmering steel. 'But fear not. You shall have many opportunities to entertain me in the months to come.'

Suddenly the air around the dark eldar shimmered as a flurry of bolt pistol shells streaked at his head and chest – and vanished as if swallowed by the void. From out of the raging melee Hogun and six Blood Claws rushed at the

xenos warrior, bloodied chainswords held high.

The alien slipped among the Space Wolves like quicksilver, lashing with his barbed whip. One viper-like blow was enough to paralyze a Space Marine with waves of pain, a second strike shredded the nerves and brought agonizing death. Three Blood Claws died without landing a single blow, the rest hurled themselves at the dark eldar, aiming a flurry of blows at the alien that would have ripped a mere human into tatters. Yet for all their speed and skill, the dark eldar dodged their blows with ease, or absorbed them with his powerful force field. Hogun emptied his bolt pistol at the alien's head, each shell swallowed up by the warrior's eldritch defences. The dark eldar casually pointed his pistol at the Wolf Scout's head and shot him through the eye. One of the Blood Claws leapt at the dark eldar with a roar and the alien spun effortlessly away from the attack. Faster than the eye could follow, the alien's whip struck once, twice, and the Space Wolf died in mid-swing.

With an effort of will, Skaflock forced his traumatized muscles to work, raising his own pistol and squeezing off shot after shot as the dark eldar's whip took another Blood Claw in the throat. Each round disappeared like all the rest – until suddenly an actinic flash obscured the alien and a sound like a thunderclap rang out as his force field finally overloaded. The dark eldar staggered, and the Wolf Scout saw a ragged hole in the breastplate of his armour.

The dark eldar let out a shriek of fury and a bubbling stream of curses – and then Kjarl seemed to materialize behind the alien, seizing its helmet in his power fist and tearing the alien's head from his armoured shoulders.

Skaflock rolled onto his side and tried to push himself to his feet. His muscles twitched and spasmed from the effects of the whip, and bursts of intense pain rippled through his chest. Then a huge fist closed on his arm and pulled him upright. 'No… faltering… yet,' Kjarl said breathlessly, flashing a wolfish grin. His armour was pierced in a dozen places and streaked with blood and gore, but his eyes were fierce and bright.

The Wolf Scout forced his eyes to focus and take in the scene around him. Over half the hall was ablaze, and the dead lay in heaps from the doorway to the dais. At the foot of his throne, Skargutz and a handful of orks fought the battered remnant of Skaflock's band. As he watched, Gunnar decapitated an ork with a stroke of his chainsword then darted in to strike at Skargutz's knee. Sparks flew as the sword's razor-edged teeth glanced off the armoured joint. The scout leapt back for another strike, but not quite fast enough. The warboss's power claw caught Gunnar in mid-leap, slicing the Space Marine in two.

Skaflock roared in rage and anguish, pushing away from Kjarl and staggering towards Skargutz, gaining speed with each painful step. His bolt pistol thundered and bucked in his hand; two orks fell with gaping holes in

their chests and a third round punched a bloody hole through the warboss's leg before the ammunition ran out. He tossed the empty pistol aside and gripped the frost axe with both hands. 'Skargutz the Render, your end is upon you,' he cried. 'You have dared the righteous wrath of the Allfather, and now there will be a reckoning.'

The warboss spun with surprising speed, scattering two Marines with a sweep of his claw. Skaflock leapt forward, rolling between the ork's massive legs, then rose to a crouch and sliced across the back of the warboss's knees. Pistons and hydraulic lines burst; joints and muscles failed, and Skargutz toppled with a crash. The huge ork tried to twist onto his side and lash backwards with his claw, but Kjarl caught its bloodied blades in his power fist. For a moment both warriors struggled, neither gaining ground on the other until, with a shriek of tortured metal, the power claw gave way in a shower of sparks.

Skaflock leapt forward, raising the frost axe high in a two-handed grip. 'When Morkai's kin drag your soul past the Hall of Heroes, tell them it was Haldane Ironhammer's axe that slew you!' The ork's snarl was cut short as the frost axe fell and the warboss's head bounced across the dais to stop at the dead wolf lord's feet.

Kjarl looked down at the dead warboss, his shoulders heaving with exertion. 'It is done.'

'Not quite yet,' Skaflock said. He gestured to the surviving Space Wolves, a single scout and two Blood Claws. 'Go and stand watch at the door.' Then, to Kjarl: 'Let us clear a table to place our lord upon, and lay the bodies of his foes at his feet.'

They pulled a table onto the dais and laid Haldane upon it, and piled his dead foes around him. As Kjarl laid the body of the dark eldar on the pile, he suddenly frowned. 'What's this?'

Skaflock watched the Blood Claw pull a small, silvery object from the alien's belt. A pale cobalt light gleamed on its surface. 'Some kind of control box?' he suggested.

'Perhaps,' Kjarl said, and crushed it in his fist. Suddenly the Blood Claw tensed, his hand going to his ear. 'Static!' he said. 'I can hear static on my vox-bead! That box must have controlled the vox jammers.'

One of the Blood Claws called from the doorway. 'The greenskins are massing at the end of the corridor. They'll be on us in minutes.'

Thinking quickly, Skaflock started digging through his carry-bags. He still had three designator beacons that the scouts hadn't found time to deploy. 'A few minutes are all we need,' he said, laying out the beacons and pressing their activation runes. 'Soon this whole base will be a pyre for our lord, and the end of the ork invasion of Cambion.'

As he worked, a shadow fell over the Wolf Guard. Skaflock glanced up to

see Kjarl watching him appraisingly. After a moment the Blood Claw steeled himself and said, ‘It appears I misjudged you, Skaflock. You’re a braver man than I gave you credit for, and a true son of Russ.’

Skaflock grinned and raised his hand in a weary salute. ‘And you fought well, Kjarl Grimblood. I owe you my life. I expect the skalds will sing of your deeds for years to come.’

‘So do I, by Russ.’ Kjarl said with a smile. ‘Speaking of which – I don’t suppose you’ve got a plan for getting us out of here?’ Nearly the entire chamber was ablaze, the rock walls running with streams of jellied fire. The heat and smoke was beginning to affect even the Space Wolves’ enhanced endurance.

Skaflock grinned. ‘Listen.’ Beyond the high ceiling came distant, heavy beats, like the pounding of a massive drum. Each one was louder than the one before. ‘Bombardment rounds,’ the Wolf Guard said.

From the doorway, one of the Space Wolves let out a yell. ‘The orks are retreating.’

‘I doubt they want to get buried alive any more than we do,’ Skaflock said. He glanced at Kjarl. ‘Ready?’

Kjarl’s eyes widened. ‘You want to fight your way through a horde of panicked orks and out into the middle of an *orbital bombardment*?’

‘Of course.’ Skaflock raised the frost axe. ‘I’d rather take my chances with the bombardment than risk Rothgar’s fury if I failed to return this. He’d curse my soul until the end of time!’

Kjarl Grimblood threw back his head and roared with laughter. ‘Lead on, brother,’ he said, clapping Skaflock on the shoulder. And with a last salute to their fallen lord the Space Wolves charged after the fleeing orks, filling the air with their bone-chilling howls.

THE CARRION ANTHEM

David Annandale

He was thinking bitter thoughts about glory. He couldn't help it. As he took his seat in the governor's private box overlooking the stage, Corvus Parthamen was surrounded by glory that was not his. The luxury of the box, a riot of crimson leather and velvet laced with gold and platinum thread, was a tribute, in the form of excess, to the honour of Governor Elpidius. That didn't trouble Corvus. The box represented a soft, false glory, a renown that came with the title, not the deeds or the man. Then there was the stage, to which all sight lines led. It was a prone monolith, carved from a single massive obsidian slab. It was an altar on which one could sacrifice gods, but instead it abased itself beneath the feet of the artist. It was stone magnificence, and tonight it paid tribute to Corvus's brother. That didn't trouble Corvus, either. He didn't understand what Gurges did, but he recognized that his twin, at least, did work for his laurels. Art was a form of deed, Corvus supposed.

What bothered him was the walls. Windowless, rising two hundred metres to meet in the distant vault of the ceiling, they were draped with immense tapestries. These were hand-woven tributes to Imperial victories. Kieldar. The Planus Steppes. Ichar IV. On and on and on. Warriors of legend both ancient and new towered above Corvus. They were meant to inspire. They were there to draw the eye as the spirit soared, moved by the majesty of the tribute paid by the music. The arts in this monumental space – stone, image and sound – were supposed to entwine to the further glory of the Emperor and his legions. But lately, the current of worship had reversed. Now the tapestry colossi, frozen in their moments of triumphant battle, were also bowing before the glory of Gurges, and that was wrong. That was what made Corvus dig his fingers in hard enough to mar the leather of his armrests.

The governor's wife, Lady Ahala, turned to him, her multiple necklaces rattling together. 'It's nice to see you, colonel,' she said. 'You must be so proud.'

Proud of what? he wanted to say. Proud of his homeworld's contributions to the Imperial crusades? That was a joke. Ligeta was a joke. Of the hundred tapestries here in the Performance Hall of the Imperial Palace of Culture, not one portrayed a Ligetan hero. Deep in the Segmentum Pacificus, far from the front lines of any contest, Ligeta was untouched by war beyond the usual tithe of citizens bequeathed to the Imperial Guard. Many of its sons had fought and fallen on distant soil, but how many had distinguished themselves to the point that they might be remembered and celebrated? None.

Proud of what? Of his own war effort? That he commanded Ligeta's defence regiment? That only made him part of the Ligetan joke. Officers who were posted back to their homeworlds developed reputations, especially when those homeworlds were pampered, decadent backwaters. The awful thing was that he couldn't even ask himself what he'd done wrong. He knew the answer. *Nothing*. He'd done everything right. He'd made all the right friends, served under all the right officers, bowed and scraped in all the right places at all the right times. He had done his duty on the battlefield, too. No one could say otherwise. But there had been no desperate charges, no last-man-standing defences. The Ligetan regiments were called upon to maintain supply lines, garrison captured territory, and mop up the token resistance of those who were defeated, but hadn't quite come to terms with the fact. They were not summoned when the need was urgent.

The injustice made him seethe. He knew his worth, and that of his fellows. They fought and died with the best, when given the chance. Not every mop-up had been routine. Not every territory had been easily pacified. Ligetans knew how to fight, and they had plenty to prove.

Only no one ever saw. No one thought to look, because everyone knew Ligeta's reputation. It was the planet of the dilettante and the artist. The planet of the song.

Proud of *that*?

And yes, that was exactly what Ahala meant. Proud of the music, proud of the song. Proud of Gurges. Ligeta's civilian population rejoiced in the planet's reputation. They saw no shame or weakness in it. They used the same logic as Corvus's superiors who thought they had rewarded his political loyalty by sending him home. Who wouldn't want a pleasant command, far from the filth of a Chaos-infested hive world? Who wouldn't want to be near Gurges Parthamen, maker not of song, but of The Song?

Yes, Corvus thought, Gurges had done a good thing there. Over a decade ago, now. The Song was a hymn to the glory of the Emperor. Hardly unusual. But *Regeat, Imperator* was rare. It was the product of the special alchemy

that, every so often, fused formal magnificence with populist appeal. The tune was magisterial enough to be blasted from a Titan's combat horn, simple enough to be whistled by the lowliest trooper, catchy enough that, once heard, it was never forgotten. It kept up morale on a thousand besieged worlds, and fired up the valour of millions of troops charging to the rescue. Corvus had every right, every *duty* to be proud of his brother's accomplishment. It was a work of genius.

So he'd been told. He would have to be satisfied with the word of others. Corvus had amusia. He was as deaf to music as Gurges was attuned to it. His twin's work left him cold. He heard a clearer melody line in the squealing of a greenskin pinned beneath a dreadnought's feet.

To Lady Ahala, Corvus said, 'I couldn't be more proud.'

'Do you know what he's offering us tonight?' Elpidius asked. He settled his soft bulk more comfortably.

'I don't.'

'Really?' Ahala sounded surprised. 'But you're his twin.'

'We haven't seen each other for the best part of a year.'

Elpidius frowned. 'I didn't think you'd been away.'

Corvus fought back a humiliated wince. 'Gurges was the one off-planet,' he said. Searching the stars for inspiration, or some other pampered nonsense. Corvus didn't know and didn't care.

Hanging from the vault of the hall were hundreds of glow-globes patterned into a celestial map of the Imperium. Now they faded, silencing the white noise of tens of thousands of conversations. Darkness embraced the audience, and only the stage was illuminated. From the wings came the choir. The singers wore black uniforms as razor-creased as any officer's ceremonial garb. They marched in, until their hundreds filled the back half of the stage. They faced the audience. At first, Corvus thought they were wearing silver helmets, but then they reached up and pulled down the masks. Featureless, eyeless, the masks covered the top half of each man's face.

'How are they going to see him conduct?' Elpidius wondered.

Ahala giggled with excitement. 'That's nothing,' she whispered. She placed a confiding hand on Corvus's arm. 'I've heard that there haven't been any rehearsals. Not even the choir knows what is going to be performed.'

Corvus blinked. 'What?'

'Isn't it exciting?' She turned back to the stage, happy and placid before the prospect of the impossible.

The light continued to fade until there was only a narrow beam front and centre, a bare pinprick on the frozen night of stone. The silence was as thick and heavy as the stage. It was broken by the solemn, slow clop of boot heels. His pace steady as a ritual, as if he were awed by his own arrival, Gurges Parthamen, Emperor's bard and Ligeta's favourite son, walked into the light.

He wore the same black uniform as the musicians, but no mask. Instead…

'What's wrong with his face?' Ahala asked.

Corvus leaned forward. Something cold scuttled through his gut. His twin's face was his own: the same severe planes, narrow chin and grey eyes, even the same cropped black hair. But now Corvus stared at a warped mirror. Gurges was wearing an appliance that flashed like gold but, even from this distance, displayed the unforgiving angles and rigidity of iron. It circled his head like a laurel wreath. At his face, it extended needle-thin claws that pierced his eyelids, pinning them open. Gurges gazed at his audience with a manic, implacable stare that was equal parts absolute knowledge and terminal fanaticism. His eyes were as much prisoners as those of his choir, but where the singers saw nothing, he saw too much, and revelled in the punishment. His smile was a peeling back of lips. His skin was too thin, his skull too close to the surface. When he spoke, Corvus heard the hollow sound of wind over rusted pipes. Insects rustled at the frayed corners of reality.

'Fellow Ligetans,' Gurges began. 'Before we begin, it would be positively heretical of me not to say something about the role of the patron of the arts. The life of a musician is a difficult one. Because we do not produce a tangible product, there are many who regard us as superfluous, a pointless luxury the Imperium could happily do without. This fact makes those who value us even more important. Patrons are the blessed few who know the artist really can make a difference.'

He paused for a moment. If he was expecting applause, the knowledge and ice in his rigid gaze stilled the audience. Unperturbed, he carried on. 'I have, over the course of my musical life, been privileged to have worked with more than my share of generous, committed, sensitive patrons. It is thanks to them that my music has been heard at all.' He lowered his head, as if overcome by modesty.

Corvus would have snorted at the conceit of the gesture, but he was too tense. He dreaded the words that might come from his brother's rictus face.

Gurges looked up, and now his eyes seemed to glow with a light the colour of dust and ash. 'Yes,' he said, 'the generous patron is to be cherished. But even more precious, even more miraculous, even more to be celebrated and glorified, is the patron who *inspires*. The patron who opens the door to new vistas of creation, and pushes the artist through. I stand before you as the servant of one such patron. I know that my humble tribute to the Emperor is held in high regard, but I can now see what a poor counterfeit of the truth that effort is. Tonight, so will you. I cannot tell you what my patron has unveiled for me. But I can show you.'

The composer's last words slithered out over the hall like a death rattle. Gurges turned to face the choir. He raised his arms. The singers remained unmoving. The last light went out. A terrible, far-too-late certainty hit Corvus:

he must stop this.

And then Gurges began to sing.

For almost a minute, Corvus felt relief. No daemon burst from his brother's mouth. His pulse slowed. He had fallen for the theatrics of a first-rate showman, that was all. The song didn't sound any different to him than any other of Gurges's efforts. It was another succession of notes, each as meaningless as the next. Then he noticed that he was wrong. He wasn't hearing a simple succession. Even his thick ears could tell that Gurges was singing two notes at once. Then three. Then four. The song became impossible. Somehow still singing, Gurges drew a breath, and though Corvus heard no real change in the music, the breath seemed to mark the end of the refrain.

It also marked the end of peace, because now the choir began to sing. To a man, they joined in, melding with Gurges's voice. The song became a roar. The darkness began to withdraw as a glow spread across the stage. It seeped from the singers. It poured like radiation fog into the seating. It was a colour that made Corvus wince. It was a kind of green, if green could scream. It pulsed like taut flesh.

It grinned like Chaos.

Corvus leaped to his feet. So did the rest of the audience. For a crazy moment of hope, he thought of ordering the assembled people to fall upon the singers and silence them. But they weren't rising, like him, in alarm. They were at one with the music, and they joined their voices to its glory, and their souls to its power. The roar became a wave. The glow filled the hall, and it showed Corvus nothing he wanted to see. Beside him, the governor and his wife stood motionless, their faces contorted with ecstasy. They sang as if the song were their birthright. They sang to bring down the sky. Their heads were thrown back, their jaws as wide as a snake's, and their throats twitched and spasmed with the effort to produce inhuman chords. Corvus grabbed Elpidius by the shoulders and tried to shake him. The governor's frame was rigid and grounded to the core of the Ligeta. Corvus might have been wrestling with a pillar. But the man wasn't cold like stone. He was burning up. His eyes were glassy. Corvus checked his pulse. Its rhythm was violent, rapid, irregular. Corvus yanked his hands away. They felt slick with disease. Something that lived in the song scrabbled at his mind like fingernails on plastek, but couldn't find a purchase.

He opened the flap of his shoulder holster and pulled out his laspistol. He leaned over the railing of the box, and sighted on his brother's head. He felt no hesitation. He felt only necessity. He pulled the trigger.

Gurges fell, the top of his skull seared away. The song didn't care. It roared on, its joy unabated. Corvus fired six more times, each shot dropping a member of the choir. He stopped. The song wasn't a spell and it wasn't a

mechanism. It was a plague, and killing individual vectors was worse than useless. It stole precious time from action that might make a difference.

He ran from the box. In the vestibule, the ushers were now part of the choir, and the song pursued Corvus as he clattered down the marble steps to the mezzanine and thence to the ground floor. The foyer, as cavernous as the Performance Hall, led to the Great Gallery of Art. Its vaulted length stretched a full kilometre to the exit of the palace. Floor-to-ceiling stained glass mosaics of the primarchs gazed down on heroic bronzes. Warriors beyond counting trampled the Imperium's enemies, smashing them into fragmented agony that sank into the pedestals. But the gallery was no longer a celebration of art and glory. It was a throat, and it howled the song after him. Though melody was a stranger to him, still he could feel the force of the music, intangible yet pushing him with the violence of a hurricane's breath. The light was at his heels, flooding the throat with its mocking bile.

He burst from grand doorway onto the plaza. He stumbled to a halt, horrified.

The concert had been broadcast.

Palestrina, Ligeta's capital and a city of thirty million, screamed. It convulsed.

The late-evening glow of the city was stained with the Chaos non-light. In the plaza, in the streets, in the windows of Palestrina's delicate and coruscating towers, the people stood and sang their demise. The roads had become a nightmare of twisted, flaming wreckage as drivers, possessed by art, slammed into each other. Victims of collisions, not quite dead, sang instead of screaming their last. Everywhere, the choir chanted to the sky, and the sky answered with flame and thunder. To the west, between the towers, the horizon strobed and rumbled, and fireballs bloomed. He was looking at the spaceport, Corvus realized, and seeing the destruction caused by every landing and departing ship suddenly losing all guidance.

There was a deafening roar overhead, and a cargo transport came in low and mad. Its engines burning blue, it plowed into the side of a tower a few blocks away. The ship exploded, filling the sky with the light and sound of its death. Corvus ducked as shrapnel the size of meteors arced down, gouging impact craters into street and stone and flesh. The tower collapsed with lazy majesty, falling against its neighbours and spreading a domino celebration of destruction. Dust billowed up in a choking, racing cloud. It rushed over Corvus, hiding the sight of the dying city, but the chant went on.

He coughed, gagging as grit filled his throat and lungs. He staggered, but started moving again. Though visibility was down to a few metres, and his eyes watered and stung, he felt that he could see clearly again. It was as if, by veiling the death of the city from his gaze, the dust had broken a spell. Palestrina was lost, but that didn't absolve him of his duty to the Emperor.

Only his own death could do that. As long as he drew breath, his duty was to fight for Ligeta, and save what he could.

He had to find somewhere the song had not reached, find men who had not heard and been infected by the plague. Then he could mount a defence, perhaps even a counter-attack, even if that were nothing more than a scorched-earth purge. There would be glory in that. But first, a chance to regroup. First, a sanctuary. He had hopes that he knew where to go.

He felt his way around the grey limbo of the plaza, hand over his mouth, trying not to cough up his lungs. It took him the best part of an hour to reach the far side of the Palace of Culture. By that time, the worst of the dust had settled and the building's intervening bulk further screened him. He could breathe again. His movements picked up speed and purpose. He needed a vehicle, one he could manoeuvre through the tangled chaos of the streets. Half a kilometre down from the plaza, he found what he wanted. A civilian was straddling his idling bike. He had been caught by the song just before pulling away. Corvus tried to push him off, but he was as rigid and locked down as the governor had been. Corvus shot him. As he hauled the corpse away from the bike, he told himself that the man had already been dead. If Corvus hadn't granted him mercy, something else would have. A spreading fire. Falling debris. And if nothing violent happened, then…

Corvus stared at the singing pedestrians, and thought through the implications of what he was seeing. Nothing, he was sure, could free the victims once the song took hold. So they would stand where they were struck and sing, and do nothing else. They wouldn't sleep. They wouldn't eat. They wouldn't drink. Corvus saw the end result, and he also saw the first glimmer of salvation. With a renewed sense of mission, he climbed on the bike and drove off.

It was an hour from dawn by the time he left the city behind. Beyond the hills of Palestrina, he picked up even more speed as he hit the parched mud flats. Once fertile, the land here had had its water table drained by the city's thirst. At the horizon, the shadow of the Goreck Mesa blocked the stars. At the base of its bulk, he saw pinpricks of light. Those glimmers were his destination and his hope.

The ground rose again as he reached the base. He approached the main gate, and he heard no singing. Before him, the wall was an iron shield fifty metres high, a sloping, pleated curtain of strength. A giant aquila, a darker night on black, was engraved every ten metres along the wall's two kilometre length. Beyond the wall, he heard the diesel of engines, the report of firing ranges, the march of boots. The sounds of discipline. Discipline that was visible from the moment he arrived. If the sentries were surprised to see him, dusty and exhausted, arriving on a civilian vehicle instead of in his staff car, they showed no sign. They saluted, sharp as machines, and opened the gate

for him. He passed through into Fort Goreck and the promise of salvation.

On the other side of the wall was a zone free of art and music. A weight lifted from Corvus's shoulders as he watched the pistoning, drumming rhythm of the military muscle. Strength perfected, and yet, by the Throne, it had been almost lost, too. A request had come the day before from Jeronim Tarrant, the base's captain. Given the momentous, planet-wide event that was a new composition by Gurges Parthamen, would the colonel authorize a break in the drills, long enough for the men to sit down and listen to the vox-cast of the concert? Corvus had not just rejected the request out of hand, he had forbidden any form of reception and transmission of the performance. He wanted soldiers, he had informed Jeronim. If he wanted dilettantes, he could find plenty in the boxes of the Palace of Culture.

On his way to the concert, he had wondered about his motives in issuing that order. Jealousy? Was he really that petty? He knew now that he wasn't, and that he'd been right. The purpose of a base such as this was to keep the Guard in a state of perpetual, instant readiness, because war might come from one second to the next.

As it had now.

He crossed the parade field, making for the squat command tower at the rear of the base, where it nestled against the basalt wall of the Mesa. He had barely dismounted the bike when Jeronim came pounding out of the tower. He was pale, borderline frantic, but remembered to salute. Discipline, Corvus thought. It had saved them so far. It would see them through to victory.

'Sir,' Jeronim said. 'Do you know what's going on? Are we under attack? We can't get through to anyone.'

'Yes, we are at war,' Corvus answered. He strode briskly to the door. 'No one in this base has been in contact with anyone outside it for the last ten hours?'

Jeronim shook his head. 'No, sir. Nothing that makes sense. Anyone transmitting is just sending what sounds like music–'

Corvus cut him off. 'You listened?'

'Only a couple of seconds. When we found the nonsense everywhere, we shut down the sound. No one was sending anything coherent. Not even the *Scythe of Judgement*.'

So the Ligetan flagship had fallen. He wasn't surprised, but Corvus discovered that he could still feel dismay. But the fact that the base had survived the transmissions told him something. The infection didn't take hold right away. He remembered that the choir and the audience hadn't responded until Gurges had completed a full refrain. The song's message had to be complete, it seemed, before it could sink in. 'What actions have you taken?' he asked Jeronim as they headed up the staircase to the command centre.

'We've been sending out requests for acknowledgement on all frequencies.

I've placed the base on heightened alert. And since we haven't been hearing from anyone, I sent out a distress call.'

'Fine,' Corvus said. For whatever good that call will do, he thought. By the time the message was received and aid arrived, weeks or months could have elapsed. By that time, the battle for the soul of Ligeta would have been won or lost. The singers would have starved to death, and either there would be someone left to pick up the pieces, or there wouldn't be.

The communications officer looked up from the auspex as Corvus and Jeronim walked into the centre. 'Colonel,' he saluted. 'A capital ship has just transitioned into our system.'

'Really?' That was fast. Improbably fast.

'It's hailing us,' the master vox-operator announced.

Corvus lunged across the room and yanked the headphones from the operator's skull. 'All messages to be received as text only until further notice,' he ordered. 'No exceptions. Am I clear?'

The operator nodded.

'Acknowledge them,' Corvus went on. 'Request identification.'

The soldier did so. Corvus moved to the plastek window and looked out over the base while he waited. There were five thousand men here. The position was elevated, easily defensible. He had the tools. He just had to work out how to fight.

'Message received, colonel.'

Corvus turned to the vox-operator. His voice sounded all wrong, like that of a man who had suddenly been confronted with the futility of his existence. He was staring at the dataslate before him. His face was grey.

'Read it,' Corvus said, and braced himself.

'Greetings, Imperials. This is the *Terminus Est*.'

Typhus entered the strategium as the ship emerged in the realspace of the Ligetan system.

'Multiple contacts, lord,' the bridge attendant reported.

Of course there were. The Imperium would hardly leave Ligeta without a defending fleet. Typhus moved his bulk towards the main oculus. They were already close enough to see the swarm of Imperial cruisers and defence satellites. 'But how many are on attack trajectories?' Typhus asked. He knew the answer, but he wanted the satisfaction of hearing it.

The officer looked twice at his hololithic display, as if he doubted the reports he was receiving. 'None,' he said after a moment.

'And how many are targeting us?'

Another brief silence. 'None.'

Typhus rumbled and buzzed his pleasure. The insects that were his parasites and his identity fluttered and scrabbled with excitement. His armour

rippled with their movement. He allowed himself a moment to revel in the experience, in the glorious and terrible paradox of his existence. Disease was an endless source of awe in its marriage of death and unrestrained life. It was his delight to spread the gospel of this paradox, the lesson of decay. Before him, the oculus showed how well the lesson was being learned. ‘Bring us in close,’ he commanded.

‘At once, lord.’ The bridge attendant was obedient, but was a slow learner himself. He was still thinking in terms of a normal combat situation, never mind that an Imperial fleet’s lack of response to the appearance of a Chaos capital ship was far from normal. ‘We are acquiring targets,’ he reported.

‘No need, no need,’ Typhus said. ‘See for yourselves. All of you.’

His officers looked up, and Typhus had an audience for the spectacle he had arranged. As the *Terminus Est* closed in on the glowing green-and-brown globe of Ligeta, the enemy ships gathered size and definition. Their distress became clear, too. Some were drifting, nothing more now than iron tombs. Others had their engines running, but there was no order to their movements. The ships, Typhus knew, were performing the last commands their crews had given them, and there would be no others to come.

‘Hail the Imperials,’ he ordered. ‘Open all frequencies.’

The strategium was bathed in the music of disease. Across multiple channels came the same noise, a unified chaos of millions upon millions of throats singing in a single choir. The melody was a simple, sustained, multi-note chord of doom. It became the accompaniment to the view outside the Terminus, and now the movement of the fleet was the slow ballet of entropy and defeat. Typhus watched a two cruisers follow their unalterable routes until they collided. One exploded, its fireball the expanding bloom of a poisonous flower. The other plunged towards Ligeta’s atmosphere, bringing with it the terrible gift of its weapons payload and shattered reactor.

Typhus thought about its landfall, and his insects writhed in anticipation.

He also thought about the simplicity of the lesson, how pure it was, and how devastating its purity made it. Did the happenstance that had brought Gurges Parthamen into his grasp taint that purity, or was that flotsam of luck an essential piece of the composition’s beauty? The composer on a self-indulgent voyage, getting caught in a localised warp storm, winding up in a near-collision with the *Terminus Est*; how could those elements be anything other than absolute contingency? His triumph could so easily have never even been an idea. Then again, that man, his ambition that made him so easily corruptible, the confluence of events that granted Typhus this perfect inspiration: they were so improbable, they could not possibly be chance. They had been threaded together by destiny.

Flies howled through the strategium as Typhus tasted the paradox, and found it to his liking. Chaos and fate, one and the same.

Perhaps Gurges had thought so, too. He had put up no resistance to being infected with the new plague. Typhus was particularly proud of it. The parasitic warp worm laid its eggs in the bloodstream and attacked the brain. It spread itself from mind to mind by the transmission of its idea, and the idea travelled on a sound, a special sound, a song that was an incantation that thinned the walls between reality and the immaterium and taught itself to all who had ears to hear.

'My lord, we are being hailed,' said the attendant.

Typhus laughed, delighted, and the boils on the deck quivered in sympathy. 'Send them our greeting,' he ordered.

Now he had an enemy. Now he could fight.

Corvus rejected despair. He rejected the odds. There was an enemy, and duty demanded combat. There was nothing else.

Corvus stood at the reviewing stand on the parade grounds, and, speakers turning his voice into Fort Goreck's voice, he addressed the assembled thousands. He explained the situation. He described the plague and its means of contagion. And he laid down the rules. One was paramount. 'Music,' he thundered, 'is a disease. It will destroy us if it finds the smallest chink in our armour. We must be free of it, and guard against it. Anyone who so much as whistles will be executed on the spot.' He felt enormous satisfaction as he gave that order. He didn't worry about why.

Less than a day after his arrival, Typhus witnessed the apotheosis of his art. The entire planet was one voice. The anthem, the pestilence, the anthem that was pestilence, had become the sum total of existence on Ligeta. Its population lived for a single purpose. The purity was electrifying.

Or it would have been, but for the single flaw. There was that redoubt. He had thought it would succumb by itself, but it hadn't. It was still sending out desperate pleas to whatever Imperials might hear. And though Typhus could amuse himself with the thought that this one pustule of order confirmed the beauty of corruption, he also knew the truth. Over the course of the next few days, the song would begin a ragged diminuendo as its singers died. If he didn't act, his symphony would be incomplete, spoiled by one false note.

So it was time to act.

The attack came on the evening of the second day. Corvus was walking the parapet when he saw the sky darken. A deep, unending thunder began, and the clouds birthed a terrible rain. The drop-pods came first, plummeting with the finality of black judgement. They made landfall on the level ground a couple of kilometres from the base. They left streaks in the air, black, vertical contrails that didn't dissipate. Instead, they grew wider, broke up into

fragments, and began to whirl. Corvus ran to the nearest guard tower, grabbed a marksman's sniper rifle and peered through its telescopic sight. He could see the movement in the writhing clouds more clearly. It looked like insects. Faintly, impossibly, weaving in and out of the thunder of the pods and the landing craft that now followed on, Corvus heard an insidious buzz.

The darkness flowed from the sky. It was the black of absence and grief, of putrefaction and despair, and of unnameable desire. Its touch infected the air of the landing zone, then rippled out towards the base. It was a different disease, one Corvus had no possible defence against. And though no tendrils of the black itself reached this far, Corvus felt something arrive over the wall. The quality of the evening light changed. It turned brittle and sour. He sensed something vital becoming too thin, and something wrong start to smile.

All around him, Fort Goreck's warning klaxons sounded the call to arms. The din was enormous, and he was surprised and disturbed that he could hear the buzzing of the Chaos swarms at all. That told him how sick the real world was becoming, and how hard he would have to fight for it.

The drop-pods opened, their venomous petals falling back to disgorge the monsters within. Corvus had never felt comfortable around Space Marines, his Ligetan inferiority complex made exponentially worse by their superhuman power and perfection. But he would have given anything to have one beside him now as he saw the nightmare versions of them mustering in the near distance. Their armour had long since ceased to be simple ceramite. It was darkness that was iron, and iron that was disease. They assembled into rows and then stood motionless, weapons at ready. Only they weren't entirely still. Their outlines writhed.

Landing craft poured out corrupted infantry in ever greater numbers. At length, the sky spat out a leviathan that looked to Corvus like a Goliath-class transport, only so distorted it seemed more like a terrible whale. Its hull was covered with symbols that tore at Corvus's eyes with obscenities. Around it coiled things that might be tendrils, or they might be tentacles. Its loading bay opened like a maw, and it vomited hordes of troops and vehicles onto the blackening soil of Ligeta.

The legions of plague gathered before Corvus, and he knew there was no hope of fighting them.

But he would. *Down to the last man*. And though there might no chance of survival, there would, he now realized with a stir of joy, be the hope of glory in the heroic last stand.

Night fell, and the forces of the *Terminus Est* grew in numbers and strength. The host was now far larger than needed to storm Fort Goreck, walls or no, commanding heights or no. But the dark soldiers didn't attack. They stood, massed and in the open. Once disembarked, they did nothing. Heavy artillery rumbled out of the transport and then stopped, barrels aimed at the

sky, full of threat but silent. The rumble of arrivals stopped. A clammy quiet covered the land.

Corvus had returned to command centre. He could watch just as well from there, and the subaural buzzing was less noticeable on this side of the plastek.

'What are they waiting for?' Jeronim muttered.

The quiet was broken by the distant roar of engines. Corvus raised a pair of electro-binoculars. Three Rhinos were moving to the fore. There were rows of rectangular shapes on the top of the Rhinos. They were horned metal, molded into the shape of screaming daemons. Loudspeakers, Corvus realized.

Dirge Casters.

If the Rhinos broadcast their song, Fort Goreck would fall without a shot being fired.

Corvus slammed a fist against the alarm trigger. The klaxons whooped over the base. 'Do not turn these off until I give the order,' he told the officers. Still not loud enough, he thought. He turned to the master vox. He shoved the operator aside and flipped the switches for the public address system. He grabbed the mic and ran over to the speaker above the doorway to the command centre. He jammed the mic into the speaker. Feedback pierced his skull, mauled his hearing and sought to obliterate all thought. He gasped from the pain, and staggered under the weight of the sound.

The men around him were covering their ears and weaving around as if drunk. Corvus struggled against the blast of the sound and shook the officers. 'Now!' he screamed. 'We attack now! Launch the Chimeras and take out those vehicles!'

He would have given his soul for a battery of battle cannons, so he could take out the Rhinos from within the safety of the noise shield he had just erected. But this would do. He didn't think about how little he might gain in destroying a few speakers. He saw the chance to fight the opponent.

He saw the chance for glory.

He took charge of the squads that followed behind the Chimeras. He saw the pain of the men's faces as the eternal feedback wore at them. He saw the effort it took them to focus on the simple task of readying their weapons. He understood, and hoped that they understood the necessity of his actions, and saw the heroism of their struggle for the Emperor. Gurges had been a fool, Corvus thought. What he did now was worthy of song.

The gates opened, and the Chimeras surged forward. The Rhinos had stopped halfway between their own forces and the wall, easily within the broadcast range of the Dirge Casters. The song was inaudible. Corvus felt his lips pull back in a snarl of triumph as he held his laspistol and chainsword high and led the charge. The courage of the Imperium burst from the confines of the wall. Corvus yelled as he pounded behind the clanking, roaring Chimera. The feedback whine faded as they left the base behind, but the

vehicles had their own din, and Corvus still could hear no trace of the song.

Something spoke with the voice of ending. The sound was enormous, a deep, compound thunder. It was the Chaos artillery, all guns opening up simultaneously, firing a single, monumental barrage. The lower slope of Fort Gerick's rise exploded, earth geysering skyward. A giant made of noise and air picked Corvus up and threw him. The world tumbled end over end, a hurricane of dirt and rocks and fire. He slammed into the ground and writhed, a pinned insect, as his flattened lungs fought to pull in a breath. When the air came, it was claws and gravel in his chest. His head rang like a struck bell.

When his eyes and his ears cleared, he saw the wreckage of the Chimeras and the rout of his charge. The vehicles had taken the worst of the hits, and were shattered, smoking ruins of twisted metal. Pieces of men were scattered over the slope: an arm still clutching a lasgun, a torso that ended at the lower jaw, organs without bodies, bodies without organs. But there were survivors, and as the enemy's guns fell silent, the song washed over the field. Men picked themselves up, and froze as the refrain caught them. A minute after the barrage, Corvus was the only man left with a will of his own. He picked up his weapons and stumbled back up the slope towards the wall. As he ran, he thought he could hear laughter slither through the ranks of the Chaos force.

The gates opened just enough to let him back inside. The feedback blotted out the song, but wrapped itself around his brain like razor wire. He had lost his cap, and his uniform was in tatters. Still, he straightened his posture as he walked back through the stunned troops. Halfway across the grounds, a conscript confronted him. The man's eyes were watering from the hours of mind-destroying feedback and his nose was bleeding. 'Let us go,' he pleaded. 'Let us fight. We'll resist as long as we can.'

Corvus pushed him back. 'Are you mad?' he shouted over the whine. 'Do you know what would happen to you?'

The trooper nodded. 'I was on the wall. I saw.'

'Well then?'

'They look happy when they sing. At least that death isn't pointless torture.'

Corvus raised his pistol and shot the man through the eye. He turned in a full circle, glaring at his witnesses, making sure they understood the lesson. Then he stalked back to the command centre.

A night and a day of the endless electronic wail. Then another night of watching with nerves scraped raw. Corvus plugged his ears with cloth, but the feedback stabbed its way through the pathetic barrier. His jaw worked, his cheek muscles twitched, and he saw the same strain in the taut, clenched faces of his men. The Rhinos came no closer, and there were no other enemy troop movements. Fort Goreck was besieged by absolute stillness, and that would

be enough.

The third day of the siege was a hell of sleeplessness and claustrophobic rage. Five Guardsmen attempted to desert. Corvus had them flogged, then shot.

As the sun set, Corvus could see the end coming. There would be no holding out. The shield he had erected was torture, and madness would tear the base apart. The only thing left was a final, glorious charge that would deny the enemy the kind of triumph that he clearly desired. But how to make that attack if the troops would succumb to the anthem before they even reached the enemy front lines?

Corvus covered his ears with his hands, trying to block the whine, trying to dampen it just enough so he could think. Silence would have been the greatest gift the Emperor could bestow upon him.

Instead, he was granted the next greatest: inspiration.

The medicae centre was on the ground floor of the command block. Corvus found the medic, and explained what was required. The man blanched and refused. Corvus ordered him to do as he said. Still the medic protested. Corvus put his laspistol to the man's head, and that was convincing. Just.

The process took all night. At least, for the most part, the men didn't resist being rendered deaf. Some seemed almost relieved to be free of the feedback whine. Most submitted to the procedure with slack faces and dead looks. The men had become creatures of stoic despair held together and animated by the habits of discipline. Corvus watched yet another patient, blood pouring from his ears, contort on a gurney. At least, he thought, he was giving the soldiers back their pride for the endgame.

There wasn't time to inoculate the entire base contingent against the anthem, so Corvus settled on the best, most experienced squads. That would be enough. They were Imperial Guard, and they would give the traitor forces something to think about.

Morning came. Though one more enemy gunship had landed during the night, the enemy's disposition otherwise remained unchanged. His eyes rough as sand from sleeplessness, Corvus inspected his assembled force. The soldiers looked like the walking dead, unworthy of the glory they were about to find. Well, he would give it to them anyway, and they could thank him in the Emperor's light. He glanced at the rest of the troops. He would be abandoning them to their fate. He shrugged. They were doomed regardless, and at least he had enforced loyalty up to the last. He could go to his grave knowing that he had permitted no defection to Chaos.

He had done his duty.

He had earned his glory.

'Open the gates,' he roared, and wished he could hear the strength of his shout over the shriek of the feedback. The sentries couldn't hear him either,

but his gesture was clear, and the wall of Fort Goreck opened for the last time.

There are songs that have been written about the final charge of Colonel Corvus Parthamen. But they are not sung in the mess halls of the Imperial Guard, and they are not stirring battle hymns. They are mocking, obscene doggerel, and they are snarled, rather than sung, with venomous humour, in the corridors of dark ships that ply the warp like sharks. A few men of the Imperium do hear it, in their terminal moments, as their positions are overrun by the hordes of Chaos. They do not appreciate it any more than Corvus would have.

The charge was a rout. The men ran into las-fire and bolter shells. They were blown to pieces by cannon barrage. They were shredded by chainswords and pulped by armoured fists. Still, they made it further down the hill then even Corvus could have hoped. A coherent force actually hit the Chaos front lines and did some damage before being annihilated. Their action might have seemed like the glorious heroism of nothing-to-lose desperation. But the fact that not a single man took cover, not a one did anything but run straight ahead, weapon firing indiscriminately, revealed the truth: they were running to their deaths, and glad of the relief.

Corvus was the last. It took him a moment to notice that he was alone, what with the joy of battle and the ecstasy of being free of the whine. He was still running forward, running to his glory, but he wondered now why there didn't seem to be any shots aimed at him. Or why the squad of Chaos Space Marines ahead parted to let him pass. He faltered, and then he saw who was waiting for him.

The monster bulked huge in what had once been Terminator armour, but was now a buzzing, festering exoskeleton. Flies swarmed from the funnels above his shoulders and the lesions in the corrupted ceramite. His single-horned helmet transformed the being's final human traces into the purely daemonic. His grip on his giant scythe was relaxed.

Corvus saw just how powerful disease made flesh could be. He charged anyway, draining his laspistol, then pulling his chainsword. He swung at the Herald of Nurgle. Typhus whipped the Manreaper around. The movement was as rapid as it was casual and contemptuous. He hit Corvus with the shaft and shattered his hip. Corvus collapsed in the dirt. He bit down on his scream. Typhus loomed over him.

'Kill me,' Corvus spat. 'But know that I fought you to the end. I have my own victory.'

Typhus made a sound that was the rumble of giant hives. Corvus realized he had just heard laughter. 'Kill you?' Typhus asked. His voice was deep. It was smooth as a deliquescent corpse. 'I haven't come to kill you. I have come to teach you my anthem.'

Through his pain, Corvus managed his own laugh. 'I will never sing it.'

‘Really? But you have already. You believe you serve order and light, but, like your carrion emperor, everything you do blasts hope and rushes towards entropy. Look what you did to your men. You have served me well, my son. You and your brother, both.’

Corvus fought against the epiphany, but it burst over his consciousness with sickly green light. The truth took him, and infected him. He saw his actions, he saw their consequences, and he saw whose glory he had truly been serving. And as the pattern took shape for him, so did a sound. He heard the anthem, and he heard its music. There was melody there, and he was part of it. Surrender flooded his system, and the triumphant shape of Typhus filled his dying vision. Corvus’s jaw snapped open. His throat contorted with ecstatic agony, and he became one with Ligeta’s final choir.

BITTER END

Sarah Cawkwell

For many years, he had made bargains, accords and dark pacts, both with powers he could name and several more that he dared not. He could not remember the last time he had merely requested something and the Imperium had provided it. In the days of his hated and enforced servitude to the Corpse-Emperor, he had but to requisition something and it was his.

Now, whenever he wanted something, Huron Blackheart simply reached out with the might of his loyal Red Corsairs and he took it. His greedy, grasping claws closed around objects, people and entire star systems and stole them away. He looted and plundered, he stole and he murdered. Occasionally though, he would come upon a treasure that he could not simply claim.

When this happened, he would be roused from the shadows in which he now existed and he would hunt down his quarry in an entirely different manner. He would sit down with agents of the most powerful and most influential and he would talk. He would barter and negotiate, bringing his considerable charisma and cunning to the fore and he would make more deals.

His reputation preceded him wherever he went and many wisely shied away from reaching any sort of arrangement with the Tyrant of Badab, fearing for their lives. But there were many more who boldly sealed their agreements with him in blood.

Sometimes, Huron Blackheart even kept his word.

This had been an agri-world once. But in the wake of an exterminatus it had become uninhabitable. Its given name was lost in history, leaving it with the identifier that had been bestowed upon it during the halcyon days of the Great Crusade. Eighty-Three Fourteen was a wasteland. Nothing grew here any

more and the only things that lived were the most tenacious of bacteria. The seas had boiled away, leaving vast expanses of arid ground that was cracked and blistered. The ferocity of the bombardment had broken open the crust and disturbed something deep in the planet's core. Volcanic lava bubbled up through the wounds in the earth and spilled across its ruined surface like blood. There was a constant smouldering heat haze that loaned everything a slightly distorted, unreal appearance.

It was a prime example of an inhospitable environment but the gigantic figures making their steady way across its broken surface were not in the slightest bit bothered by the poisoned air or the excruciating heat. They walked without tiring, keeping up a pace they could sustain for many days if they so desired. They had marched to war in this way many times. But on this day, there was no war to be had. This was a deputation sent to accompany their lord and master to a summit.

Huron Blackheart walked in the midst of half a dozen of his Red Corsairs, the only one not wearing a helm. The countless implants and prosthetics that held his brain within what remained of his skull meant that wearing a tactical armour helm caused him great discomfort. Additionally, for the most part, it was such a laborious and time-consuming process to re-wire sections of his cranial implants to accept a helm that it was little more than a hindrance. The complex, wheezing workings of his replacement lungs and respiratory system filtered the atmosphere in much the same way as a helmet anyway; and thus the choking, sulphuric air had no effect on him at all. Bareheaded, he stood out as unique amidst the group.

He could have made this journey alone but had elected to field a show of strength. He was wily and astute, blessed with cunning and guile like no other. But he did not trust the individual with whom he was dealing.

It had been a tedious process setting up this meeting. Dengesha had not been prepared to travel to Huron Blackheart's stronghold deep in the heart of the Maelstrom and neither did the Blood Reaver care to board a ship almost entirely populated by warp-witches. He had used sorcerers for his own ends before, of course. Indeed, it had been his own cabal who had suggested Dengesha as the best possible candidate for the task. Increasingly heated exchanges had taken place until an impasse had been reached. Neutral ground was the solution.

On a rocky outcrop overlooking the volcanic plains of a world that had once teemed with life, the shape of another giant could be made out. A baroque silhouette, picked out by the weak rays of the sickly yellow sun, stood alone. One of Huron's retinue pointed upwards with the muzzle of a bolter, indicating the other's presence.

'I see him,' Huron said, simply. 'I told you he would come.' A deep chuckle came from his ravaged throat. 'He could not help himself.'

Dengesha took no sobriquet in order to convey his greatness. It was not in his nature to embrace an honorific that extolled his deeds to the outside world. He was no Despoiler or Betrayer. He chose instead to let his actions speak for themselves. For centuries he had stood at the head of the Heterodox, a cabal of sorcerers who, it was rumoured, had splintered centuries earlier from the Word Bearers. Dengesha was said to have studied the heart of Chaos Undivided for more than five thousand years and as such, his well of knowledge ran deep.

There was nothing about Dengesha that suggested such great age. His visage was timeless and its individual features unimpressive. He bore several scars on his face but more than this were the countless runes and brands that were seared into his skin. They writhed and twisted now under Huron's scrutiny, living things that spoke of a true disciple of the dark powers. He felt no discomfort in the sorcerer's presence. He was fully at ease with his own confidence.

The two Space Marines, the warrior and the psyker, had moved to meet one another within a cave in the rock face. Neither's attendant retinues were with them as per the terms of their agreement.

The cave had once been a natural wonder and the source of a wellspring that had kept the local agricultural workers provided with water. As high as a refinery tower within, the cave was studded with broken, jagged stalagmites and stalactites that glittered with seams of semi-precious rock. Inside this cave, high above the shattered plains, was the only moisture remaining anywhere on the planet.

The underground spring that had once nourished crops and quenched the thirst of thousands of Imperial workers was now a toxic sink hole, steaming and roiling gently. Periodically, air would escape from a fissure and expand with a rush, spraying boiling water in all directions. It spattered against the armour of the two giants who stood face-to-face. Neither gave ground for some time and then the psyker broke the stalemate with a bitter greeting.

'Blood Reaver.'

Huron greeted the sorcerer in kind and they considered each other in further mute, candid appreciation for a while. Their eyes locked and the sorcerer's head tipped slightly to one side. The master of the Red Corsairs felt the faintest brush on his mind as the other attempted a psychic evaluation. The resultant sharp intake of breath brought a smile.

'Difficulties, Dengesha?'

'You are no psyker and yet you are warded… what is it that shields your mind from my sight?'

'Are you so disappointed? Should you not be wary of being so free with the admission that you are invading my thoughts without my permission?' Huron's voice was grating and harsh, dragged from replacement vocal cords

and a vox unit that had been tuned and retuned until it sounded as close to human as it could. Which was not very.

‘You know my nature, Lord Huron. It is, after all, why you sought me out. Now answer my question.’ Dengesha’s words were demanding, yet his tone remained deferential. Huron approved of the approach. ‘What is it that grants you this protection?’

‘Perhaps you should tell me what you have heard?’ The question was thrown back at the sorcerer who folded his arms across his chest.

‘I have heard,’ he said, choosing his words carefully, ‘in rumours whispered throughout the Eye that the four favour you. You carry a boon they granted you. I have heard that something walks at your side and grants you certain… benefits.’

‘You are very well informed.’ Dengesha took another sharp intake of breath and Huron continued. ‘Does that surprise you, sorcerer? Do you taste envy? Are you curious as to why it is that the dark powers see fit to grant me such a gift? Look closely, Dengesha. Tell me what you see.’

The sorcerer considered the Red Corsair for a few moments. He looked the warrior up and down. A giant clad in desecrated red armour with so many augmetics and implants that he looked more like a blighted tech-priest or enginseer than the scourge of the Imperium. The metal-plated head shook slightly and a quirk of amusement twitched the lipless mouth.

‘No, Dengesha. Look *properly*. Use your witch-sight.’

The sorcerer *looked*. And he *saw*.

The word *hamadrya* had never been a part of Huron Blackheart’s vocabulary until the day he had been reborn. There had been many deals made in those few days when he had hovered in the grey mists that lingered between life and death. His body had been left all but useless in the wake of the Star Phantoms assault on the Palace of Thorns and without the anchor of its corporeal weight, his soul had been free to wander at will.

Nobody knew who – or what – he had consorted with in those days. But if the thought was never expressed aloud, all of the Red Corsairs knew that their lord and master had to have made *some* pact. He could not have survived otherwise, despite the ceaseless labours of his most faithful. They could repair the physical damage to their Chapter Master’s body, but that was all.

But none ever asked of the events that had transpired and Huron Blackheart never volunteered the information.

The hamadrya had begun its life as a *thought*. A potentiality. A tendril of insubstantial warp-stuff that draped itself invisibly across Huron’s mantle. Over weeks, months and years it had become something more tangible. In its earliest stages, it was nothing more than a wisp. A curl of smoky air that lingered around the warrior’s shoulder like a mist snake wrapping itself

protectively around him. Huron himself seemed either oblivious or indifferent to its presence, but over time began to notice that he was developing a sensitivity and then a resistance to psychic intrusions.

The more he realised this, the stronger the warding became until the ethereal presence at his shoulder took on a more corporeal form. Sometimes it was reptilian. Sometimes avian. Other times simian. Always animalistic and always no larger than the breadth of the warrior's shoulder span. Others could see it, but never for long. Most of the time it could only be glimpsed briefly out of the corner of the eye, leaving the viewer wondering if they had seen it at all.

It granted Huron Blackheart an extra layer of power that boosted an already over-inflated sense of ego. But it had limitations. It was a creature of the warp, after all.

The sorcerer *looked*. And he *saw*.

'I confess, my Lord, that I did not believe the rumours to be true,' he confessed. He had considered the tale of the familiar to be nothing more than a figment of the mad Tyrant's overwrought imagination. Yet his witch-sight gave him a unique view. 'I have never seen its like before. Is this what they call the hamadrya?'

'Indeed it is. And you would do well not to concern yourself further with its origins or its purpose. Consider instead the question my agent put to you.' Always quick to the point, Huron Blackheart did not care to linger on matters past.

'Yes, Lord Huron.' Dengesha bowed from the waist. 'I consider it a great honour that you seek my assistance in this matter. I understand that your… blessing loses power; that it becomes weaker the further from the heart of the Maelstrom you travel. In conjunction with your own cabal…' There was unmistakable superiority in Dengesha's tone as he said the word, 'I have determined what you need to overcome this limitation.'

'The hamadrya is a thing of the warp,' Huron said. He drummed his fingers idly against his armour plated thigh. The noise reverberated through the cavernous chamber, the acoustics oddly distorted. 'It draws its strength from the powers therein. And the further from its source I travel…' He broke off and raised his head to study Dengesha. 'My cabal have told me what I need. A potent soul, shackled by arcane powers. The hamadrya can feed from its torment for all eternity. But my sorcerers, strong as they are… cannot do this one thing.'

Huron's red, artificial eye whirred softly as it focused. 'Give me my solution, Dengesha and we will share the spoils of war.'

'You need a potent soul.'

'I have found such a thing. Sister Brigitta of the Order of the Iron Rose.'

‘I have heard of this Order and of this woman. The self-proclaimed saviour of her people. She who bears the sins of a generation on her shoulders.’

‘Aye. One of the faithful. A powerful symbol.’

‘You need a suitable vessel. Such a thing will not be easy to locate, my Lord. It could take many long months of searching…’

‘You underestimate my resources, Dengesha.’ Huron’s twisted face distorted in a smile again and he twisted a loop on his belt bringing an object slowly into view.

The bottle was exquisite. Deep, emerald green in colour, it was a fusion of bottle and vial with a wide lip tapering to a long, slim neck that fed into a small oval bowl. It was encased within beautiful fretwork, wrought from copper or brass or some other burnished metal that snaked around its delicate surface.

‘My cabal attached this vessel to my belt,’ said Huron. ‘They told me that only another sorcerer could remove it, that if I were to touch it myself, the power would be tainted.’ He shifted his hip slightly so that it was facing Dengesha, who snapped open the belt loop, taking the bottle in his hands. He could feel its imbued power; a thrum of psychic energy that made his hands vibrate gently as he held it. Huron studied him.

‘On the understanding that you will give me what I ask for, I make a gift of this vessel to you so that you may work whatever fell deeds necessary. Do you accept?’

‘Gladly, my lord. Such an arcane item… such a *relic* must have cost you dearly. Where did you locate it?’

‘My sources are many and varied. Do not bother yourself with detail. Is it adequate for its purpose?’

‘More than adequate.’ Dengesha studied the bottle in admiration for a while, then with a series of hand movements, caused it to disappear. It was little more than cheap theatrics and it did nothing to change the expression on Huron Blackheart’s artificial face. ‘This Sister Brigitta of yours will be heavily guarded, of course. I will need absolutely no distractions whilst I perform the binding.’

‘Leave that side of the bargain to me, master sorcerer. My Red Corsairs will distract whatever pitiful forces guard her and you will take your coterie and perform your rituals. You will present me with what I want and in return, I give the Heterodox the world in her charge for your chapels and its people for,’ he gave a creaking shrug, ‘whatever you see fit.’ His augmetic eye darkened briefly as though he blinked, a slow, thoughtful thing that was somehow unsettling. ‘Do we have an agreement?’

‘A world and its subjects? My lord, that is… very generous of you.’

Huron shrugged. ‘My Corsairs will still take what spoils we desire, but it is not beyond me to show gratitude and generosity. Now tell me, Dengesha of

the Heterodox, do we have an agreement?'

'We do.'

There were many who boldly sealed their agreements in blood. Dengesha of the Heterodox was one such individual.

Sometimes, Huron Blackheart even kept his word.

The temple burned.

Since time immemorial, the Order of the Iron Rose had been cloistered within their monument to the Emperor of Mankind. A dizzyingly aesthetic building, the temple had stood proudly within well-guarded walls for countless generations. The sisters lived their studious lives quietly, only leaving at times of war when their fierce battle skills were most needed. Then, their comparative gentleness could easily be forgotten in the face of their roaring battle madness.

Sister Brigitta was the incumbent canoness, but had always eschewed the title, preferring to remain on the same level as her sisters. She was dearly beloved by all who knew her. Intelligent and insightful, her words of wisdom on any number of subjects were treated as precious jewels to be collected and admired.

She stood now, clad in her copper-coloured battle armour, her black and silver-flecked hair streaming in the breeze. The armour forced her to stand upright with a grace and dignity that added weight to her command. Her jaw was tightened and her face bore an implacable expression as she stared down from the highest chamber of the steeple at the slaughter taking place far below.

Tears ran down her face, but not of fear. They were tears of rage and regret that the sanctity of the temple had been violated. At either side, her two most trusted lieutenants also wept at the wanton destruction that rampaged below.

They had come without warning. They had struck fast and they had struck without mercy. The loyal Palatine Guard who protected the sacred grounds had done an admirable job of holding the enemy at bay but ultimately, they were only human. What hope could they have against the Adeptus Astartes?

Sister Brigitta surveyed the carnage. Seemingly countless forces of the giant Space Marines pitted against the pitiable wall of humanity. That delicate wall of mortal flesh was the only thing standing between the Chaos forces and the sisters.

From here, she could not see the faces of the brave guardsmen who died in their futile efforts to protect the Order, but she imagined that each shared the same look of zealous ferocity. The Order of the Iron Rose preached that fear made one weak and had no place on the battlefield.

The barking report of bolter fire filled the air and the murderous whine of chainblades was all-pervading. The screams of the dying were agony to listen

to and the ground below was already running scarlet with the blood of the fallen. Some of the Chaos warriors fell upon their victims, hacking and dismembering. The sight sickened Sister Brigitta. Beside her, Sister Anastasia murmured a soft litany, commending the souls of the departed to the Emperor.

'We must meet in the central chamber,' the Canoness finally said, tearing her eyes from the slaughter. 'Gather the Order, Sister Anastasia.'

'Yes, sister.' Anastasia left immediately to carry out her superior's command and the Canoness stood for several moments longer, salt-tears running down her weather-tanned face.

'The Order of the Iron Rose will stand to the last, traitors,' she promised, raising her voice to be heard above the growing wind.

The Red Corsairs had dealt with the pathetic human threat in short order. Even as the last guardsman died, pierced on the end of a chainblade, Huron Blackheart's warriors had turned their weapons on the temple walls and gates. They had been erected over the course of many years by master craftsmen and artisans.

What had taken humanity years to perfect and construct was levelled in minutes by four traitor Space Marines and their multi-meltas. The irony of that equation amused Huron Blackheart enough to make him laugh out loud.

He had accompanied his forces to the surface of this world but had taken no part in the battle. He had stood to one side with Dengesha and his cabal of sorcerers, watching with displaced indifference as they butchered their way forwards.

Another direct hit on the wall finally reduced it to molten slag, a huge cloud of pale steam billowing outwards from the destruction and coating the armour of the warriors in a fine film of grit. The Red Corsairs did not wait for their master's order to proceed. They crossed the threshold of the sacred temple and met the second wave of PDF forces with renewed vigour.

Dengesha moved forwards dispassionately, his cabal moving with him like a flock of birds flittering around their mother. Fighting independently, each warrior-psyker was capable of incalculable destruction. Fighting as a unit, they were imbued with such power that no mortal man could look upon the forces of the warp flowing from them and hope to survive.

Dark lightning flickered from fingertips, fire burst from the palms of their hands and the very earth itself trembled where they trod. The sheer, raw power they exuded was tremendous and Huron Blackheart watched their performance with something akin to raw hunger on his face.

Three guardsmen were incinerated with a blast from Dengesha's fingers, their bodies catching fire as though they were nothing more than dead wood. They died in terrible agony, screaming and begging for mercy. Huron watched as their ravaged faces slowly melted, like candles burning down to the taper.

Another unfortunate soldier was caught in the mesmerising stare of one of the Heterodox and found himself unable to move. With a press of psychic power, the sorcerer burst the guardsman's brain like a ripe fruit. The man fell to his knees, blood and grey matter dribbling from his ears before he pitched over, face first into the dust.

The winds had whipped up to a frenzy now, but these were no natural weather conditions. This was the work of the Heterodox and the winds carried maddening whispers, half-heard promises and dire threats. They blew from the very heart of the warp itself and plucked at the souls of men with ethereal claws. Some who were caught in its path went mad in an instant, hacking and slashing at phantasms only they could see or hear. Others stood their ground more firmly, litanies of warding on their lips.

But each was slain. Each pitiful stalk was reaped and the more death and destruction there was, the more powerful the cabal seemed to grow until, with a feverish cry to the dark gods of Chaos Undivided, the Heterodox unleashed the true horror of their collective.

From without, the sounds of battle echoed. From within, the sisters of the Order radiated a calm composure. A small order, barely one hundred Sisters of Battle had gathered together in the central chamber. They were all clad in armour similar to Sister Brigitta's, although where hers was a burnished copper hue, theirs were a deeper colour, a reddish bronze that glinted in the light cast by the candles and sconces on the walls.

'Our time here is short, sisters,' the canoness began when she had Anastasia's assurance that all were present. 'Our enemy has breached the gate and they will soon dare to desecrate the most sacred inner sanctum of our beloved Order.' Brigitta reached up as she spoke and braided her thick hair into a plait that hung like a rope down her back. None of the Order would go into battle with their hair loose. It was an affectation, but an important one. Brigitta's visual reminder of the very physical pre-battle preparation instilled focus amongst the gathered sisters. In the ensemble, others mirrored her action.

'We will not stand and allow that to happen. We will hold out against these intruders for as long as the Emperor gives us the strength. We will stand our ground until the bitter end. We fight the gravest of traitors, my sisters. We battle against fallen angels. Traitor Space Marines. And they bring witch-kin with them.'

A palpable ripple of dismay ran through the sisters. They had stood proud against countless enemies. Aliens, cultists, even a preceptory of Battle Sisters who had lost their way, and they had always triumphed. They had fought alongside Space Marines many times. But the Order of the Iron Rose had never fought *against* them.

Brigitta raised a hand for silence and she got it immediately. From outside the fortified walls of the temple, the muffled sounds of gunfire and terrible, bloody death could be heard, filling in the pauses in her impassioned speech.

'We are the beloved of the Emperor. We are the Sisters of the Iron Rose. We stand as a reminder that the flower of that name is protected by thorns. We will not allow these foul traitors to reach out and pluck us from existence without exacting our payment in blood first.'

She raised her bolter to her shoulder and cast her eyes around the assembled battle sisters. 'We will make our stand in the rear courtyard. If we draw the whoresons out into the open, they may exact less damage on our temple.' It was unlikely, and most of the Order knew it, but they were words that encouraged her sisters. Brigitta was under no illusions; the battle that was coming towards them could well be the last thing any of them saw. But they would die as they had lived, defending the Emperor's legacy.

The clouds above the temple boiled, swirling together in a dark mass of intangible horror. The wind was now a gale, screaming its unnatural, elemental fury across the surface of the planet and whipping up the detritus from the fallen walls into plumed, choking columns. Lightning coruscated within the cloud and as it moved, it picked up dust and debris, including corpses of the fallen.

The Chaos-driven maelstrom moved with almost agonising slowness across the battlefield. Beneath it, the earth split and wept streams of tar and sulphur. Those who still stood were either knocked from their feet by the quaking of the ground beneath them, or they were caught up in the storm's passage and sucked, screaming, into its abyssal depths.

From what remained of the temple walls, valiant surviving forces turned the defence guns on the cabal who stood as a pack, their hands raised, palms upward, to the skies that bubbled overhead. Each of the twelve was the perfect mirror image of the others. Whilst all were wearing horned helms, their stance was arrogance itself.

The armoured turrets roared defiance and one of the sorcerers was destroyed, his torso chewed apart by the stream of high-velocity shells. The cabal did not change position but, as one, their heads turned towards the weapons mounted on the wall.

Dengesha made a slicing motion with his hand and the winds changed direction and increased speed, moving with impossible haste towards its new target.

Sister Brigitta stood defiant amidst her battle sisters. She was a woman who had lived a life filled with devotion to the Emperor who she loved every bit as much as she cared for every woman who stood around her. Their honour and

courage now, in the face of overwhelming odds, was a reward unlike any other.

From the youngest novice to Sister Anastasia, with whom she had fought in many engagements, she knew each one of them. She knew their life histories. She knew their hopes and she knew their fears. She was no psyker, but you could not live your whole life within an Order and not gain remarkable skills of perception.

She loved her sisters and though she may die here today, that love would bring her faith and the strength to stand her ground.

Her thoughts were wrenched back to the present as she heard the echo of a crashing thump in the distance. The sound of weapons being brought to bear against the gate.

'They come,' she said, her voice low and soft, yet carrying such authority that every one of the Order stood straighter. There was the sound of weapons being readied, of magazines being slammed into place, of swords being drawn from sheaths. There were overlaying, incomprehensible litanies and prayers.

Another sickening *crump* against the gate.

'We will stand defiant,' Brigitta said, raising her bolter above her head. '*Ave Imperator!*'

The battle cry was echoed, but was drowned out by the sound of an explosion that blew in the ancient, stained crystal windows as the enemy breached the gates.

'Be ready! Hold firm! Do not doubt in yourself for one moment. Trust to your sisters and trust to your blessed weapons. *A morte perpetua. Domine, libra nos!*'

Battle cries were torn from their throats and one hundred Battle Sisters took up arms and prepared to make their stand.

The maelstrom ripped the guns from their mountings as though they were plants placed in dry soil. The guardsmen who had manned them were pulverised by the shrapnel from the destruction as the howling, unholy winds ripped the turrets into nothing more than shards. Mangled pieces of weaponry tore through their bodies, cutting them to ribbons and, in one young soldier's case, decapitating them. The spiralling morass of metal and ruined flesh added its mass to the storm and above the temple, the skies began to rain droplets of blood.

At the final gate, Huron Blackheart's traitors had set melta charges against the armoured portal. The blocky devices clamped to the towering hinges with a metallic clang and the Corsairs withdrew. The bombs detonated with a wash of heat and an earth-shattering explosion that rocked the ground.

Slowly, Dengesha's cabal ceased the link with their powers and the violent, raging winds began to subside. The first obstacle had been overcome. The

second – and their objective – lay behind the devastated walls.

The Chaos sorcerer turned his helmeted head towards Huron. ‘You must not kill her,’ he said through the vox-bead in the Tyrant’s ear. ‘If she dies, her soul will be as good as useless to us. Do not let your barbarian horde rip the Order apart without first isolating the mark.’

A twitch of irritation showed on Huron’s face. ‘I am not completely without intellect, Dengesha.’ The fingers that were wrapped around his massive battle axe tightened visibly. The sorcerer’s face could not be seen, but Huron could *sense* his smirk. ‘I will be taking care of dear Sister Brigitta myself.’

‘My *sincerest* apologies I did not mean to imply you were anything but knowledgeable in the ways of warp majesty, my lord.’ His sarcasm was biting and Huron turned away from the sorcerer cursing the necessity of their temporary association. It would be over soon. The Order of the Iron Rose would be obliterated and he would take his prize.

He comforted himself with the thought. In due course, his familiar would feast from a soul most worthy of its hunger.

Striding across the courtyard, Huron surveyed the damage with an approving expression. What remained of the gate was barely recognisable as any sort of portal. Broken spurs of plasteel jutted in all directions and the metal composite that had been mixed into the gate for reinforcement was little more than dust. Occasionally, more dust would fall in a pathetic clump from the walls either side of the former door.

The Red Corsairs strode forwards, warriors with a clear objective and purpose. In the eyes of the Imperium, they were renegades. But they were still Space Marines and the regimental mindset came easily to them. Until the fighting started, at least.

‘Listen to me, my Corsairs,’ said Huron across the vox. ‘When we locate the sisters, do not touch their leader. She belongs to me.’ He addressed the entire group, but knew that not all of them would truly hear him. ‘The toys we have despatched thus far have been an easy enemy and they will have sent out the word for aid. By the time that aid arrives, there will be nothing left but a smoking ruin.’

A few scattered roars of approval drew a nod from Huron. ‘What we will come up against in there will be more challenging, but do not falter. We come to take a prize that will make us even greater than we are. The Imperium of Mankind and their pathetic Corpse-Emperor will rue the day they ever named us traitor.’

There were grunts of acknowledgement across the board, some coherent, others less so. Just as his band of renegades were drawn from a vast background of different Chapters, so their levels of sanity varied. Huron cared little for the butchers amongst his followers. They served a purpose in war but when it came to more delicate matters, they were an encumbrance.

Fortunately, he had enough sane followers to keep the borderline berserkers in check.

‘Then we move with all haste to the final stage of our action here. Find the sisters. Kill those you must, but leave the canoness alive.’

Without further hesitation, the Red Corsairs streamed into the sacred Temple of the Blessed Dawn.

They rampaged through the temple without thought for preservation. Marble floors cracked and split beneath their heavy tread. Chainblades chewed through statue and carvings alike, making firewood of huge portraits of sisters and saints. Some riches were left intact. Over the years, the Red Corsairs had all developed an eye for goods that would please their lord and master for, it was said, his collection of Imperial relics was beyond compare. They would retrace their steps before they departed and gather up such treasures, along with the weapons of the fallen. For them, that was the most valuable reward.

Their plundering steps ultimately took them through the central chamber where the sisters of the Order had recently gathered. Dengesha nodded approvingly.

‘This will be a good place for the ritual,’ he said.

‘Then you remain here sorcerer, and make whatever preparation is necessary. We will seek out Sister Brigitta and I will bring her to you personally.’ Huron ran his tongue over his metal teeth in a parody of hunger. He swung his battle axe easily and it chewed its way through a beautifully painted rendition of some long-ago battle at which the Sisters had been victorious. Its shredded remnants dangled to the ground and the memory of the great war was lost after no more than a single stroke.

The first two Red Corsairs to throw open the heavy door that led out to the courtyard were torn apart by incoming bolter fire. The Battle Sisters had kept their weapons trained on the exit and the moment it opened they had pulled the triggers instantly. The explosive rounds buried themselves in the armoured hides of the traitors and burst them apart in a storm of gore and ceramite shards. The bodies disintegrated messily but their sacrifice bought those that followed enough time to bring their weapons to bear and return fire. Four sisters were thrown backwards, unbalancing several more. Before they were back on their feet, the Red Corsairs had flooded into the courtyard and the fight began in earnest.

The Sisters of Battle were greater in number than the Red Corsairs and their armour afforded them a degree of protection. But they were facing an undisciplined rabble whose tactics were unpredictable at best and unfathomable at worst. But the Battle Sisters held their position, clustered around the canoness like a sea of bronze with a copper island at their centre. They formed a circle around where she stood on the rim of a fountain, crying

out orders to her warriors.

The initial firefight did not last long. At a word from the Tyrant, the Red Corsairs pressed forwards, chainblades whining, and began to cut their way through the serried ranks of women. The ring surrounding the canoness grew tighter and smaller.

The stink of ruined flesh and spent bolter rounds was strong in the air and so much smoke rose from the detonations that it choked the courtyard with a fog of bloody vapour and fyceline.

'Courage, sisters!' Brigitta's voice was clear, like a bell sounding through the uproar. 'Remember your teachings! You tread the path of righteousness. Though it be paved with broken glass, you will walk it barefoot…'

Brigitta paused in the recital as she watched Sister Anastasia's broken body fall to the ground. A grief unlike any she had ever known before passed through her with a shudder. She summoned up every ounce of her considerable inner strength and brought her bolter to bear on the hated enemy. Her voice rose through the noise once again.

'Though it crossers rivers of fire, we will pass over them…'

Her voice was strong and did not waver, but the strength of her armed guard was failing. Not through lack of zeal or fire; if she were to take any reward from this abysmal horror before her, it was that her beloved sisters died honourably and bravely. But it was failing through sheer loss of its numbers. What had once been a ring that had been several bodies deep now presented a barrier of barely a dozen of her sisters.

A number of the traitor Red Corsairs had been felled, but their armour, better and more intricate than that of the Battle Sisters, deflected more and protected them for longer. Brigitta realised with a sinking heart that they were probably not even dead. That their enhanced physiology would aid their recovery and that they might rise to fight another day. And she *despised* them for it. She loathed their continued existence. To her mind, they represented the worst kind of faithless traitors the Imperium could have conceived.

She abhorred them for tearing apart the temple, her home, the place where she had grown from a teenage girl to womanhood.

She…

…was bleeding.

Brigitta tasted, for the first time in her life, a tremor of fear. It was seasoned with the coppery taste of her own blood as she bit her lip hard enough to put her teeth through the delicate skin. The flavour of her own mortality gave her enough strength to complete her fervent prayer.

'Though it wanders wide, the light of the Emperor guides my – our – step.' She slammed a fresh magazine into her bolter and, letting out a screaming roar of battle rage, unleashed her full fury at the encroaching enemy.

At her feet, dead and dying sisters spilled blood and viscera across the

courtyard stones. The image of their defeat burned itself onto her retinas and branded hatred on her heart. Tears of anger and terrible, terrible grief blurred her vision, but she did not – she *would* not – falter. Not now.

She continued to fire her bolter into the enemy without caring any longer whether she hit them or not. It became an act of sheer venomous loathing.

After a few short moments, she became aware that outside her immediate sphere of awareness the sounds of battle had ceased. Only one weapon continued to fire and that was hers. It did not detract from her focus, however, and she poured ammunition at the enemy until the last bolter shell clattered to the floor.

One of the enemy, bareheaded and terrible, moved from the pack to stand before her.

'You are Sister Brigitta of the Order of the Iron Rose,' he stated. It was not a question. She looked up into his inhuman face and drew in a rasping breath. She had seen un-helmed Space Marines warriors before and was used to their over-exaggerated features. But this… *creature*… that stood before her was so far removed from anything even remotely human that she felt, against her will, the urge to scream in incoherent contempt. A poisonous air of evil came from him and she felt sick to her stomach.

She began to quietly recite litanies of faith to herself, never once taking her gaze from this augmetic monstrosity. She neither confirmed nor denied the accusation of her identity but instead ripped the combat blade from its sheath at her side and plunged it the traitor's throat. Blackheart sighed wearily before catching her wild lunge on the back of his claw. Then, with excruciating care, not wanting to kill her outright, he backhanded her into unconsciousness.

She was like a rag doll in his arms, limp and lifeless, and as he carried Sister Brigitta into the chamber, Huron Blackheart marvelled as he always did at the papery inefficacy of the human body. He wondered how it was they had *any* resilience without the enhancements that he shared with all his gene-bred brothers. Brigitta's face where he had struck her was distorted. He had fractured her cheekbone at the very least and purple bruising was swelling up around her jaw. Her braided hair had come loose and hung freely down.

Dengesha turned to study them. He had removed his helm and Huron was struck once again by the wriggling sigils that marked the sorcerer's face. 'You did not kill her?'

'She is merely unconscious. Allow me a little credit.'

'Then lay her next to the vessel and I can begin the ritual.' Already Dengesha had made the preparations for the rite that would bind the potent soul to the cursed vial. The green bottle lay on its side, an innocuous and inanimate object. Around the chamber, Dengesha had marked out a number of unreadable symbols, each one drawn at the point of what formed the eight-

pointed star of Chaos. One each of his cabal stood at seven of the points, the top-most remaining free and evidently waiting for Dengesha's leisure.

Huron moved forward and dumped Brigitta's body without any ceremony on the ground where the sorcerer indicated. He noted as he did so that the sigils drawn on the floor were marked in blood; most likely from that of the dead soldiers.

'You should step outside the borders of the mark, my lord. Once we channel the powers necessary to perform the binding, they will be potent.'

From beyond the broken walls of the temple, the distant sounds of shouting could be heard. The assistance that the temple guards had called for was finally arriving. Huron nodded to several of his warriors who moved wordlessly out of the chamber.

'They cannot be allowed to enter this place whilst I am working. The balance of this work is delicate.'

'My men will keep them away.' Huron took several steps back. 'Trust to their abilities to do that. I, however, will remain.'

'As you wish.'

Huron Blackheart had witnessed many rituals of this kind in his life, but he had never seen one driven with such determination and single-minded focus. He watched Dengesha closely as the sorcerer moved back to take his point at the tip of the star and listened intently to the words that he recited. It did him little good, as the sorcerer spoke in some arcane tongue that Huron did not understand, though the inflection was clear.

The seven other members of the Heterodox echoed his words, one at a time until the chant was being repeated with a discordant, impossible to follow rhythm. The sound grew and swelled and all the while there was the underscore of another battle taking place beyond the temple walls.

A thick black substance, like tar from a pit, began to bubble up in the space marked out by the points of the star. It rose upwards, never spilling over the edge of its limits and coated first the bottle and then the unconscious Sister Brigitta in a film of inky blackness. Dengesha's chant became almost musical, as though he were singing. His eyes were fevered and his expression one of pure ecstasy.

The thick, gelatinous substance became more and more viscous and at some point during its creeping encroachment, Brigitta stirred from her unconsciousness. Realising that she was being smothered, she opened her mouth to cry out. The fluid rushed into her mouth and she began to choke on it, writhing desperately on the floor as she struggled to breathe.

As soon as that happened, Dengesha stepped forward from his position and moved to stand above her. Huron watched, leaning forward ever so slightly. This was it. This was the moment. He had made countless pacts and agreements to reach this point and so had his followers. This was the point at

which it would all pay off. Or the point at which it would fail.

Outside, the sounds of gunfire had stopped, but the Chaos sorcerer paid no heed.

Dengesha looked down at the wriggling human woman with a look of total contempt, then reached to take her arm firmly in his grip. He guided it to the glass vial and placed her hand upon it, wrapping his gauntlets around her tiny hands. He then spoke the only words that Huron could understand.

'Be forever bound.'

The oily liquid began to slowly ebb away, draining until all that remained was the faintest slick on the ground. Brigitta, who was in tremendous pain and almost frozen with terror stared at the green vial, then she stared up at the sorcerer.

Then, summoning every ounce of strength and fortitude she possessed, she spat in his face. Dengesha began to laugh, a hateful, booming sound that bounced around the walls of the chamber and resonated in everyone's vox-bead.

Then abruptly the laughter stopped and a look of utmost dread crept slowly over Dengesha's face. His fist, which had been ready to crush Brigitta's skull suddenly opened out flat. His face slackened, his posture changed and he slouched suddenly as though wearied.

And Huron smiled at him.

'What is this treachery?' The sorcerer spun around to face the Tyrant of Badab, who stood watching him with an air of amusement. 'What have you done, Blackheart?'

'Ah, Dengesha. Your fate was sealed the moment you took the vial from me. You were quite right. I needed a potent soul. And my sorcerers found me one. *Yours*, in fact. And now, with the ritual of binding complete, your soul and the vial are united. You quite literally belong to me.'

'This is not possible! There is no way you could have… your sorcerers are nothing compared to the glory of the Heterodox!'

'Ah, arrogance has been the downfall of many a brother of the Adeptus Astartes over the millennia, brother. My sorcerers may not be as powerful as you and your former cabal, but they are far more cunning.' Seemingly bored of the conversation, Huron moved around the chamber, occasionally turning over the body of a fallen soldier with his booted foot. He picked up a boltgun, empty of ammunition and dropped it back down with a clang.

Dengesha's face was fury itself and he reached out to the powers of the warp. But none of them answered him. His black, tainted soul was no longer his to command. He looked to each of his cabal in turn and for their part, they turned from him.

'You all *knew* of this,' he stated flatly. 'You betrayed me to this *cur*…'

'Come now, Dengesha. If you seek to wound my feelings, you will have to

try a lot harder than that.' Huron stooped and picked up a meltagun. 'My agents have been dealing with your cabal for months. They agree that their prospects with me and my Corsairs are more interesting than a lifetime of servitude under your leadership. It has been vexing, true – but I think you will agree that the ultimate reward is well worth it.'

On the ground, Sister Brigitta was listening to the exchange without understanding it. All she knew was that these two traitors were speaking such heresy as it was almost unbearable to be a party to.

Dengesha stared at Huron's back with a look that could have killed and perhaps once, before his soul had been plucked from his body, could have done.

'So you see, Dengesha. In a way, my promise to you is truth. Now that your Heterodox are part of my Corsairs, they will help themselves to the spoils of this world. You, however…'

The Tyrant of Badab crossed the distance between them with uncanny speed and fired the meltagun at the sorcerer. His head was vaporised and seconds later, what remained of his body crashed to the ground. Brigitta gazed up at Huron and there was a look of serene understanding on her face. Her doom was come and it was clad in the desecrated armour of the Imperium of Man.

'My faith is my shield,' she said, softly. The words rang hollow in her ears.

'No,' said Huron, equally softly as one of the claws of his hand tore through her breast and skewered her. He raised her to eye level. 'It is not. And it never was.'

She let out a sigh as she died and slid free from his claw to the floor below. Without looking at the two corpses at his feet, Huron reached up and plucked the vial from the ground, reattaching it to his belt.

Sometimes, Huron Blackheart kept his word. But this was not one of those times. He did not care who he betrayed to reach his goals. Loyal servants of the Imperium or those who served the dark gods of Chaos. It made little difference to him. The end *always* justified the means.

'Take what we need,' he said. 'And then we leave.'

'It worked perfectly.'

'Surely you did not doubt, my Lord?' Valthex turned the vial over in his hand before handing it back to Huron.

'The curse worked exactly as you said it would. Thanks to your efforts, my familiar now has the strength it needs to grant me the blessing of the four beyond the Maelstrom. Well done, Armenneus.'

'I live to serve, Blood Reaver.' Valthex dropped a low, respectful bow and Huron stalked away. Straightening himself up, the Alchemancer absently rubbed at a sigil branded into the skin of his hand.

It was not just the Tyrant who made pacts. The Patriarch would have to wait to see when he would be called upon to deliver his side of the bargain.

ON MOURNFUL WINGS

Simon Spurrier

The sky became a mirror, reflecting the ocean's anger. Tangled clouds flexed and boiled, wrestling for supremacy of the horizon.

A wall of wind and dust and water ripped from the maelstrom like a talon snatching at the land.

Someone screamed.

Everyone died.

Ica lurched awake, the memory of screaming voices withdrawing into his mind.

Around him the glider shuddered, inexpertly-fitted fuselage protesting at the pressures beyond. A rusted bolt dropped from the seal above his head and clattered on the floor.

He couldn't bring himself to care.

Dalus slept fitfully beside him. Ica wondered if he shared his twin's dark-rimmed eyes, prematurely lined features and weary, malnourished complexion. Probably. Sleep had become tortuous since… since then.

Dalus mumbled and fidgeted in his uncomfortable seat, disturbed.

The glider's descent became more pronounced and several passengers, all boys of thirteen, whispered urgent prayers of protection. A tortured creak announced the deployment of ancient landing gear.

Let it break, said a voice in Ica's head. Let it hit the runway and splinter into a thousand pieces. Let us spin along that narrow strip of plascrete above Table City, detonating like a messy citrusbloom and sitting there, half buried under granite landslides, flaming and screaming and dying.

There had been a priest in the tiny Ecclesiarchy chapel at Kultoom, a priest

with one eye and one flickering ocular implant. He had scars on both cheeks and the bulge of dog-tags concealed beneath his sackcloth robes. Sitting there in the shuddering glider, wishing for oblivion, Ica remembered the priest's words with a guilty wince. 'Seek not escape from misery in death,' the voice droned, eye clicking and whirring in the gloom, 'for He That Is Most Mighty gathers not the Selfish Dead to his side.'

The priest was dead now. Everyone in Kultoom was dead now.

The glider landed amid the rain lashed chimneys of Table City with the baby scream of salt-clogged brakes. Its confused passengers disembarked meekly.

The principal city of Gathis II was a desolate metropolis: a scaled-up echo of the tribal communities and lugubrious villages dotting the few areas of planetary dry land. Ramshackle dwellings clustered around one another for protection, smeared with the planet's only resource: chamack oil.

Produced from the pulped remains of chamack weed, the viscous sludge was exported by the Administratum as a cheap but foul-smelling sealant. Day and night the cargo gliders ferried their odoriferous loads from distant island-tribes, a whole year's harvest barely filling a single glider. Competition for access to the aquatic plantations was fierce and regularly bloody.

Ica pushed his face against rain-splattered blast shields as an enormous vessel lifted from the ground, clouds of dust writhing like gaseous tendrils.

'Wonder where they go?' Dalus said, tired-looking eyes tracking the slab of metal into the brooding rain clouds.

Ica nodded. Inside, a voice said: It doesn't matter. Nothing matters.

'Keep moving!' someone called, and both twins returned to the winding line of youths, herded along by men in thick rain-cloaks. They trudged through the skyport, between looming parades of Imperial ships with their massive, mysterious engines.

'Question not your lot in this life,' the priest had said, his his dead voice echoing through Ica's mind. 'Be content to serve Him-Upon-The-Throne – however humble your station.'

Along the line Ica could see inquisitive eyes goggling at the gargantuan treasures looming on either side. Their expressions said, 'How do they work?' 'Where do they go?' 'What's out there?' But they'd never know; never leave the rain-pocked surfaces of Gathis; never see the stars.

And nothing they had ever done would be remembered.

A building loomed ahead, archaic façade crumbling. Its steep sides, surmounted by spines and sneering gargoyles, stood incongruous among the surrounding dockyards. With growing unease Ica realised the youths were headed directly for a gaping set of loading doors on the building's side.

Above, carved from vast stone slabs, stretching in a magnificent halo of angular symmetry, was a set of stylised feathers, angular and black. Not the

graceful arcs of Administratum heraldry, with their sweeping curves and adamantium omegas; but rather squared and clipped, arranged in a brutal phalanx. And at the crux of the jagged raptor wings, watching with mute melancholia, an ivory-white death-masque cast its gaze down upon the column of youths.

A winged skull.

The sky rumbled distantly. The twins barely bothered to look up. 'Another storm,' Dalus grumbled, tinkering with his stretch-wings. Ica pushed at a ratchet joint and nodded.

'Mountain ghosts having a brawl, father?' he grinned.

The twins' father smiled, features creasing like old leather. He leaned over Ica's shoulder and helped tighten the wing-brace, tousling his son's hair warmly. 'That they are, son.'

Across the room, Dalus watched the movement closely, then returned to improving his glider with renewed vigour.

Ica had never seen so many people. The interior of the building seemed endless, ebony horizons pulling away on every side, gazing down upon an infinite ocean of young, bewildered heads.

'Every male of age thirteen to be present at Table City upon the thirteenth day of the thirteenth lunar month of every year. By Imperial command.'

Every year the same: the gliders would come to Kultoom and collect the youths. And sometimes, once in every decade, not all of them would return.

Inducted into the Imperial Navy, the rumour went.

Or sent as cannon fodder to fight the orks.

Or offered as a sacrifice to the Emperor's glory.

Or any one of a thousand different possibilities, all of them rich with uncertainty and legend.

Sent to appease the angry mountain ghosts, one rumour went.

Something far above screeched like a craghawk and a shape parted with the ceiling-shadows, resolving into a metallic platform suspended upon chains. The murmuring of thousands of youths arose throughout the chamber, a choir of fear and uncertainty.

The platform creaked to a pendulous halt far above and silence spread like a net.

The air was greasy and tense, spiderlegs scuttled up the spine and static whispered through the ears and nose.

Spotlights flickered to life, each a miniature thunderclap.

'Look,' Dalus said. Ica followed his gaze and there, threading through the crowd, were the black-robed minders who had ferried the boys from the gliders. Every so often they would stop, lizardlike, and tilt their heads, then

scurry off again in another direction. Sometimes they'd look up at the distant platform as if someone stood there, watching, directing.

And then they began to Choose. A hand would reach out and tap at a shoulder, blindly feeling for – what? And then three or four of the ebony figures would close in, dragging away each victim in a knot of limbs.

Ica had expected shrill pleas for help: oh Emperor, don't let them take me! But no, those who were taken seemed placid, cowed somehow. Not one of them cried out.

Then something stabbed at Ica's mind. Something that crawled through his brain and knew everything. Something that said, Yes, you're correct not to care. You're already dead, and you know it.

And when black-gloved hands closed on his arms and hauled him away into the shadows, he didn't cry out in alarm. He didn't even mutter a prayer under his breath because, after all, what good would it do?

Unconscious and drifting, Ica knew he'd never see Kultoom again. Never net slippery lacefish from his father's dirigible, never glide in frantic circles above the tribe's submerged chamack-patch, watching for theft-raids from neighbouring tribes.

There was no Kultoom to go back to. The dirigible had been pulped and hurled away into the shrieking skies. The other tribes had come and, unchallenged, plundered his ancestors' Chamack nurseries.

Someone slapped him, hard, and he vomited.

Next to him, Dalus said 'aack' and dribbled blood. To each side of Ica unconscious youths were dragged awake with punches and kicks, courtesy of those same black-cloaked figures from before. The one looming over him grunted, satisfied with Ica's alertness, and stepped clear. The twins traded uncertain looks.

They knelt in a line of some thirty youths – those dragged from the building in the skyport, Ica supposed – on a rocky plateau. All around them towered the colossal crags of the Razorpeak Mountains, casting their ugly shadows far across the churning seas below.

Somewhere down there, Ica thought, is Table City, where thousands of bewildered youths are climbing back aboard gliders for the journey home, thanking the Emperor and wondering what had happened to those few who had been taken…

Ica tried to remember how he'd arrived at this dizzying place, but his memory faltered. There had been pain, briefly, then the vaguest sensation of machinery and engines – yes, he recognised the sound from the skyport – rising in volume.

To himself, he said, It doesn't matter how you got here. Nobody cares.

'Chapter serfs,' said a voice, thick with authority, 'that will be all.'

The black-robed men bowed mechanically, quickly descending a stairway

hewn into the mountainside. Otherwise, the outcrop was empty, dwarfed by its parent mountain, with only a small cave in the vertical cliff-face nearby that could have concealed a person. Ica fixed his eyes on the rocky maw and tried to focus.

Something moved inside.

Something that twisted the light like mercury.

Something huge that somehow shifted with fluid grace.

Something that hulked forwards, polished facets decorated by ivory whorls, smouldering with reflected light. Panelled mirror-gauntlets curled around a blood-red staff and somewhere in the centre of the whole impossible being a pair of melancholy eyes stared out with incalculable wisdom and sadness. A metallic hood, pressed down over the sallow face, seemed to crackle with barely restrained energy.

'I am Thryn,' the behemoth said, mournful voice shivering along Ica's spine, 'Librarian Secundus of the Adeptus Astartes.'

The words meant nothing. Faces twisted by misery and fear, the youths stared as the Librarian took another step, mirror-armour shattering the light. Shoulder guards flexed, and Ica glimpsed again the mournful skull with its stretched wings, engraved upon the metal. The man's pale face drilled its hard gaze into each boy in turn.

'You have been chosen,' the voice said, 'alone among thousands. Chosen not for your strength or your courage, not for your souls or your bodies. You've been chosen because you, each in their way, already understand an immutable truth.

'You understand that you are already dead.'

Somewhere to Ica's left, a boy sobbed quietly.

'Disaster, loss, injury… a lifetime of exclusion and isolation – these are the memories you share. You must understand that whatever you feel, however great your grief, it is a mere nothing: an invisible fraction of the despair shared throughout our Imperium.'

Again something scuttled into Ica's brain, twitching its way through his memories. And when next the Librarian spoke, the voice seemed to enter Ica's very mind. 'You've been brought here to die. You must understand. Cherish your mortality. Cling to it. Today each of you will perish with such certainty that you are, in a sense, already dead – just marking time until the end.

'Behold the despair.'

And the ethereal fingers in Ica's skull sunk deeper and twisted, bringing forth...

...screaming voices, and his mother's fingernails broke, one after another, until her grip was wrenched clear and she diminished into the maelstrom, screaming his name for help...

...and howling creatures with scarlet eyes and green skin like rotten leather clashed their tusks as women screamed and babies cried and cities burnt...

...and his father's workshop disintegrated, vindictive lightning obliterating the chaff as it circulated up into the banshee skies...

...and multitudes were slaughtered, and monstrosities stalked through bloody streets, chitin clacking, and not one horrified scream was louder than any other, and to every sufferer the world is ended, their life destroyed, and it was happening a million times over...

...and Ica screamed and Dalus screamed, although neither was heard, and outside the chapel detonated in a whirligig storm of masonry, and somewhere amongst the debris the old priest thrashed his limbs as the candles he'd so recently lit impaled him before racing away on the wind...

...and the ghostly vessel swept past in a multicoloured broadside, unleashing colossal energies in an actinic torpedo volley that punched gaping mouths into the blast shields, and a hundred thousand human ants wordlessly shrieked the last of their oxygen into the void...

...and they didn't see their father die, but they heard his voice as the gather-hall sealant crumbled like dry leaves and haemorrhaged into the hurricane, and his howl of terror seemed to go on for ever and ever and ever and...

...and the lightning claws, writhing with evil, moved faster than the eye could follow, flaring against His force sword's rune patterned blade, and when finally the ivory power armour splintered and the Warmaster's talons reached inside, on a million worlds a trillion humans sank to their knees, and nothing would ever be the same again...

...and the despair never ended.

Ica opened his eyes and prayed for death. All that he was would be nothing. The suffering of the universe eclipsed his own utterly. Nothing mattered.

'You will enter the cave,' the Librarian ordered, words alive with psychic energy, impossible to disobey. 'You'll enter the cave and inside you will die. You will rise through caverns of fear and violence, and with every footstep you draw closer to oblivion.'

The grave voice halted, and Ica tried to stand, turning to see his brother already rising up.

As usual.

Always first.

Others followed, desperate to obey the Librarian's command despite their aching minds. Thryn's silver gauntlet lifted, unfolded a single digit, and silently directed the youths into the cave.

One boy, further along the line, didn't stand. His eyes stared blankly, wide and lifeless. Ica understood. The weight of sadness had been too much to bear.

Ica pinwheeled higher, stretchwings fully extended. Every arm movement tilted him fractionally, sending him soaring above and across Kultoom Island.

'Good, Ica! Good!' his father shouted up, cupped hands framing his proud face. 'Don't overbalance – that's it! Perfect!'

Above Ica, Dalus glided in a series of long, lazy spirals. 'How's this, father?' he called, voice almost lost in the chasm of air.

The twins' father glanced away from Ica momentarily, nodding. 'Good.'

Ica peered up at his brother to exchange a smile in celebration of their first flight. But Dalus was frowning, and when he noticed Ica staring, his smile was too brief and too forced, before he manoeuvred his glider away.

Torches flickered in brackets, flames guttering with each movement of the air. Finally all the youths were inside, silent and cowed by the psychic trauma.

Inside Ica's head, a voice said: All dead, dead, dead, dead, dead…

Then the door closed.

One moment the daylight streamed in through the cave entrance, framing the wide figure of the Librarian against the rain-streaked outcrop beyond. The next; iron blast doors slipped from grooves with a thunderclap clang and sealed the youths inside.

The youths exchanged uncertain glances. One boy, voice barely more than a whisper, said 'W-what's happening…?' Nobody replied.

Something hissed, and Ica turned to find water bubbling from a crack in the floor, veils of steam rising from the rapidly enlarging puddle. Nearby, Dalus sniffed at the air. 'Stinks of sulphur…'

Again the voice invaded Ica's brain, the measured tones of Librarian Thryn filling his mind with its patient, mournful inflection. All the youths tilted their heads as if listening intently, and Ica knew that they too heard Thryn's words.

'Millennia ago, an object fell from the sky among the Razorpeak Mountains. Its impact shattered apart the crust of this planet, destabilising it forever.

'It – like us – dies one second at a time. One day its core will solidify, its oceans will freeze and its people will starve. Until then it whiles away its mortality with fiery temper tantrums and indignant earthquakes.

'You are standing at the centre of this world's deepest despair.'

Ica returned his gaze to the growing puddle at his feet, now rising in a small hump of boiling fluid. He could feel its heat, even standing back. Across the floor of the chamber another fissure began to weep.

'Once every year,' the voice droned, 'lava flows beneath the Razorpeaks vent into the tunnels beneath your feet, filling them with scalding water.

'Within an hour this cavern, and all those above it, will be submerged. You will breathe boiling fluid. You will gag silently as the air is burnt from your lungs. This chamber has a single exit. Take it, don't take it. Either way, you

have minutes to live.’

The psychic contact ended, leaving Ica dizzy and nauseous.

An orifice in the rock nearby gurgled, hissed, then roared in incandescent fury. Water exploded forth, a mallet striking at the rockface and shattering into a million shards of liquid and steam.

A boy screamed, vapour rising from his blistering face like a shroud.

And Ica thought: So, this is it. Better to die now. Welcome it. Cherish it.

Except…

Except there’s nothing left to lose, and dying in the next chamber is as good as dying here…

Frowning, not understanding why, Ica drove himself onwards, stepping towards the tunnel leading up and away. As quick as a wraith, Dalus streaked past him, rushing to be the first through. And behind them came the others, eyes dead, driven on only by the realisation that it made no difference.

The boy who clutched at his face, shrieking unintelligibly in pain, was left behind, cries becoming fainter and fainter, finally falling silent with a single water-choked sob.

On the day it happened, the twins had sneaked into the gather-hall through the broken synthiplex panel at its rear.

Outside it was raining, and the droplets hammered on the building’s corrugated roof like a harvest of gallberries, all falling at once. Outside the people of Kultoom tribe, as normal, laboured away their small, blind little lives.

Ica and Dalus were mighty kings, contesting the hand of a fair princess.

They were hero and villain, struggling for dominance.

They were Emperor and Horus (although neither knew which was which).

They were alien and human, or heretic and redeemer, or mutant and puritan.

Throughout the deserted hallway their wooden Jenrak-staves clacked together, whistling in broad sweeps and jabbing viciously. Giggling uncontrollably, feinting and lunging, Ica and Dalus were warriors.

And then their father heard their voices and crawled inside, demanding to know why they’d left their chores. Dalus had said they’d wanted to practise so they could defend the Chamack from neighbour tribes, but their father had seen it was a lie. He grinned slyly, and said, ‘Fine. So, fight.’

So, beneath his stern gaze they’d fought. But the fun was gone, and every lunge that found its mark was rewarded with a curt ‘Good’, and every clumsy back step elicited a burning silence from the gallery where their father stood, shaking his head or muttering.

And it wasn’t a game any more, so Ica drove his stave deep into Dalus’s stomach.

‘A good hit,’ their father said.

And it wasn’t fun any more, so Dalus battered aside Ica’s defence and smashed his brother across the cheek. Ica dropped to the floor, blood ebbing from his nose.

And their father rushed to Ica, checking for broken bones. And he looked up at Dalus, standing over him in a confusion of shame and triumph, and said:

‘Stupid boy. Always going too far!’

And outside the thunder rumbled, and Kultoom waited for death.

Bones clattered on the floor with every footfall. Steam churned behind the youths like the breath of a daemon, hot in pursuit of its prey. They drew closer together, staring into the face of razor-sided agony.

The cavern was bisected by a living cobweb of mossy lichen, clinging to strand upon strand of fibrous stalks and coiling roots. Another tunnel, again leading upwards, yawned on the other side of the mossy partition. But the web, glowing with bacterial luminescence, bore thorns. As long as Ica’s finger, they sprouted like butcher-hook talons, curved like scimitars and equally as sharp. Tiny spines beneath the hood of every blade waited to barb any hapless victim, lacerating flesh and splitting sinews. The forest of daggers, five deep, reached from cavern wall to cavern wall, from stalactite-strewn ceiling to uneven floor.

Somewhere, deeply enmeshed, hung a skeleton – its empty eyes watching Ica, saying, you’re like me. You’re all like me. All dead.

The tunnel from the previous chamber was already submerged, scampering air bubbles cratering the swiftly rising surface. Clouds of steam, reeking of sulphur, coiled insidiously amongst the boys.

Ica pushed himself forwards. Once the impetus to move on had taken root, once the inertia – urging him to give up – had been overcome, driving forwards was not so hard. He turned and, yes, there was Dalus, already approaching the dagger-thorns.

What difference does it make? Ica pondered. Might as well.

The first thorn ripped apart his thin jerkin and prised open his skin, a frosty fire that blossomed warmly.

The next hooked into his shoulder, scraping the dark places inside against bone and nerves. He groaned in pain and gritted his teeth.

Keep going.

The next thorn turned his thigh into a ploughfield of flesh-ribbons.

Something hit his cheek and he glanced around, where a small youth sprayed arterial redness from a gaping wound in his neck. The boy’s eyes rolled upwards with something like relief.

Behind Ica, others were pushing through, moaning with each new open

wound. To the rear somebody screamed as the boiling water trickled over the lip of the previous tunnel and scorched an unshielded foot.

Ahead, Dalus pushed further into the tangle, incisions covering his arms and legs. He gripped at a branch, hauling himself forwards – only stopping to inspect his lacerated palms. He glanced briefly at Ica, as if checking his brother was still there, still watching, then frowned and barged his way forwards.

A thorn dragged itself along Ica's brow, and he blinked against the red wetness oozing into his eye. He moved forwards, sliced and diced, not caring; feeling the pain with abstract distance – registering its presence but not its effect. An arm broke free, a chequerboard of cuts marking its surface.

A growl of triumph ahead broadcast Dalus's release. Dalus stopped and turned, panting and bleeding, as slowly his brother wrestled free. Something splintered, a mossy crack of parting twigs, and Ica stepped clear.

He turned to look back at the others, some almost liberated, others hopelessly enmeshed, watching with eyes already rheumy and lifeless in death.

Some youths hadn't even tried to get through. They stood or sat on the other side, impassively waiting for their doom as the water bubbled ever higher. Ica nodded, understanding how they felt, and turned away.

Dalus was already climbing towards the next tunnel. Ica blinked bloody tears from his eyes and followed.

The sky quaked, electric ribbons chasing across the horizon. Wind plucked at what few trees grew on Kultoom Island, eliciting a creaking and groaning that vocalised the tribe's anxiety.

Tribesmen looked to the churning clouds and spat, cursing the dismal weather. The priest, dribbling in his zealousness, shouted a prayer to the Emperor, vying with the thunder to be heard. His oratory finished, he entered the chapel and sealed the door.

Windkites were hastily rescued from mid-air gyrations; chamack harvesters were moored securely, and everywhere was the sound of slamming shutters and doors.

The sky went black.

In their hut, Ica and Dalus, footfalls heavy with sulky indignation, descended into the damp darkness of the cellar. Their mother's voice followed after.

'…and stay down there 'til you learn obedience! If you can't be trusted to finish your chores, seems to me you can't be trusted to use a wing-glider either!'

At this the twins both gagged in alarm, turning to the cross-armed silhouette at the top of the stairs with a cry, 'But–!'

‘But nothing, night take you! No gliding for a month! And now your father’s out in the rain, fixing up that Emperor-damned panel , and who knows where he’ll find cover if the storm hits and how we’ll survive if he’s hurt and why can’t you be obedient like Father Lemuel says and…’ The whinnying voice faded away as the door slammed and their mother stalked off to bolt the shutters.

In the darkness, Ica sniffed back the blood in his nose. He could feel Dalus glaring across the room.

Through chambers and caverns, they ran. Scalding water churned from every crevice, dousing the flickering torches one-by-one.

In one chamber the floor was a gravelpit of smouldering embers, heated by fire-red magma that cooled, sludgelike, in scattered puddles. The youths – those who dared – scampered across in a flurry of yelps and explosions of sparks. Some fell with a howl into the curdling lava, clawing at the air and shrieking until their skin charred and their lungs filled with fire.

In one cavern a firestorm of shrapnel and smoke burst from some hidden alcove among the stalactites, reacting to the unblinking red eye of a motion sensor embedded in one wall. Some of the adolescents lurked at the room’s entrance, dividing their terrified glances between the rising water behind and that glaring ruby light, choosing who would live and who would die. Others rushed by, ducking and dodging. Their flesh and bone was dissolved in the resulting whirlwind of metal, screams ripped away in a rush of smoke and dust. A few – those who neither hesitated nor rushed – made it through.

In one chamber the ground gave way to an echoing chasm lined by splintered bones. Only by leaping across then scrabbling amid the jagged handholds of the opposite rock face could the youths pass. The screams of those who fell, punctuated by the splintering cracks of impact, echoed throughout the hollow mountain forever.

And always the water rose, dogging at their heels, curling its tendrils, wrapping everything in a sulphurous haze. The mountain filled from the base upwards, and with every step the remaining air grew hotter and more stifling.

Ica, muscles protesting, passed obstacle after obstacle, forever convinced that each test would be the last. Only by accepting his own death could he march across scorching coal fragments. Only by understanding he was nothing could he amble unhurriedly past an unflickering motion sensor. Only by knowing that he was dying one second at a time, that he was already dead and forgotten, that nothing he had ever done would be remembered, could he hurl himself into the abyss, then clamber, hands and arms lacerated, to his feet.

He was surviving and he didn’t care.

And all the time, driven on like some unstoppable dervish, Dalus was one

step ahead; turning back to watch Ica but never rushing to his aid when he faltered. Their clothes hung in shreds, their skin was a patchwork of scrapes and cuts. Once Dalus had turned to Ica, eyes burning, and said: ‘Try to keep up, brother…’

And then they passed through the final cavern and entered a tunnel that twisted and grew narrower, coiling slowly downwards. Ica, palms and knees shredded, struggled to keep sight of his brother’s retreating form.

‘Dalus?’ he panted. ‘T-the water, it’ll…’

‘I know,’ came the curt reply. ‘It’ll come down after us.’

The tunnel grew steeper, walls closing in until the brothers writhed, wormlike, using only toes and elbows. How many youths remained behind them Ica didn’t know. He couldn’t turn his head, even if there were light. He was blind, a maggot within a mountain.

The ghost of a scream filtered along the corkscrew tunnel: a million kilometres away. Somewhere far above scalding water lapped at the edge of the descending shaft, waiting…

Ica could see it happening, in his mind. The water – at first only a few droplets – would ebb its way over the lip of the cavern. As it rose the trickle became a stream, then a river, then a tsunami that tumbled down through the passageway, growing faster and faster as the walls grew closer, roaring in sulphurous fury.

And then there was light. Hurting Ica’s eyes, making him wince. And there was Dalus, worming his way from the tunnel, shredded legs kicking as he exited.

And the mountain shook as the waterspout filled up, and all around the air began to rush by, driven on by the wall of liquid rage charging at his heels.

And the sun didn’t look sweet when he saw it, and he felt no relief at the freshness of the air. He was still dead. Still forgotten.

Only two other youths clambered from the tunnel behind them, faces pale and eyes ringed as if they had been existing underground for years.

They stood on a ledge, jutting from a sheer rockface on the mountainside, and the ground fell away in all directions. The distant ocean was a pond of ripples from this height. And beyond, with sides so sheer that even the craghawks could find no nesting spots, was the Ghostmountain: the tallest of all the Razorpeaks, its very existence a toothy, snarled challenge to the clouds.

Ica stared at it and murmured, ‘Emperor preserve…’ Its enormity compacted his misery, reminded him of his scale. You are nothing, he told himself. You are nothing and in a moment you will die, punched from this ledge by a fist of water. Maybe your bones will shatter at the impact, driving shards of ivory into your brain. Maybe you’ll die quickly. Or maybe you’ll be cannoned out into the air, screaming as the water burns your skin and your eyes dissolve. Maybe you’ll plummet, arms thrashing, to the fanged rocks at

the base of the mountain.

Maybe you'll die in pain. Maybe you won't.

But you'll die. It's so certain that you'll die, you might as well already be dead.

And look, there's nowhere left to go. Nowhere left to run.

And the mountain shook, and the water roared, and Ica remembered.

His mother, screaming as the storm hit and the roof of the hut separated like a jigsaw, trying to wrench open the cellar door to seek sanctuary. She buried her fingernails in the rotten wood of the strut support as behind her the walls of the house went convex and shredded like paper.

'Look,' grunted Dalus curtly, returning Ica to reality. He pointed towards a tangled shape at the farthest corner of the ledge.

A twisted morsel of canvas, stretched to near-tautness by a metal frame, protruded like a shark-fin. Other components – rusted spring mounts and ragged tail rudders, decaying tensile pins and mangled harness struts – lurked within the heap.

'Gliders…' Ica mumbled numbly. Behind him the mountain growled.

And the voice in his head whispered: So you can go on.

Might as well.

Nothing to lose.

Dalus was already beside the pile, snatching at the decaying apparatus, selecting the best glider kit. He hefted the concertina stretch wings onto his back and began buckling the harness around his chest, eyes glowering in determination. Ica, legs ready to collapse beneath the despair filling his mind, simply reached out a hand and dragged at whatever random assemblage it touched. The wings hung shredded and near useless, the harness little more than crossed bandoliers of pleated chamack-twine.

Doesn't matter. Put it on.

The mountain bellowed, a bull-roar of fury. The air rushing from the tunnel mouth became a physical force, pushing the twins backwards towards the edge. One of the other youths lunged for the pile of gliders, eyes wide. The final survivor simply stood and stared, waiting.

Then the world was thrown on its head.

Kultoom tribe died. Kultoom Island shredded like an almost dead body, thrashing itself uselessly, flailing at its tormentor and struggling to hold in its own viscera.

The storm closed with hungry malevolence; anonymous and implacable.

The universe, with no more regard than a man might have for an insect beneath his boot, reached out and expunged a population.

With a cockroach snap the wind unfurled the tattered wings of Ica's glider and

threw him across the distant ocean. From the corner of his madly oscillating view he registered the mountainside erupting in a gargantuan waterspout, cascading downwards in sheets of rainbow-infested spray – but it was distant, unimportant. A scream dwindled on the howling wind.

Then it was all gone: obliterated in a dizzying split second, and when reality coalesced Ica was gliding erratically, stranded within a gulf of air. The breath, sucked from his lungs, returned in heaving gasps, his head pounding with the angry rhythm of his pulse. Nearby, fighting for stability, Dalus swooped past, stretch wings fully extended. Petulant turbulence buffeted Ica and he over tilted, tumbling briefly in a flurry of mangled wings and tail blades. The descent flattened into an awkward, crippled equilibrium, doomed to fail before long.

The third youth, who had snatched at the pile of gliders moments before the water thundered from the tunnel, cried out nearby. Ica's gaze darted sideways to see the ragged collection of components he'd selected parting like crumbling earth, fragmenting in a cloud of wafting fabrics and spinning shards of metal. The small shape at its epicentre, arms flailing uselessly, tumbled away towards the ocean. He screamed all the way.

Dalus's trajectory levelled out, once again in front of Ica, and he turned to deliver another infuriating grin, sunken eyes twinkling in – what? Triumph?

Then both twins stared forwards, driven on by the furious gales ripping between the razorpeak summits. To fly into the wind was impossible, retaining balance and altitude was the only recourse. So, bloodied and scarred, exhausted physically and mentally, the twins were silent as before them the Ghostmountain loomed closer.

Afterwards, the world was black. Not the dull, dry blackness of a firestorm or some other act of violence, but rather the polished blackness of sea-slippery rock. The very earth had been torn apart, cleaved up from the rocks below like a scalp from a skull. And yes, there was debris, but not much: no devastated huts or mangled vehicles, but rather scattered patches of dust that might once have been homes, or the splattered bloodspray of liquid metal, melted and hurled away by vicious lighting.

Ica and Dalus crawled from the cellar that had become their burrow, and stared at all that was left of their lives.

On the first day, and even the second, there was no real pain. The despair had yet to descend and instead they wandered the pulverised island in a fugue.

On the third day the reality began to crystallise. They would cry occasionally, though somehow never enough to satisfy the hidden despair. The need to express, to vent, went unresolved. They could not bear to look at one another, nor speak.

On the fourth day, when hunger began to cramp their stomachs, the numbness began to return. They would find some distraction or task – some beleaguered seabird or semi-successful fishing attempt – and all would seem normal, until the mind allowed itself to wander and the memory of… of events returned. And every time the pain would return: an endless loop of remembrance and reaction.

On the fifth day the glider came.

'Every male of age thirteen to be present at Table City upon the thirteenth day of the thirteenth lunar month of every year. By Imperial command.'

It almost passed over, sighting from its aerial vantage nothing but the wasted remains of a community: a tribe reduced to a naked rocky crag by the tempest whims of an unstable world.

But Dalus flashed light from a jagged shard of mirror at the distant wraith, and it began the long spiralling descent that would bring it to the last survivors of Kultoom Island.

And they went aboard to die.

Twice Ica's stretch wings hissed as fabric tore, and twice he found himself lurching impossibly to the left or right, preparing for the terminal descent to the waves below.

Twice the voice in his mind said, Yes – let me die! And twice he righted himself, somehow finding the stability to continue. The Ghostmountain no longer loomed across the horizon of the world. This close, it was the world.

'Where will we land, brother?' Ica called ahead to where Dalus effortlessly hung aloft. His brother didn't reply. Ica called out again, louder this time, 'I said, 'where wi–'

'I heard.' Dalus looked back, piercing his twin with a stare. 'And how should I know?' Then he adjusted his shoulders, dipped forward and streaked ahead.

At times the wind seemed to reach underneath Ica, a seemingly gentle hand to cradle his exposed form, only to hurl him high into the air, or drop away from underneath, leaving him tumbling and helpless. At such moments only fatalistic momentum – the certainty that it made no difference whether one went on or gave in – allowed him to struggle against the pockets and troughs of resistance to stay level.

Every second brought him closer to the Ghostmountain until it seemed to become a planet, tumbling across the horizon of Gathis, to inevitably collide, showering all of existence in chaotic planetary viscera and arterial lava. Ica found himself wishing it would, that he could ride the crest of that fiery cataclysm and burn out in the air, an insignificant spark.

In his abstract state he barely felt the fingers of power that once more delved into his mind. He could barely summon the energy to retch, gagging

uselessly at the psychic contact. The voice of Librarian Thryn entered his brain again, stabbing at the back of his eyeballs.

'There…' it hissed, and unbidden his eyes swivelled to a craggy rockface, where – if he winced against the stinging air and focused – he could make out a shadowy recess above a flat ledge. Another cave. Ahead he could see Dalus reacting similarly, face turning to the distant platform.

So the twins tilted their exhausted, ruined bodies towards the ledge, and clumsily, awkwardly, descended.

The stone felt like a bed of feathers, welcoming and cushioning Ica's tumbling form. In some distant part of his brain he was aware of the ruinous landing, vaguely noting the spreading pain but unable to wince or groan.

Dalus was already on his feet, of course. He cast off his stretch wings in a blur, then clenched his fists and punched the air in triumph.

'First!' he called out to the mountain, spinning to stare at his panting brother with eyes full of madness. 'I beat you!'

Ica stammered, uncertain. 'W-what?'

'I beat you. I came first.' Dalus's grin extended further still, an ugly gash in his sallow, pale features. 'Now we'll die, b-but it won't matter because... because when we do you'll know I'm best, and the world will know I came first, and, and–' The grin became something else – a grimace of pain and rage which bubbled up from his eyes and sent tears streaking across his face until his voice cracked and he couldn't continue. Ica stared, astonished and terrified at his twin's tantrum, unable to understand. For the first time since he could remember Dalus looked like a child – shredded and exhausted by a hateful world – but a child nonetheless, with all the petulance and pettiness a child should command.

Then the wind seemed to be rushing directly down upon their heads: a warm gale that grew hotter and hotter. Ica tilted his tired neck and there, descending on a mantle of smoke and superheated air, was Librarian Thryn. Like a pair of shimmering wings unfurling from his colossal shoulders, twin streams of heat diminished slowly until his massive feet crunched upon the rocks and his metallic form settled.

'Survivors…' he said, sunken eyes drinking in their features. 'Survivors who are dead, and yet live. Hm. Have a care with feelings of relief, young ones. You'll die yet.'

Ica struggled against the energy filling his brain, twisting his groans of exhaustion into words. 'W-why? Why do these things to us?'

Thryn smiled, psychic hood crackling. 'Let us see…' he hissed.

And the energies reached out and infiltrated the twins' minds, and they saw–

Ica's mind was a mountainside. A descending slope of anguish that neither

levelled off nor ended abruptly in a chasm of fatalism. It rushed onwards, descending too far into misery to ever consider turning about and rescaling, yet too steep and unbroken to ever reach its suicidal conclusion.

Ica's own life was worth nothing to him.

To go on, unfeeling and uncaring, was just as easy as giving up.

Librarian Thryn smiled to himself.

Dalus's mind was a minefield of bitterness and pain.

In every challenge, in every task, there was judgement. There was his father's attention, grudgingly given and rarely complimentary. There was his mother's love, distant and awkward.

And there was Ica. Ica, his father's favourite. Ica, to whom his mother cried out before her death. Ica who was loved and spoilt. Ica who could do no wrong. Ica who was an hour older than he. Ica who would inherit their father's chamack. Ica who, by dint of sixty Emperor-damned minutes, mattered.

Dalus's own life was worth nothing to him. All that mattered was outdoing his brother, coming first, finally demonstrating to his parents – far too late – that he the younger brother, he the runt, he the scorned and unloved and uncared for, that he was the better!

To go on, raging and jealous and desperate for attention, was far easier than giving up.

Librarian Thryn frowned.

When reality returned, the wind howled like a child. Ica opened his eyes to a world refracted by tears and Thryn's mournful voice filling his mind.

'All of creation suffers, young ones. Only in accepting our own mortality can we… make a difference. Only in bearing the burden of our failures can we find the strength to go on. Only in detachment from glory, or honour, or jealousy... from life itself can we hope to spare others from grief.

'We are Doom Eagles. And we are already dead.'

A silver gauntlet raised to point at Ica, the extended digit filling his world.

'You may enter, young one. Enter and discover the Eyrie of the Doom Eagles. Enter in humble and thankful service of the Golden Throne. But remember: you have not survived, this day. You are dead now. Never forget.'

And Ica stood, numbly. Nothing was real. Nothing mattered. The wind screamed, almost tearing him away into the abyss, and he staggered, step by step, into the gloom of the cave. Behind him, he knew, Librarian Thryn followed, his hulking frame stalking gracefully into the welcoming shadows beyond.

And he didn't look back, but he could hear the blast door closing, shutting out the rain. He could hear the wind, growing stronger by the second. And he could hear his brother, sobbing gently. Moments before the blast door closed, moments before Ica's life as a peasant of Gathis ended and his non-life as a

Doom Eagle began, he heard his twin cry out to the empty, aching universe:

‘But I came first! It’s not fair!’

And Ica said to himself: No, it’s not fair. It’s life.

The Ghostmountain sealed with a thump, and the twins, each in their own way, died.

ANCIENT HISTORY

Andy Chambers

Cross the stars and fight for glory

But 'ware the heaven's wrath.

Take yer salt and hear a shipman's story.

Listen to tales of the gulf,

Of stars that sing and worlds what lie

Beyond the ghosts of the rim.

But remember, lads, there ain't no words

For every void-born thing.

– Shipmen's labour-chant, Gothic Sector, Segmentum Obscurus

Nathan ran down the stinking alley, panting and sweating. He could hear shouts and a scuffle behind him as they pounced on Kendrikson. His mind raced faster than his feet across the cracked slabs. Poor old Kendrikson. Still – better him than me. He leapt over a prostrate body almost invisible in the darkness as the irony of the situation struck home. At least that's the last time he'll try to get me killed.

At the corner he risked a glance back. A lone streetlume cast a pool of yellow light over a scene that looked suspiciously like one from some Ministorum morality play. Four burly, shaven headed men in dun-coloured coveralls were hauling Kendrikson to his feet. He seemed unduly surprised, nay stunned, to be cast in the starring role of the eponymous incautious reveller laid low by local ruffians, cultists or worse – surely a punishment from the God-Emperor for his carelessness and self-indulgence.

The image was shattered when the officer stepped out from the shadows to congratulate the men on their catch. Nathan had never seen an Imperial Naval officer before but he had no doubt that he was looking at one now. Tall, poised, immaculately dressed in a tailored uniform coat and a pair of glossy black boots which had probably never trodden the dust of a planet for more than a few hours. He would surely be a junior officer to be in charge of a gang like that, trawling through the back alleys of Juniptown to fill out some labour team aboard his ship. Junior or not, he radiated the absolute assuredness that only generations of breeding and a lifetime of training engenders.

Nathan started to back away as his mind raced on. There were rumours that Imperial ships would come from Port Maw to Lethe, but everyone said that sort of thing when there was a war among the stars. Half the people hoped the fleet would come and save them from Sanctus-knows-what, while the other half were afraid that the fleet would bring the war to their doorstep. Nobody had ever thought that the Navy would come to steal a tithe of men and take them away on ships. Men who, if only half the stories were true, would never be seen again.

Kendrikson was off for a cruise and there was nothing Nathan could do about it. He certainly didn't intend take on a pressgang single-handed.

'Well, well,' said a finely cultured voice from behind him. 'It looks like young Rae missed one – get him lads!'

A blow struck his head, bright stars flashed before his eyes and he fell into waiting arms which bore him off even as his consciousness slipped away.

Nathan woke to the sound of a voice speaking. It sounded deep, resonant and faintly amused. He was amongst a crowd, being propped up by a stranger. The voice rolled on through his confused awakening like martial music: proud and insistent.

'…I could take this ship twice around the galaxy and wander the void for a

hundred years if the Emperor wished it. One thing would bring me back to the hallowed worlds of humanity before we'd been out for more than a year! Crew! You lucky fellows have won the chance to serve aboard one of the sector's finest ships, the *Retribution*. Remember that name with pride and affection and all else should come naturally.'

Nathan must have looked confused because the stranger, a thin, dark man with tired eyes, whispered to him: 'It's the captain. 'Ere to welcome us aboard – sez it'll likely be the first and last time we see's 'im.'

Nathan blinked and gazed about him.

A vast, curving wall disappeared out of sight above them. It was pierced by arches showing a night sky speckled with stars. Halfway up it a buttressed gallery swelled outwards and it was from there that the captain spoke. His voice must have been amplified somehow, because a normal man's voice would have been drowned by a distant rumble which seemed to radiate from the worn stone floor they stood upon. A jolt of panic shot through Nathan as he realised they must be aboard some ship. No, an Imperial warship, he corrected himself. Even as he watched the stars in the windows were sliding across it almost imperceptibly. They were already underway.

Nathan was inducted into a gun crew: number six gun of the port deck, known to its crew as Balthasar. Him, Kendrikson, the tired-eyed man – who introduced himself as Fetchin – and five others were beaten, stripped, shaved, deloused, tattooed with their serial numbers and issued with dun-coloured coveralls, apparently tailored so that their one size would fit no one. The gun officer for Balthasar, a Lieutenant Gabriel, seemed decent enough and didn't revel in their humiliation. He and his enforcers, his armsmen, simply crushed their individuality and made it clear that they were to obey orders and cause no trouble. He was even good enough to explain to them that men were a commodity on a warship, like food or fuel or ammunition. When the ship ran out, it came to a world to resupply. Simple as that. Even before the lieutenant had finished his little speech, Nathan had hardened his resolve to escape at the first opportunity.

They were set to work in a gunroom, a cavernous, hangar-like space which reeked of grease and ozone. It was part-filled by cranes and gantries but dominated by the breech of Balthasar, apparently some sort of gigantic cannon as big as a house and nested at the centre of an insane web of power coils, chains, coolant pipes, wiring, hydraulic rams and less easily identified attachments. By the unspoken rule which applies to all new recruits, the old hands set them to work on the most mundane, laborious and unwelcome tasks in the gunroom. In this case that meant long, hard work-shifts scraping off corrosion – which an old hand named Kron helpfully pointed out bloomed like a weed in the moist, oxygen-rich air inside the ship – or chipping away

frozen coolant from the branches of piping. They ate on the gundeck too, their food arriving on square metal trays through an aperture in the wall.

Food breaks were accompanied by the arrival of the crewmen the old hands referred to as armsmen. They came through one of the two heavy pressure doors that led into the gunroom, from the direction which Nathan had nominated as ‘south’. The armsmen wore leather harnesses over their coveralls and carried long clubs and stubby pistols or shotguns. They kept a respectful distance while the guncrew ate, but their attitude spoke of a readiness to do harm if necessary. Once the food was consumed and the trays returned to their slot, the armsmen left through the north door, presumably to perform the same, apparently pointless function in the next gunroom.

Again, it was Kron who explained the purpose of the armsmen’s vigil to the new recruits. ‘They’re here to make sure everyone gets their own share, lads.’ Kron told them. ‘An’ that nobody takes what isn’t theirs.’

Fetchin seemed shocked. ‘So yer can’t even keep a crumb for later? Or swap some wi’ yer mate.’

Kron’s answering grin was an ugly sight, particularly because he, like many of the old hands, had been patched with steel over old injuries. In Kron’s case the tech-priests had left him with a half-skull of polished metal and set with a red-glowing eye. ‘Not unless you want a few extra lumps to nurse, no,’ he chortled.

Seeing disbelief still written on their faces he added more quietly: ‘Was a time, years ago, when we had a… bad captain. He didn’t keep a watch, boys. Was alright at first, the bully boys didn’t take too much and no one starved. But then we were caught in a storm ’tween Esperance and the K-star for months, the ether was torn apart by cross-chasers and remnants so much that it was all the Navigators could do to keep us from being lost. Pretty soon men’s hunger made ’em desperate, an’ desperate men’ll do terrible things.’

Kron closed his real eye, blocking out bad memories.

Nathan had seen plenty of desperate men around Juniptown in wet season, when work was scarce or non-existent.

‘I’ve seen floors swimming with blood after fights over a husk of bread. The captain’s right to keep a watch,’ he said.

Kron looked at him curiously for a moment and then nodded. ‘That’s right, lad. Better to be harsh now than deadly later.’

Food was palmed and traded and fought over anyway, but in a quiet, cautious fashion which Nathan suspected the armsmen chose to overlook. Several times he tried to speak with Kendrikson but each time his old rival ignored him or, if Nathan pressed him harder, fled away from him. The old hands brooked no fighting so Nathan took it no further. He judged that the old hands were right: punishments for fighting were liable to be swift and brutal.

At the end of each workshift the crew slept in a low bunkroom beneath the

gundeck. armsmen arrived to drive them below, although they needed little persuasion to drop their tools and find their way down into the gloomy, red-lit chamber. There were no exits from the bunkroom saving the hatch which led back up to the gunroom. cleansing and purging was undertaken in ridiculously small metal cubicles off the bunkroom. Nathan watched and waited but opportunities for escape never presented themselves. Soon work-shifts and sleep-shifts rolled relentlessly past until all sense of time was lost, until there was only toil and rest from toil, and then toil renewed.

It was only after the ship had left the Lethe system and passed into warp space that Nathan began to understand why men were a commodity. The warp made everything different somehow. Even the cavernous gundeck felt claustrophobic and oppressive, as if immense pressures existed just beyond the hull. Then the dreams had started, nightmares which left the mind dark and full of half-formed images upon waking. Some men screamed and wept in their sleep without knowing why, and others just grew more and more introverted and silent. Fetchin was one of these and Nathan had seen a weird light coming into his eyes long before it happened.

It was the end of the work-shift. The crew was straggling down the hatch to the bunkroom, more reluctant now that the dreams had come. Fetchin was last of all, listlessly scouring at a corrosion spot long after the others had moved away. The armsmen stepped forward with hard faces and Fetchin backed away with a stooped, almost scuttling gait. Almost at the top of the ladder, Nathan stopped and turned, his mind fumbling for some encouraging words which might persuade Fetchin to go below.

Before he could speak Fetchin backed into another of the guncrew. The man cursed and roughly thrust Fetchin away. From there it seemed as if Fetchin was possessed by devils. He pounced on the man with a snarl and bore him down. A horribly throttled gurgle escaped the thrashing pair and Fetchin rolled away, his lips and chin bloody with the ruin of the man’s throat. Two men tried to pin the devil-Fetchin’s arms but he slipped through their grasp like an eel, raking clawed fingers across their eyes with a hysterical, wordless scream.

The armsmen came pelting up and the first to reach the scene swung at Fetchin’s shoulder with his long club, probably aiming to break his collarbone. The blow never connected. Fetchin grasped the downrushing arm with preternatural speed and swung the armsman away with a horrible cracking, popping sound which spoke of dislocated joints and snapping bones. The madman turned suddenly and bounded towards the bunkroom hatch. Men scattered as his last manic leap sent him hurtling straight at Nathan.

Nathan saw the animal fire in Fetchin’s eyes in the age-long instant as he

leapt and felt his guts turn icy. There was not a scrap, not a hint of the mild, world-weary colleague he had come to know. All reason was lost in that glare, and Nathan was frozen in it.

Suddenly Kron was between them, so quick that Nathan didn't even see him step in the way. Kron swept the flailing arms aside and punched two stiffened fingers into Fetchin's windpipe before his feet had touched the ground. Fetchin was knocked sprawling by the impact and let out a low growl as he skidded across the deckplates. Nathan felt shocked; Kron's deadly accurate blow should have left Fetchin dead or unconscious, he felt sure.

Click-clack BOOM.

The sound of the shot echoed around the gunroom. A frozen tableau was left in its wake. An armsman stood with shotgun levelled, smoke curling from the muzzle. Fetchin slid down the bulkhead leaving a bloody smear, a fist-sized wedge of raw flesh and entrails blasted from his midriff. Nathan, splattered with still-warm blood, not able to understand how Kron had moved so fast.

The armsmen drove them below with kicks and blows before another word was said. Kron was surprisingly kind and turfed out the old hand who bunked below him so that Nathan did not have to sleep beneath Fetchin's empty berth. When they were brought up for the next work-shift a scoured spot on the bulkhead was all that was left of Fetchin.

Nathan woke to the sound of screaming. He lurched up with a half-strangled yelp, almost braining himself on the bottom of Kron's bunk. He stared wildly about him, gulping for breath. The oppressive red light of the bunkroom still surrounded him, the cloying odour of sour sweat and grease still fought the sharp tang of coolant in the air down here. The room was quiet save for the drip of the condensers and the assurance of night noises made by forty sleeping men.

Nathan wiped a shaky hand across his eyes and peered over towards Kendrikson. If anyone had screamed it would have been Kendrikson; he had nightmares nearly every sleep-shift. They all did, but Kendrikson just couldn't take it. Perhaps he had a guilty conscience, or perhaps he was just some dumb thief who was completely terrified by being shut up in one of the Emperor's warships. But Kendrikson's bunk was empty; he must have gone to relieve himself.

The scream came again, but it was tinny and distant, carried along by the conduits from another bunkroom. Pity the poor devils in there, thought Nathan, every one of them wide awake and praying the screamer didn't go berserk and start clawing and biting at them. That he didn't turn into a wild beast like Fetchin had.

Nathan lay back in the narrow bunk and tried to recapture sleep. He tried to

imagine all the other shipmen doing the same. Start with this gundeck. Kron had told him there were forty guns with forty crews each, that's sixteen hundred, another gundeck on the other side for three thousand two hundred. Then there were the lance turrets, port and starboard, nobody seemed to know just how big the crews for those beasts were, call it another sixteen hundred a piece. This was working well, his eyelids were drooping. That was six and a half thousand souls (give or take). The torps probably had a crew much bigger than a single gun but less than a whole deck – maybe a thousand. That made seven and a half… engines must be at least two or three thousand more…

A rasping cough snapped him back to full wakefulness. A bittersweet cloud of smoke was drifting down from the bunk above. Nathan sighed. Kron, it was always Kron. 'Ain't sleeping too good?'

'Nah. Bad dreams,' Nathan replied. Kron was the oldest hand on the gundeck. Even Lieutenant Gabriel listened to him, sometimes, so it often paid to listen too.

'Really? Not like Fetchin, I hope,' Kron wheezed. It was a statement – or a cruel joke – not a question.

Nathan decided to take it as a joke and chuckled quietly. 'No, not like Fetchin,' he said. 'Just more dreams of the ship.'

Kron harrumphed quietly and another cloud of smoke wafted downwards, the feeble breath of the recyclers apparently insufficient to even pull it up and away. 'It's lucky to dream of the ship,' Kron said, his voice sounded a little wistful to Nathan, as though Kron were talking to himself. 'I used to dream of it a lot when I was young.'

Nathan wouldn't like to have to guess Kron's years. Apparent age varied so much from one world to another that it was a long shot at best. Take into account all the warp-time Kron must have had and Nathan would be naming a figure somewhere between sixty and three hundred. In the time it took him to think that, a slithering sound came from above and suddenly Kron was there, pipe in hand, right beside Nathan's bunk. The red light turned his polished skull, with its sharp nose and glowing eye into a gargoyle's head. His living eye twinkled.

'Come walk with me, young Nathan. Let's go up on deck.'

Nathan sat up and warily eased himself out of the bunk. 'What about the armsmen?' Nathan asked. Kron just snorted and started to pick his way, soft as a cat, to the hatch.

The gunroom was dark, its spars and columns rearing up with cathedral-like splendour into a gloom broken only by the jewel-like gleam of ready-lights and power indicators. They edged around to the far side of Balthasar over snaking cables, Kron sure-footed and Nathan trailing behind. As they rounded one of the pillars Nathan froze as he heard a squeak of oiled leather. Kron stepped on and virtually walked into an armsman.

The armsman brought up a torch and snapped it on, a little too quickly and awkwardly to have been lying in wait for them. Nathan slipped back round the pillar and out of sight so he didn't hear what was said, but after a few muttered words the armsmen swung away, whistling a little ditty and heading for the far end of the gunroom.

'Yeh can come out, lad,' Kron called. 'Ole Leopold won't bother us.'

Nathan came forward. 'I'd thought they would never stoop to fraternising with gunners, the armsmen I mean,' he said.

'Not while others're about, but come sleepshift they'll talk and trade like anyone else – they're crew just like us, just trusted enough to bear arms all th' time.' Kron seated himself on a stanchion and gestured expansively to another. Nathan took a last glance round before warily sitting also.

Kron gazed at him steadily while he got out his pipe again. 'So what's your story, young Nathan?' he asked.

'I don't have a story,' Nathan replied carefully. 'If this is about Kendrikson, my business is with him alone and I'll thank you not to intrude.' That earned an arched eyebrow and Nathan suddenly felt he was mistaken, Kron hadn't brought him up here to find out what was going on between him and Kendrikson.

'No,' Kron said, 'I mean, tell a story. That's how it's done among shipmen. When we want to really talk we tells a story, that way we can tell our secrets without saying them right out so others might hear.'

When Kron said that, he looked meaningfully at the outer hull plates, which Nathan could see from here were covered with writings, layered one over the other, marching lines of faded Gothic script which continued up and out of sight towards the ceiling.

A sudden chill crept down Nathan's spine. He was sure he heard a vague creak of metal up at the north end of the gunroom. 'What do you mean? What "others"?' he hissed.

Kron raised a hand to stop him 'That's jest what I mean. Let me tell you a story about how mankind got among the stars: a tale of ancient times.'

Kron began to speak clearly and surely, without the customary drawls and breaks in his speech. It was almost as if he were reading from a book, or reciting a tale told many, many times before.

'Once, long ago, Man lived on just one island. The broad oceans surrounded him and he believed himself alone. In time, Man's stature grew and he caught sight of other isles far off across the deep ocean. Since he had seen everything on his island, climbed every peak and looked under every stone, he became curious about the other islands and tried to reach them. He soon found the oceans too deep and cold for him to get far, not nearly a hundredth of the way to the next island. So Man returned and put his hand to other things for an

age.

‘But in time food and water and air ran short on Man’s island and he looked to the far islands again. Because he could not bear the cold of the ocean deeps, he fashioned Men of Stone to go in his place, and the Stone Men fashioned Men of Steel to become their hands and eyes. And the Stone Men went forth with their servants and swam in the deep oceans. They found many strange things on the far islands, but none as strange or as wicked as the things that swam in the depths between them; ancient, hungry things older than Man himself.

‘But these beasts of the deep hungered for the true life of Man, not the half-life of Stone, so the Stone Men swam unmolested. At first all was well and the Men of Stone planted Man’s Seed on many islands, and in time Man learned to travel the oceans himself, hiding in Stone ships to keep out the cold and the hunger of the beasts. All was well and Men spread to many islands far across the ocean, such that some even forgot how they came to be there and that they ever came from just one island at all.’

Kron’s tale wound on, telling of how the stone men became estranged from humanity by their journeys through the void. This led to a time of strife when the Men of Steel turned against their stone masters and mankind was riven asunder by wars. A thousand worlds were scoured by the ancient, terrible weapons of those days before the Men of Stone were overthrown, and a million more burned as flesh fought against steel. Worst of all, the beasts arose and were worshipped as gods by the survivors. Once proud and mighty, Man was reduced to a rabble of grovelling slaves. Finally one came who freed man from his shackles and showed him a new way to reach for the stars. This path was forged from neither stone nor steel but simple faith. Faith guarded Man from the beasts of the void as steel or stone could never do.

Nathan came to himself with a start. Kron’s sonorous voice had lulled him into a strange, half-dreaming state. He looked back at the wall and its inscrutable scripture. Faith. Faith kept the beasts at bay. Beasts that turned men into creatures like Fetchin. Each line of script covering the wall was a prayer to the God-Emperor for protection. Centuries of devotion layered like stratified rock to keep whatever was out there… out there. He could feel Kron’s expectant gaze upon him, the red eye burning like a ruddy star in the gloom. Nathan uncomfortably tried to ignore the scratching noises he thought he heard coming from the gloom. Just nerves, he told himself, or rats, of course. Still, no harm in watching the shadows.

‘I don’t know many tales,’ Nathan hedged, trying to recall one about the Emperor or the Great Crusade. He felt Kron’s tale must be a parable of ancient times, set before the Crusades. They were spoken of only through the preachings of the Ecclesiarchy. In the Lethe system, a legendary time of

righteousness and purity recalled in the Ministorum's most reverential sermons, usually as a comparison to the immorality and irreverence of modern times.

'Tell us about you and yon Kendrikson then,' Kron prompted.

Inwardly Nathan cringed, but he sensed that Kron could be a big help to his chances of survival, let alone escape, and he had told a tale first. Warily, Nathan began.

'Me and Kendrikson don't go back far, but in the short time I've known him I've decided that I need to kill him. My youthful prospects were not exceptionally good, truthfully they were much given over to petty crime and associating with undesirables. However, thanks to Kendrikson I'm now an unwilling recruit in the Emperor's Navy. That appears to mean lifetime incarceration in a steel cube twenty paces across until death by insane shipmate, starvation, disease or enemy action intercedes. This wasn't my first choice in life.'

Nathan stood suddenly. There was no doubt about it now, someone or something was creeping towards them as stealthily as it – or they – could manage. He gently lifted a steel hookbar from the deck and held it ready. Kron, seeing his look and actions, similarly armed himself with a long spanner. All the while Nathan kept talking, so as not to alert their stalkers. He told Kron about how he and Kendrikson had both served on the *Pandora*, an ageing lugger hauling ore and oxygen between the outer mines of Lethe. He even told him about how they had both actually been in the pay of a businessman dedicated to transporting goods of a rare, valuable and illegal nature with no questions asked.

Nathan had just got to their last voyage on the *Pandora*, and how Kendrikson had sold him out to the pirates when their skulking stalkers attacked. They came out of the shadows in a rush, three pale shapes and one dun coloured one. Nathan made a two-handed swing at the first to reach him. The steel hookbar caught it on the side of the head with a meaty crack and it dropped as if poleaxed.

It was a man. Pale, near naked, with a matted beard and bloodied shock of hair. A second leapt forward, jagged blade swinging, while Nathan was still recovering from his initial blow. He managed an awkward parry with the hookbar and the man pulled his blade back for another hack. Nathan followed through with his block and crashed the end of the hookbar into the wildman's elbow, making him yell and drop his blade. The third dove in between them and drove Nathan back with a flurry of blows.

He blocked a few strikes with the ungainly bar, but gave ground and almost stumbled on a trailing pipe. In desperation he ducked under a cable conduit as his assailant made an overhead cut. The blade sliced into the shoc-lines with a shower of fat sparks. The man convulsed and his face clamped into a rictus

grin of agony as current flowed remorselessly between blade and deck through him. As Nathan dashed past him he was starting to smoulder, the blade glowing orange in his deathgrip.

The second man had retrieved his blade and made as if to strike as Nathan ran up, but the superior reach of the hookbar finally paid off. Nathan slammed it bodily into his ribs. The momentum of his charge skewered the man on its cruel head, splintering ribs and ripping open a gouting wound. Nathan abandoned the wedged bar and plucked the blade out of the man's fingers, giving thanks that his enemies seemed disorientated and slow, as if they were half-starved or dim-witted.

Nathan sprang forward towards the last foe, a figure in shipman's coveralls bending over the prone body of Kron. Nathan's nape hairs prickled as the figure lurched up. Blue wych-fires writhed about his limbs like angry snakes and sparks poured from its fingertips. By some reflex Nathan ducked away from a hissing bolt of energy which lashed out from an outstretched hand. It still caught him across the left shoulder and sent fiery needles of agony lancing into his very bones.

If he could have shouted in agony he would have, but his lips only parted in a soundless gasp as a wave of numbness washed through him. Nathan fell to his knees on the deck and fought his unresponding body as it dragged him down, down. The figure stepped closer. Through blurring eyes Nathan could see the complex weaving of tattoos beneath his skin, glowing through it with lightning-brightness. Even the coveralls were rendered translucent by that glare, and bones stood out coal-black as he raised a spectral hand in a gesture full of menace.

With his final ounces of strength he struck back at his foe the only way he could, hurling the blade stiff-armed as he slid to the deck. Before he blacked out he felt a thunderclap of pressure and a wave of heat before blackness closed over him.

Nathan's eyes flickered open. He pulled himself up to a sitting position and retched. Only moments had passed. Smoke was still rising from the corpse beside him and the sweet stench of cooked flesh hung in the air. The thrown blade protruded from the corpse's larynx, and Nathan knew he should never gamble again after fluking that shot. But, despite the blade, the massive burns across the body looked like they had been just as fatal. Vagrant flickers of static still trailed along rigor-stretched limbs. Nathan mustered his courage and stared into the blackened face. It was Kendrikson, patently no mere smuggler after all. He stepped well clear of the corpse as he staggered groggily to where Kron lay.

Faint breath sighed from Kron's lips and the burns on his body didn't look fatal. Nathan paused at this, his head throbbing and mouth dry with fear, and

considered how he might be able to judge such a thing given his lack of experience. Regardless, he could not simply leave Kron lying insensible so he decided to follow his instincts and attempt to revive him somehow. By shaking him and calling Kron's name, Nathan was soon rewarded with a moaning and stirring. Seconds later Kron's real eye flickered open; his redgem-eye remained dim.

'Wh-wh-what? Wh-where am I?' he whispered with trembling lips.

'On the gundeck,' Nathan replied. 'There was a fight…'

He broke off. Kron had raised his hands and was touching his metal half skull and dim jewel-eye. 'It's still on me!' he suddenly yelped. 'Get it off before it can crash-start!'

Nathan stood in shock. Kron's voice was different and he was starting to thrash around in a most un-Kron-like fashion. Nathan snatched for his wrists in fear that he might injure himself and the strange voice grew shrill with panic. 'No! Don't let it take me… don't let it…' Kron's new voice trailed away and his body slackened in Nathan's grip. As Nathan lowered him gently to the deck he noticed Kron's jewel-eye was flickering back to life.

'Ai, Nathan,' Kron said, his voice normal. 'Lost my way there for a sec. Ye were about to tell me how ye escaped from the pirates?'

Nathan stared at him. Kron seemed to have no recollection of the fight or his bizarre behaviour. Nathan squatted down, watching Kron carefully as he slowly looked about, taking in the carnage around him.

'There was a fight,' Nathan explained again. 'Kendrikson and some new friends tried to kill us, well, perhaps just kill me and capture you.'

Kron stood with no apparent signs of pain or weakness, and walked over to Kendrikson's corpse, where he bent down and retrieved a half-melted spanner. 'I struck him with this,' he told Nathan. 'I didn't realise he was a Luminen.' Kron fell silent, staring down at Nathan with that red, cyclopean eye for a long, long minute.

Nathan had a greasy feeling of fear in his stomach as he gazed back. Kron was obviously not entirely whole or sane. He had called Kendrikson a Luminen, a word which stirred disturbing memories in Nathan's mind. It might be best not to remind Kron of his equally disturbing words and actions. Better now to find out about the Luminen Kendrikson and his allies. Kron was holding Kendrikson's scorched head in his hands now.

'Why do ye think they were out to catch poor Kron?' the old man asked. Kron turned away to hide the act, but his hands still made an ugly cracking noise as they crushed Kendrikson's skull.

'I have absolutely no idea who they were,' Nathan snapped, 'let alone what they wanted with you! Kendrikson was… was... I don't know, possessed? What is a Luminen?'

Kron clicked his tongue a few times, a curiously mechanical sound like that

of the *Pandora*'s clattering old logic engine. Before he could reply there was a flicker of lights at the south end of the gunroom; echoing shouts followed. Kron turned and scurried towards the north end without a word. After a second's indecision, Nathan followed, struggling to keep sight of Kron's disappearing back while not tripping on a cable or cracking his head on a stanchion.

He caught up with Kron as he bent over a thick pipe in a shadowed corner beside the script-marked outer wall. The pipe was made of many rings of metal half the height of a man. Kron pulled apart two of the rings and slipped inside, turning to hold the rings apart and jerking his head for Nathan to follow. He ducked within, realising as the rings creaked back into place that he had heard the same noise before Kendrikson and his allies had attacked.

They belly-crawled along the pipe in silence, the way lit only by Kron's cyclopean eye. Bundles of wires ran along the bottom of the pipe, most filthy and blackened but some more recent, their bright colours encarmined by Kron's unflinching gaze. Dozens of dog-eared labels clung precariously to the different bundles. Many were torn off or unreadable, others bore legends such as Lwr diff, aaz/3180 or Ar.ctrl 126.13kw in careful gothic script.

The pipe gave out in to a black crack, chasm-deep with cabling spilling off into its depths like a frozen waterfall. Kron led Nathan on to a short bridge of pipes that crossed to the other wall which was splotched with bright blobs of enormous silver like soldering marks. At the far side Nathan stopped, unnerved by Kron's continuing silence and the cold, lightless spaces he was being led into. Time for some answers.

'Kron,' he whispered, 'where are we? And where do you think you're taking me?'

Kron turned to face him before replying. 'She's an old ship, lad. She fought and sailed the void for nigh eighteen centuries in the Emperor's fleet, an' before that she slept in a hulk for another twenty. That's where I–' Kron clamped his mouth shut and his eye blazed. He gazed round warily before speaking again. 'We're between the hull plates here. Yon weld marks are from when she took a salvo in the flank during the assault on Tricentia.'

'And where are we going?'

'Somewhere that's safe, where we can hide 'til the armsmen finish their search; hide an' talk in peace.'

'Won't the armsmen follow us down here?'

'Nay lad, wi'out a fully armed servitor crew an' a tech-priest they couldn'a use their guns for fear of cracking somethin',' Kron said.

'And where is this sanctuary of yours?'

'Not ten strides yonder.' Kron pointed.

Nathan took a long, hard look at the narrow ledge of rotting cables that ran along the wall from the end of the pipe bridge. His burnt and aching body

already throbbed from the efforts he had forced it through after the fight. Now, as the flush of adrenaline left him and the icy chill in the air replaced it, he doubted his arms and legs could carry him on such a precarious path. He hesitated and swayed involuntarily on the bridge, which suddenly seemed rather precarious in itself now he came to think about it.

'Kron, I don't think…'

Too late, the old man was swinging off along the ledge with the agility of a monkey. With him, the wan red light that served as the only illumination was vanishing fast.

Nathan hesitated only a moment before a hot flush of anger drove him forward onto the ledge. He'd be damned if he would let this walking enigma disguised as an old man abandon him to the dark and potentially more of Kendrikson's feral allies. He grasped a shoulder-high seam of wiring and pulled himself firmly over to get a foot on the cabling, trusting his weight to it as he pulled his other foot into place. Bloody-minded determination hauled him along three paces of the ledge. He made two more with his heart in his mouth and fingers fumbling blindly for purchase on the wires before his foot slipped off the cables.

His body swung out alarmingly, and only his recently gained handholds on the wiring-seam stopped him pitching off the treacherous ledge. He desperately scrabbled to get his foot back on it. His hands were as weak as water and his heart was thumping so hard his arms quivered. After a few seconds of naked terror he got his foot back on and hugged himself to the wall, teetering as his legs shook. He couldn't let go of the wiring now, his legs were too weak to trust and his hands couldn't hold his weight for much longer. He couldn't go forward, he couldn't go back. Every iota of his strength was necessary just to hold him where he was, with the blackness below sucking at his remaining scraps of vigour.

Nathan clutched closer still to the wall and plucked up his courage, carefully shuffling one foot along the cabling. He shifted some weight to it and shakily drew the other foot closer. With a supreme effort of will he unhooked one hand from the wires and reached out to grasp them further along. Then he rested and sweated before shuffling his foot forward again. So he went for the remaining five paces: slide, grip, shuffle, rest; slide, grip, shuffle, rest; slide, grip…

Nathan almost fell into the opening when he came to it. The horrible sensation that he might fall off just as he pulled himself to safety was almost overwhelming. Once inside the opening he sat trembling for only a moment, before summoning the energy to crawl further away from the edge.

The interior of the narrow space looked like the choir stall of some Ministorum chapel. Narrow seats crammed along either wall beneath gothic

arches of tubular metal. At the far end a porthole of stained glass was lit fitfully from behind by swirling colours. Kron stood silhouetted against the glass. He turned to face Nathan and pressure doors rolled shut behind him, shutting the dank breath of the crevasse outside. ‘Well done, lad. I was thinking ye weren’t goin’ to make it.’ His voice sounded as smooth and calming as the raspy little goblin could make it.

‘What the hell did you leave me alone out there for?’ Nathan demanded.

‘To see if you’re as tough as I’m thinking ye are.’

‘Oh really, and do I pass muster?’

‘I’ll be needing to hear the end of your story to know that.’

‘That’s got nothing to do with this!’

‘Come, lad, I can tell by the look in yer eyes that you don’t think that’s true. “Coincidence” is just a name that fools use for events they don’t understand.’

Nathan blinked at Kron and gave a mental shrug. What harm could it do to finish the story if it gave Kron one less thing to be evasive about? ‘All right, but then you better give me some answers or I’ll crawl right back out of here and tell it to the armsmen.

‘As I said, I opened the inner hatch to the cargo bay. Once it was open I overrode the outer hatch controls and hung on tight. I knew the drums in the bay were badly secured because me and Kendrikson had been too busy watching each other to make a decent job of it. The outer hatch blowing was enough to break them free and dump them into the void between the *Pandora* and the pirates. I was almost crushed by the stampede of metal cylinders but by the Emperor’s grace and a strong grip I was able to keep a hold and stayed on the ship instead of being flung out among the cartwheeling drums outside.

‘A few seconds later the first drum connected with the docking thrusters of the pirate ship. I’d been playing for time, just hoping to upset their approach, but the drums were filled with liquid oxygen. The touch of the thrusters was enough to make them explode like bombs. Dozens of the cylinders exploded in slow, slow motion, the tendrils of fire reaching back further into the cloud and detonating the rest. The escalation scared me badly and I hauled myself within the inner hatch and closed it an instant before the expanding bubble of flames washed across the *Pandora*. The deck bucked and the handful of drums which had not escaped with their fellows rolled around and clashed angrily.

‘In a second the shock wave had passed and I looked out of the hatch to see the pirate ship spiralling off, fires clinging to it and debris leaking from it like a blood-trail. I went forward and up to the bridge where that slob Captain Lage was defecating in his britches. Lage claimed that Kendrikson had held him at gunpoint and forced him to cut the engines and wait for the other ship. Minutes before the explosion Kendrikson had taken a raft and left the ship.

Naturally he had taken all of the archaeotech we had been smuggling with him.

‘I was surprised when I heard Kendrikson had been seen in Juniptown on Lethe. I’d thought he was dead or long gone. I knew I could pick up a bounty for his head so I went hunting for him in the back alleys, which is home turf for me. But both me and Kendrikson were seized by men from the *Retribution*. And that is how I began my new career in the Imperial Navy…’

‘Ye never actually knew Kendrikson?’ Kron asked softly.

‘No, I knew of him, worked with him, but he avoided me and most people from what I heard, he was a guy so weird he didn’t even have a nickname. He was just “Kendrikson”, and that said it all. Alright, I’ve told you my tale now it’s time for you to give me some answers. No stories, just tell me the truth. ‘Who were those men with Kendrikson?’ Nathan glared at Kron, daring him not to answer, to push him over the edge into screaming fury.

‘Them’s muties, shipmen that’s spent too long sailin’ the void an’ lost their faith. The beast song’s in their heart now and they live like lice on the innards o’ the ship; sometimes they’ll even grab compartments and feast on the poor shipboys if they can. Once in a century the captain’ll put the ship into port and flush her guts with poison to clear ’em out but ’tween times there’s always muties in the crossways and trunks. Seein’ as we’re in a big war right now there’s more than ever, and they’ll be lookin’ to call the beasts aboard all the time, invite ’em in as it were. Out there’s whole squadrons who’ve succumbed to the beasts in men’s hearts in past times, ones I reckon we’ll be fightin’ soon enough. Kendrikson probably pretended he were possessed to scare ’em into obeying him. The pirates’ ship ye saw, did it have a mark on it? A rune or sigil?’

‘Yes it did, most do. I don’t see–’

‘Did ye see it well enough to know it again?’

‘Yes, but I’m asking the questions now.’ Nathan had recovered enough energy to stand and hauled himself up to face Kron. ‘What’s a Luminen? I asked you before and you didn’t answer but now you’re going to tell me. What made Kendrikson a Luminen and how did that give him lightning in his veins and the power to melt steel like wax?’ Nathan took a step closer, looming over Kron in the narrow space. ‘Tell me!’

Kron grinned up at him before turning and pointing at the stained glass. ‘I bet the pirates’ symbol looked like that.’

Nathan gaped. The intricate, geometric designs of the window centred around a central icon. A halo of gold with rays so short and square that they looked like crenellations on a castle wall. In the centre was a grinning skull, picked out in loving detail with strands of platinum wire and swirls of crushed diamond. He snapped his gaze back to Kron. ‘What does it mean?’

‘It answers both your questions, lad. Kendrikson and yon pirates came from

the same place. They made him a Luminen, took him an' made crystal stacks of his bones an' electro grafts of his brain, gave 'im skinplants and electros so's he could summon lightning an' channel it an' much more. He was a war-child of the Machine God, what the uninitiated call an electro-priest, though not one in a hundred can hide his power an' look like a normal man like he did.'

'The Machine God – you mean the tech-priests of Mars, don't you, the Adeptus Mechanicus?'

Kron nodded solemnly and Nathan suffered a painful insight into the awesome power that organisation wielded within the all-powerful Imperium. Tech-priests ministered to machines and engines on every civilised world, every interstellar ship. The Navy might man its ships but the tech-priests ran them. Their prayers and runes brought life to cold, dead metal and their forge worlds produced weapons in their billions for the Emperor's eternal war against aliens, heretics and traitors. In theory at least killing Kendrikson made him one of the latter. A sobering thought indeed.

'All right then, what's this place. Those look like shuttle controls. Am I right in presuming that it's an escape pod of some sort?'

'Aye lad, a cutter. Good for a planetary hop if ye don't mind the waiting as she's a mite slow.'

'Given what I've just heard I'd jump ship now if we weren't in the warp.'

'Death by fulguration if they catch ye,' Kron muttered with an honest-looking shudder.

'Well, we can't go back. If they find out who Kendrikson was and who killed him I'd wager they'll come up with something even more unpleasant.'

'Nay, lad, if anyone knew who Kendrikson was he wouldnae have been in the gunrooms. Tech-priests only come to repair battle damage and such.'

'So Kendrikson was originally out to get back the archaeotech for the tech-priests and got pressganged accidentally, but why didn't he tell the Navy who he was? They would have let him go for sure.'

'Many times servants o' the Emperor bury their real selves behind false memgrams and such, makes 'em hard to ferret out even wi' soul-seers. Their real purposes run in the background, watching the puppet show through the eyes and ears until they're in position to accomplish their mission. Then they become a whole different person. The Luminen part was just standing by for orders, but it must have decided that you needed killin' to keep its past buried.' Kron let that sink in for a few seconds before passing judgement on the matter.

'No one'll know we did for 'im if we get back before roll call, 'cept Leopold mebbe and he ain't going to say for fear o' bein' called derelict.'

Nathan was safe as long as Kron didn't rat on him, but he had a feeling that Kron was happy to keep their secret for the time being. They were partners in

crime. ‘I’m willing to bet that there’s another way back into the crew quarters without crossing the gunroom.’

Kron grinned.

‘Hajj.

‘Isiah.

‘Kendrikson.’

The sergeant-at-arms leant over and whispered something to Lieutenant Gabriel, who paused over the great ledger he had open before him. Nathan swallowed hard. This was where Kron’s theory came to the crunch. Getting back from the cutter had been easier than he had hoped. A narrow culvert led back from the crevasse into the cubicles by the bunkroom. Nathan had carefully memorised every twist of the trunking and was determined to go back and familiarise himself further with it in the very next sleep shift. But for now he must see whether the Angel of Retribution was at Kendrikson’s side or not.

Lieutenant Gabriel gazed at the assembled company, eyes blinking as if he were struggling to recall Kendrikson’s face. He turned and murmured a question to the sergeant, who shook his head curtly in response. Gabriel made a small mark in the ledger and continued.

‘Krait.

‘Komoth.’

Roll call held an additional pleasant surprise: when Lieutenant Gabriel assigned the duty roster Nathan found himself placed on the Opticon crew. His momentary puzzlement was soon answered when it became clear that he was to be Kron’s apprentice. He stole a look at the old man, who looked blandly innocent of course, and made a mental note of the apparent influence he could wield. Nathan wondered what the role of apprentice entailed, and for that matter what the Opticon was. A dim memory floated forward that the Opticon was involved in observation outside the ship. He certainly knew that the Opticon crew usually worked high up on the main gantries above Balthasar’s breech on what amounted to an extra half-deck a good twelve metres up spiral steps of skeletal ironwork.

Whatever the duties, they could scarcely be as onerous and repetitive as the labours he was tasked with at present. As he ascended he could see other members of the guncrew moving to repair the damage he and Kron had caused in their desperate fight. The bodies were gone but charred cabling and slashed conduits were visible. Nathan wondered grimly how often they had repaired such damage without knowing its cause. The adage that ‘ignorance is bliss’ seemed to dominate shipboard life, but with good cause if what Kron had said about the muties was true. The grim pressures of warp travel became all the more nightmarish with the thought that there were malevolent entities

clustered beyond the hull. Beasts that thirsted for human lives and souls, whose subconscious calls drove men mad. Nathan suddenly stopped climbing the steps as the thought struck him that he was going to help Kron observe those beasts and the Empyrean, the alternate dimension that they swam in.

The curses of the men behind made him move on, accompanied by a perverse desire to see the sinister beasts. He had mixed feelings when he reached the raised deck and saw a row of five shuttered arches lining the hull wall. There were ten in the Opticon crew and the burly rating named Isiah placed two men at each shutter. At first Nathan and Kron busied themselves greasing the shutter runners and cogs at its head and foot. After a quarter watch or so Isiah received a message from the comm-box he carried and relayed an order to raise the shutters. Kron smartly threw a lever and the shutter rose smoothly up to reveal an expanse of black glass which rose higher than his head and as wide as his outstretched arms. As Nathan glanced around at the other crews he noted a sense of nervous anticipation behind their actions, as if raising the shutters was an act of hidden significance.

Nathan was still gazing expectantly at the black glass when the scream of a siren shocked him rigid. The titanic blast of noise seemed to make the very deck plates tremble and was followed by a booming voice which rang like the word of the God-Emperor: ‘ALERT STATUS ALL STATIONS!’

Kron turned and ran for a set of lockers at the side of the Opticon chamber, hotly pursued by the rest of the crew. The men started pulling on pressure suits which Kron dragged from the lockers. The significance of the situation was becoming readily apparent to Nathan by now. They were going into battle, very soon. Those ridiculously cumbersome-looking, heavy, rubberised pressure suits and thick-bowled helmets could be all that stood between them and the void.

To his surprise, Nathan managed to finish clamping himself into a suit before anyone else.

The helmet locked down onto a broad ring across the shoulders of the suit but had a visor made up of different layers, the last of which was little more than a slit in the armour plate. He slid back all the layers and saw Kron had done the same. Nathan felt relieved that he wouldn’t have to breathe the stale, sweaty air inside the suit just yet. ‘How long does this oxygen last?’ he asked Kron, tapping the dented brass cylinder plumbed into the side of the suit’s chest.

‘A watch or so for somun’ as big as ye.’

‘Just eight hours? They don’t want us to get any ideas about wandering off, do they?’

‘Ye can always get more air on the ship and if ye… part company wi’ the ship an’ ye’re not picked up they wouldnae be able to find ye anyway. Ye’d be drifted too far into the void.’

‘Alright, what do–’

The deck lurched beneath their feet and there was a sickening sensation of falling for a second. Isiah shouted at them to get to their stations. Nathan noted that the rating now bore a pistol and what looked suspiciously like a shock-maul and sprang to his post as best as the suit’s heavy boots would allow.

The monolithic siren blasted twice. A commanding voice spoke: ‘BATTLE STATIONS. BRACE FOR IMPACT!’

The deck shuddered and dropped again. This time the falling was longer. Nathan slid the visor down, grabbed a stanchion and braced his legs. He felt sick and hollow. The suit was stifling. He fought an urge to tear the helmet off and scream his lungs out. An insistent, intellectual part of his brain kept telling him to be calm and that the ship was simply preparing itself and surging majestically into battle. But the animal instincts of his body felt every jar and shake as an infernal choir of death screams.

The ship lurched and fell again. This time Nathan actually felt his feet leave the floor. He felt as though part of him was being torn away, all the roiling emotion in his body began coalescing into a tearing sense of dislocation. A tangible shock rang along the length of the ship and Nathan realised they had left warp space.

The black glass of the Opticon flashed white and then cleared to show a scene of awesome beauty. A night-sky bisected by titanic thunderheads of cloud reared above a fiery sunset. Static lightning cobwebbed the depths and climbed up to blush the clouds with purple. Stars stood out sharp and clear, their own fires made to seem cold by their distance.

‘The void never looked so beautiful or terrible before,’ Nathan whispered, his fear drained away by the majesty of it all. Kron’s voice crackled in his earpieces.

‘That’s right lad, ’cause through this glass ye see as the ship does; heat, light, magnetism, radiants and etherics are all clear to her.’ Kron slid out a large circular lens which was attached to the window frame by a system of brass rods and runners. The thick frame of the lens held two number counters and two raised icons. Kron expertly tracked it across the surface of the window. The numbered wheels of the counters span in response, one horizontal, one vertical.

The ship shuddered again, and Nathan swayed against the window, his helmet ringing off the unyielding surface alarmingly. The sensation of almost being pitched out into the void was enough to make his palms sweat inside the cursedly thick gloves. As he straightened up, Isiah was barking orders to the crews to search different co-ordinates. Kron slid the lens across until the metriculators showed 238.00 by 141.00, their search area. At that spot the lens resolved a dark area which had shown occasional vagrant twinklings into

an asteroid field, rolling mountains of stone lit by the star's fiery light.

'What are we looking for, Kron, just rocks?' Nathan asked with shaky levity. The old man was tracking the lens back and forth across the field with deft, economical movements. Each time he reached its periphery he depressed one of the runes, and the tumbling stones shown in the lens were outlined in red with strings of numbers showing speed and distance which remained in the glass after the lens slid away.

'Anythin' that might show us where the foe's a'lurkin; a glint here, or a bloom o' heat there.' Kron never took his eye from the lens as he spoke, Nathan slid back his topmost, armoured visor so that he could see better.

'You mean engine heat trails like those?' he stated, pointing to a set of needle-thin arcs which shimmered near the edge of the field.

'CONTACT! MARK-TWO-FOUR-ZERO BY ONE-THREE-SEVEN!' Kron roared, Isiah shouting it back, word for word, over the crackling comm.

The lens now showed broad, vaporous trails of red which curved back around the furthest asteroids. There looked to be four to Nathan, although they were already merging and dissipating.

'They're closing in, lad, I can smell it.'

Kron tracked the lens along the trails and cursed as they disappeared behind a glowing streamer of dust. Moments later an incandescent spearhead of heat blossomed out of the cloud, dust and lightning rolled off it in plumes as the lens starkly announced it as Enemy vessel [class: Unknown]. 51,000l. Closing.

A burst of activity on the deck below drew Nathan's attention. Through the grilled floor he could see Balthasar's breech had been swung open and the gunners were hauling flat plates covered in short spikes into the open maw. Even through his thick suit he could hear the gunners' cheers as they slammed the sub-munitions home. On the lens light and shadow now etched out the enemy, showed the silhouette of crenallated battlements and barbed buttresses as the spearhead rolled abeam on the white-hot stabs of myriad thrusters. Grand cruiser, the display read, Repulsive class.

A ripple of serried flames geysered from the Repulsive's flank as she completed the turn, and a storm of black specks arrowed towards them. Nathan gasped in horror as a heartbeat later the specks started to explode in gouts of flame. At first they looked distant, small puffs of colour against the void, but the projectiles kept coming, surging forward through the fiery chains to detonate in turn. In moments their view of the enemy was obscured by a firestorm which was rippling ever closer. The flames filled every window in the Opticon by the time Nathan slammed his visor fully shut.

The Repulsive's salvo crashed down on the ship itself with hurricane force. Nathan staggered as the deck rolled beneath him and a mighty, rushing wind roared beyond the hull. A lash of dazzling purple light blazed through the

glass, cutting the incendiary cloud like elemental lightning. It was gone in an instant before it returned in a retina-burning sweep which slammed into the ship with a bone-jarring impact. Nathan's spine crawled with the sensation of unseen energies straining and crackling before a rush of scorching heat washed over him.

At last he was glad of the suit's cumbersome protection, though even with it he felt as though he had been suddenly cast into a great oven. The heat was a palpable thing, pushing down on him like a great hand and burning his throat as he tried to breathe. Nathan saw several of the Opticon crew collapse into pathetic heaps, one with flames licking about him. After what seemed like hours but could only have been seconds of heart-stopping fear the burning suddenly stopped, leaving a horrible tang of smouldering rubber inside his helmet. Sirens blasted and an almighty voice boomed over the chaos: 'PORT WEAPONS PREPARE TO LOCK-ON. TARGET MARK-TWO-SIX-NINE BY ONE-SIX-ZERO.'

Iron discipline drove the shipmen to their tasks, that and the grim instinct that to live they must fight and win. The ship had been wounded but it could still fight back. Fires were doused, the dead and injured dragged away. The firestorm was lessening and a moment later the decks ceased to rattle as the ship finally burst clear of the enemies' salvo pattern. Kron's breath rasped in Nathan's earpiece as they slid the lens back over the grand cruiser contact. The Retribution was coming across the enemy's bow, and the metriculator's count showed the enemy as closing.

'LOCK ON.'

Kron activated the second rune on the lens frame. A stylised cog superimposed by the Imperial eagle sprang into existence within the lens but the runners seemed to be jammed and Nathan had to help him drag the device over the target contact. The lens showed the ornate spearhead foreshortening into a shark-finned ziggurat of bronze as they pulled across the front of her. Where the icon rested the hull of the grand cruiser was illuminated as if by a ghostly radiance which played over shimmering walls of force.

'FIRE MAIN Batteries!'

The lights dimmed for a moment as capacitors charged and then the ship resounded with the clamour of the guns. Nathan felt the pressure of unseen forces hit him like a slap as forty guns hurled their payloads across the void. A moment later he saw the spreading cloud of projectiles cleaving towards the enemy. No spreading storms of fire this time, the munitions detonated right beneath the enemy's prow. Invisible walls fell beneath the onslaught and a rain of destruction crashed across the battlements of the ziggurat-fortress. Debris haloes puffed from it like smoke rings.

'FIRE MAIN LANCE ARRAYS.'

Ravening white spears of pure power stabbed at the foe, tearing red-

glowing gouges across its hull, globs of molten metal spun away and flames leapt from the wounds. The grand cruiser lurched visibly under the impacts, and began to twist away from the salvo. Even as it did so, two heat trails appeared from behind the grand cruiser, coming up fast to slash at its rear with a spiralling net of laser bolts. Nathan felt a flush of relief. The other two ships must be allies, and now their mutual enemy was caught between two fires. Below, the gunners were rushing to reload Balthasar for another shot, while a small team struggled to pin a whipping power line which sparked furiously. He looked back at the lens in time to see a swarm of bright flares pulling away from the enemy cruiser's prow. Ominously the tiny heat trails curved to alter course towards them and it soon became apparent that although these new weapons were not as fast as the projectiles fired before, they were considerably bigger. Sirens blared.

'ALL STATIONS PREPARE TO REPEL BOARDERS.'

The relief Nathan had felt rapidly evaporated. The enemy must have launched boarding torpedoes, simple attack craft packed with the troops, bombs, incendiaries, corrosives, nerve agents and other hellish weapons necessary to wreak havoc if they got aboard. It was bad enough to be caught up in the titanic duel between warships but now the enemy was coming to strike at them face to face, all the time with the prospect of being crushed like an insect by the pulverising contest going on outside. Isiah rapidly passed out weapons from an arms-locker: blades, shock mauls, stubby autopistols and chunky shotguns. Nathan found himself equipped with a worn-looking pump gun and a clip of shells. He risked a glance at the windows as he was fumbling to slot the shot-filled cylinders into the breech of the gun. They now showed finger-long missiles with beaked prows powering, as it seemed, straight for him on harsh coronas of light. The sirens blared a repeating four-tone alarm.

'PORT TURRET STATIONS: OPEN FIRE!'

Nathan cursed as he dropped a shell onto the grating; his fingers felt like sausages in the thick suit gloves. Outside lasers sketched livid traceries across the void as the short-range turrets laid down their barrage, shells and missiles exploded in gouts of orange incandescence as the Retribution's barbettes joined in. The first rank of the beaked projectiles were consumed or broken open and tiny, struggling figures spilled into the void as they spiralled away. But still more torpedoes surged through the barrage and angled in, cutting their flaring drives on a final approach.

Nathan slammed the last shell into place and carefully pumped the action to chamber a round. At the last instant before impact the torpedoes appeared to swell enormously, becoming as big as shuttles before they disappeared from view. A ringing impact threw Nathan to the quivering deck and an endless cacophony of screaming, tearing metal followed. It was so loud it made him

quail at the bone-crushing violence of it, of the sheer force that was ripping through the metres of armour plate to breach the hull.

Finally the tearing slowed and stopped until only the screams of injured gunners and the hiss of escaping air penetrated Nathan's helmet. The Opticon deck had twisted and now part of it sagged away towards the lower deck. Nathan crawled to the edge and saw there was terrible carnage below. A great crocodile-snout of steel and brass projected through the hull plates near Balthasar's breech. Deckplates were twisted back; stanchions and pipes had been bent into an insane ironwork jungle with flowers of steam and spraying fluids. The surviving gunners were taking up defensive positions, aiming their assortment of shotguns and pistols at the invader.

As they did so, cannons coughed into life around the crocodile's snout. Gunflashes strobed as the autoweapons hammered explosive rounds across the interior of the gunroom. Men were blasted asunder where the rounds struck and hot shrapnel whickered around the metal walls injuring others. The snout was grinding open now and a horde of nightmarish figures spilled out of it to add their fire to the fight. At first they appeared like men in the flickering light, but their insane glee marked them apart. They capered as the gunners' pitifully few weapons tore into them, filling that crocodile maw with twitching bodies. They roared with mad laughter as they blazed back with their own guns and threw devilish bombs which burst into pools of hungry, incandescent flame wherever they landed.

Nathan sighted on a twisted figure as it pulled back its arm to throw. The pump gun crashed and the figure fell into a burning pool of its own making. The flames spread, engulfed the crocodile snout and the next two who tried to rush through it were eaten alive by the incendiary. Even so a group of the attackers were out in the gunroom now, dashing through the wreckage to hurl themselves on the gunners. Vicious hand-to-hand combats broke out all across the deck, the foes' hooks and crooked blades clashing against the gunner's pry bars and line gaffes.

The pump gun was useless now the melee had reduced all ordered fighting to a shambles.

'We've got to help them!' Nathan shouted to Kron.

Kron's helm nodded ponderously back and they both slid themselves down the twisted Opticon deck to drop down onto the gundeck. Isiah and two other survivors of the opticon crew followed and they waded into the brawl in a loose knot. Nathan used his gun as a club, smashing the skull of a black-clad figure who was about to gut a fallen gunner. He winced as the gun crunched into its misshapen head, fearing the ageing weapon would fall apart in his hands.

He pumped the action to chamber a round to reassure himself it still could, just as two figures leapt at him out of the smoke. Their mad eyes glared from

behind leather hoods, looking so like Fetchin's that Nathan almost hesitated before he blasted one in the midriff with the shotgun. He pumped the slide to chamber another round but it jammed halfway. Cursing, he swung the gun up to block a saw-bladed knife as the other foe slashed at him but he was borne back as his attacker leapt bodily onto him, pinning the useless gun between their bodies. Panic stole Nathan's strength as he struggled against its maniacal attack. Drool spilled across his face as the creature tore away his helmet with its free hand and pushed him to the deck.

Nathan dropped his gun and scrabbled to keep a grip on the knife-hand as his foe leaned his weight against it, pushing it inexorably towards his exposed neck. For a long second Nathan saw every detail of the thing astride him with horrible clarity. Flames billowed behind a head made jagged by the short horns thrusting out through its leather mask. Cartilage-textured tubes twisted in and out of its flesh like parasitic worms. It was either naked or covered in human hides marked with brands and stigmata. It stank like a week-old corpse and it muttered mad, excited prayers as it bent to the task of murdering him. If what he had been told was true this thing must have been human once. Every shred of its humanity was gone now, eaten up by insane gods that had reduced it to living offal that worshipped its own butcher.

Sickness lent Nathan an awful strength, a burning desire to wipe out these horrors that had been unleashed on them. With a supreme effort born of revulsion Nathan shoved the creature back. Suddenly it convulsed, then slumped and its dead weight bore him back down again.

Nathan rolled free to see Kron pulling an axe from the abomination's neck. Isiah and the others had disappeared into smoke. Only corpses surrounded Nathan and Kron. Nathan's helmet visor had been smashed, rendering it useless. Without it he realised how thin the air was becoming. The flames all around were turning ghostly as they hungrily ate at what remained. Even the screams and sounds of combat were becoming subtly muffled.

'We have to stop more of them getting aboard!' Kron shouted to him through his own damnably intact helmet.

Nathan nodded his understanding. Grabbing up some firebombs from the corpse and found a short halberd from among the fallen before heading for the heart of the inferno. He felt filled with a kind of righteous fury at the turn of events, like things couldn't get any worse and it was time for some payback. Somebody had to pay for him landing up in a situation as dire as this, and with Kendrikson already dead it was going to have to be their insane, murderous enemy.

The snout stood open as before. The flames were dying away in its maw and Nathan could see more twisted figures gathering to rush through. He fumbled to find an activation stud on the rune-etched bomb before giving up and simply lobbing it as the figures started to run forward. Then another, and

a third from Kron, turning the entryway into a sea of corrosive fire as the bombs burst on impact. Nathan turned to shout to Kron an instant before an armoured giant burst through the conflagration with a brazen roar.

Before Nathan could react the heavy pistol in its fist barked twice and Kron was thrown back with a flash and shower of blood. Nathan felt an icy bolt of fear trying to force his feet to run but it was already too late. The figure charged forward with nightmarish speed, an ironclad monster of myth, skull-helmed and laden with death, a screeching chainsword in its other fist slashing down at him in an unstoppable arc.

Nathan hurled himself aside and brought up the halberd to block the slash. It was a mistake. The power of the blow threw him back, jolting his arms as the shrieking teeth of the saw tore chunks from the halberd's steel haft in a shower of sparks. The giant wielded its huge blade with ease, and in the blink of an eye its shrieking blade circled and swept down at him again. Nathan leapt back but the sweep of the chainsword tore the head from the halberd and slid along the arm of his suit, chewing through it and tearing at his flesh. A cold flush of painlessness told Nathan that the injury was severe; his body was already trying to shut out the agony.

In desperation Nathan thrust the jagged end of the halberd haft into the thing's barrel chest. It rang off an armoured plate and buried itself deep in a nest of cables beneath where its ribs should have been. The giant warrior didn't even flinch as it sent him sprawling with a blow from its heavy pistol.

Death was close. One of his eyes was blind and Nathan felt an abnormal calm as he accepted that these were his last seconds of life. The world seemed to slow to an insect crawl as the armoured warrior stepped towards him, raising its keening sword for a killing blow. Nathan felt only a pang of disappointment that he would never know more of Kron's strange wisdom; so much must have died with him. The pounding of Nathan's last heartbeats sounded like a distantly thumping drum.

Thump. One armoured boot crunched down. Flecks of blood span away from the motion-captured teeth of the chainsword as it soared upward. Nathan looked down at his right arm and saw it was crimson from shoulder to wrist. Everything wavered as he started to black out.

Thump. The other boot crashed down. The blade was raised almost to the top of its arc. Nathan was aware of movement where Kron had fallen, and a tiny spark of hope flared that he might still be alive, might save Nathan somehow if only he were quick and could defeat this unstoppable colossus. Logic sneered at his paltry hopes from the dark recesses of his brain.

Thump. The blade began to sweep down, gathering momentum. Nathan's world was shrinking, the vision from his remaining eye darkening until he could barely see. Paltry hopes and all conscious thought were corroded away by the sea of agony raging through his arm.

Thump. Nathan saw the blade had entered his dimmed world and part of him welcomed it, teeth flashing bright as a shark's hungry smile in the gloom. The pain would be over soon, that could only be good. A spectral hand seemed to reaching over him to touch the blade, as if the God-Emperor himself were placing a benediction on his slaughter. The hand was crawling with blue fires and sparks cascaded from its fingertips.

Thump. A flash of light leapt from hand to blade, and with it the chainsword exploded and was hurled away from the giant's fist. The hulking warrior staggered and started to raise his pistol. Kron stepped forward into Nathan's circle of vision and raised a hand.

Thump. A ravening bolt of brilliance crackled from Kron's hand onto the warrior's chest plate and rent it asunder in a thunderclap. The mighty figure was thrown off its feet, its pistol sending explosive rounds flashing off wildly from its owner's convulsing death-spasm.

Thump. The chainsword, molten and twisted rang down on the deckplates. Nathan clasped his left arm to his right shoulder and instantly felt warmth flood through his blood slick wounds. The armoured warrior crashed to the deck beside its smoking sword. Nathan tried to breathe more deeply to clear his head but found he couldn't. The orange flames all around were shrinking into bluish flickers. The air was nearly gone.

Kron squatted down beside him as the ship shook, as if from some internal explosion. Nathan could see the chest of Kron's suit was shredded and bloody, a death-shot surely. Wreckage dislodged by the shockwave crashed down nearby with horrible clangour. Kron didn't even flinch as he calmly removed his helmet. As the helmet came away, Kron's eye blazed as never before. It was glowing with the fierce light of furnace. Nathan tried to blot out the horrible intensity of that glare in his dimmed world but couldn't. It bored into him, so that it seemed like Kron the man was shrunk to nothing more than a wraith, that the crimson brilliance trailed behind it like smoke.

Kron's lips moved, but Nathan had to strain to hear their faint whisper through the rarefied air.

'Don't you worry, shipmate, Kron'll see to ye.'

'L-Luminen!' Nathan gasped.

'No,' Kron whispered.

Nathan's body was trembling uncontrollably as shock set in. His vision had almost dimmed completely, apart from a harsh, red light floating nearby.

'Not that at all.'

A helmet clamped down over Nathan's head, dimming the light and bringing a welcome darkness.

Nathan awoke on the floor of the hidden cutter. His arm was in a sling and a bandage covered one of his eyes but he otherwise felt rested and healthy.

Kron was sitting in one of the narrow pews, watching him.

‘How de ye feel?’ he inquired with genuine concern.

‘Good,’ Nathan grunted as he sat up. ‘How long was I out?’

‘Five hours. I took time to fix ye up, an’ me too, and rest some ’fore we go back up to the gunroom.’

Nathan felt a sense of relief. He had feared Kron would ask him if he wanted to jump ship. The aftermath of a battle offered the best chance Nathan would likely get for an escape to go unnoticed. But somehow the prospect seemed a lot less appealing now he had seen what was out there waiting for mutineers and faithless men to fall into its clutches. In fact Nathan was feeling an unfamiliar amount of regard for the God-Emperor after his experiences, a craving for the protection the Ecclesiarchs promised could be gained from the blessings of the Holy Master of Mankind.

But that left him in here with Kron, not-a-Luminen Kron who could defeat a champion of the mad gods with his own lightning. No ordinary gunner, for sure. A servant of the Emperor? Somehow Nathan didn’t think so. If anything he really did look like a gargoyle in this setting, a red-eyed piece of malevolence that had detached itself from the stonework and come down to blaspheme among it. Perhaps someone hiding out then, disguised among a faceless mass yet always moving from one world to another. It would be a superb cover. Unremarkable, beneath attention and yet guarded by the awesome might of an Imperial warship. Ultimately, whatever other misgivings Nathan might have, Kron had saved his life and that put him firmly in Kron’s debt. He began to say so but Kron waved his thanks away.

‘Don’t be too thankful, lad. I had to fix your eye with what was to hand down here. I’m ’fraid I might have made a terrible job out of it. Take the bandage off. Tell me if ye can see.’

Nathan knew what was coming even before his fingers brushed cold steel around his eye. The lens of it was hard and slightly curved to the touch. He bore the metal-sealed scars of his first engagement as part of the Emperor’s Navy, but his vision was perfect. Nathan shuddered as he recalled Kron’s unnerving personality shift after the fight with Kendrikson, when he had seemed like a slave desperate to escape his inactive bionic eye.

‘Kron?’ Nathan began tentatively. ‘Who are you really?’

Kron chortled. ‘A princeling who was stolen by gypsies.’

‘Don’t start that again.’

‘Very well, I’ll put it this way, lad… Cross the stars and fight for glory…’

THE BURNING

Nick Kyme

The following events take place between Salamander and Firedrake, the first two novels of the Tome of Fire trilogy. This series follows the Salamander Space Marines as they attempt to unravel the mysteries surrounding the Chapter.

First there was heat, then a sense of dislocation and a curious weightlessness as his body was propelled through humid air. It lathered his skin in a feverish steam-sweat that condensed into vapour as he moved. Pain followed swiftly, focussed in pins of agony impaled into his face, setting every nerve aflame. Reality was a series of flashes: light then dark, then hot and red.

Groggy, he lolled on his back. Ash, kicked up from the hard fall, billowed up in a grey pall. Coughing, he tried not to choke on it. Fire, fire in the eyes. Cinder flecks made them itch and sting. Scratch it out. Muffled voices spoke without meaning. The smell was potent, though. It was…

Burning.

A stark moment of revelation, and he realised it was his own flesh. His fingers…

They don't feel like my own… smaller, not as strong.

…were just millimetres from the charred edges of his skin when a strong hand seized him.

'Don't…' a voice warned. The faded quality dampened the sense of urgency it tried to convey. The accent was deep, thick. It had a silken tone that was instantly recognisable yet somehow incongruous.

'What– what happened?'

My voice… strange, as if from someone else's throat. No power, no resonance.

'Dusk-wraiths,' the other replied – he still couldn't see him, his eyes registered only blurs of light and heat – as if that was explanation enough. 'We must move. Come on, get up.'

'I can't see.'

So craven, so weak and… and… mortal. This is not my voice.

'You will. Give it a moment.'

Strong hands gripped him again, hooking under the arms and hoisting him up. Sulphur tanged the breeze, acrid on his tongue. Sight returned slowly.

On the horizon stood a mountain of fire, its peaks wreathed in pyroclastic cloud as it spoke with a voice from the depths of the earth.

I know it. Was I born…?

A great plain of ash spread before him, grey like a tomb, flaking like cremated skin. In the distance, the mountain, imperious over its smaller brothers and sisters, reached up with craggy fingers to rake the incarnadine sky. Hot clouds billowed in the visceral firmament like blots of dissolute blood. Veins of lava bled down the mountain face, trailing to a vast lake of fire many kilometres away.

Ash, rock, flame – this was a hellish place, somewhere the damned came to suffer eternal torment. It was a red world, a world of magma rivers and razor-edged crags, of sulphuric seas and gorges of flame. It was beyond death.

One foot went in front of the other.

I used to be stronger than this…

His legs worked of their own volition, rather than through an effort of will. They were running when he spoke again, though he didn't know from what.

'Am I dead?'

Was I reborn?

The other turned, resolving through a milky film of slowly regained sight. He was tanned, etched with tribal scars and carrying a long spear. Even with the scaled hide draped across his body and the rough sandals on his feet, the man had a feral but noble bearing.

'No, Dak'ir,' he replied, nonplussed. 'This is Nocturne.'

Home…

Behind him, Dak'ir heard the scrape and whirr of the turbines slowly closing on them. He dared not look back. Half-glances, snatched during the panicked flight, had revealed dark weapons and a long droning engine. Its nose ended in a jagged barb, its flanks were bladed and it *hovered* as if held aloft by the very air hazing around it. A metal stink, wet and hot, followed it in a thick miasma. Platforms either side of its black fuselage carried… *daemons*, black-skinned daemons.

The other had led them into a narrow gorge, scurrying down volcanic scree and through venting geysers of steam. It was hard going, even on foot, even unencumbered by armour or machineries…

I remember my armour.

…yet the turbine whirr followed.

Dusk-wraiths were dogged hunters.

I know them by another name.

Dak'ir heard their shrieking – an unnatural, eldritch clamour – grow with anticipation of the kill.

'Follow!' the other cried. Dak'ir lost him briefly in the smoke rolling across the crags. He fought to maintain pace, heart hammering in his chest…

Why do I only have one?

…but the other was too swift. He knew this plain. Dak'ir felt he should know it too, but it seemed distant in his memory, as if the sights were not his own to recall.

Keeping low, aware of the jagged bursts of displaced air overhead caused by weapons fire, Dak'ir barrelled around a twist in the rock.

Reaching the other side, he found the other was gone. He'd entered a belt of smoke, exuded from some venting crater, and did not appear again. Dak'ir fought his panic, held it at bay.

But I should know no fear…

Panic now and he was dead. He'd not even seen his predators clearly, yet knew in his core the sharp tortures they'd visit on his flesh.

I've seen their victims flayed alive, impaled on spikes…

Crashing through the ring of smoke, Dak'ir closed his eyes. Rough hands dragged him aside and into the shadow of a deep and hidden spur.

The other was there, a finger pressed tightly to his tanned lips.

Something large and fleet skidded past them, impossibly aloft on the hot air, breaching the smoke bank like a serrated knife through skin.

Three seconds lapsed before the whine of engines became the roar of explosions as the skimmer-machine was torn apart, its hellish riders thrown clear or devoured by fire.

An ululating war cry ripped from the other's lips as he hefted his long, hunting spear.

Dak'ir found a recurve bow suddenly in his hands. He knew its contours well. This was his weapon.

And yet, it isn't.

Nocking an arrow, he followed the other to the site of the wreckage.

More tanned warriors were emerging from the smoke and displaced ash. Some carried finely-wrought swords. A number of them even had long rifles, braced to their shoulders and spitting shot.

Dusk-wraiths lolled in the tortured remains of their skimmer-machine. Up

close, it reminded Dak'ir of an Acerbian skiff but longer and infinitely more bladed. Skulls and other grotesque fetishes hung from spiked chains looped around its metal hull.

Its riders were armoured in a sort of black carapace reminiscent of an insect's segmented outer shell. Not daemons at all, but still daemonic in their own depraved way. They were tall and lithe, cruelly barbed like their ship. Murderous coals burned in their eyes, like the embers of trapped hate.

I know these creatures, and yet they are not…

Several were dead, even before the spears, bolts and blades cut down the rest. The slain rotted and festered before Dak'ir's eyes, their armour corroding on the arid breeze like metal rusting impossibly quickly until flaking almost to nothing. Their bodies became ash, meeting the grey patina of the plain and disappearing. By the end, there was nothing to suggest they'd ever been there.

Dak'ir lowered his bow, too stupefied to loose. The slaughter was over anyway.

The other approached him, wiping black ash and rust from his spear, and frowned.

'Brother…'

Yes, I have many brothers, but you are not they.

'Are you all right?' The other came closer. Dak'ir felt the other's hand upon his shoulder and only just realised he himself was similarly attired in sash and sandals.

'I– I don't…'

This is not my armour.

The other gestured for him to sit on a nearby rock. 'Still dazed from the blast,' he said mainly to himself. 'It's me, N'bel.'

I've heard that name before. It's very old.

Dak'ir looked up, his eyes and senses suddenly sharp. The name resonated but he didn't know why.

'Brother…' he echoed, and clasped N'bel's arm in a warrior's greeting. 'I know you.'

It was called a *drygnirr*, a fire-lizard, one of many that stalked the volcanic plains of Nocturne. It was a kind of salamander, the lesser kin of the monstrous firedrakes that dwelled deep in the mountains near to the magma's warmth. Dak'ir remembered this much of his surroundings as he awaited the metal-shaper.

Scurrying over the scattered rocks, the creature regarded him intently. A fire burned in its eyes, casting a glow about its onyx face. Barring a thin spine of blue, its scales were utterly black.

'What do you want, little lizard?'

'Don't let the others hear you talking to yourself.' N'bel appeared, carrying

something in his hands. ‘They already doubt an Ignean’s mettle in battle.’ N’bel leaned in close and clapped a strong palm on Dak’ir’s shoulder. ‘Not I though, brother.’

Dak’ir nodded at the other Nocturnean’s camaraderie, so familiar and yet so strange to him at the same time. He had felt the prejudice at his Ignean heritage before, too.

That was another time, spoken by another’s lips.

When he glanced back towards the rocks, the drygnirr was gone. Perhaps it was just a figment of his imagination, and he wondered briefly if his doubters might be right.

‘Here.’ N’bel proffered a silver mask. ‘*Pyrkinn* flesh,’ he explained as Dak’ir took the mask. ‘It’ll quicken healing.’

The metal-shaper, a bald-headed, broad-shouldered warrior with folded arms like bands of iron, nodded sagely behind him. Unlike the other tribal warriors, the metal-shaper carried a stout hammer across his back. White ash marked his body in sigils representing the anvil and the tools of the forge. His skin was even darker than N’bel’s and his glossy eyes captured the fire of the overhead sun and blazed.

Eyes of fire… Skin as black as onyx…

Dak’ir put on the mask. It only covered half of his face, the wounded part, but he felt the pain ease immediately.

My face was burning when I heard them cry out his name.

‘My skin…’ he said, realising for the first time that it was much lighter than N’bel’s.

‘Ha! Ignean-ash. A cave-dweller sees less of the Nocturnean sun, Dak’ir.’ N’bel looked concerned. ‘Are you sure you’re well?’

‘Just a little disorientated. What happened to the wraiths?’

N’bel became pensive. ‘Gone.’ He gestured to the plain beyond where several warriors assembled. One of them wore scaled robes and a snarling lizard mask. He waved a crooked staff, threaded with curving fangs and desiccated reptilian tails. A chest-plate of saurian bones armoured his muscled torso. The others watched him intently as he padded the earth: taking up handfuls, tasting, scenting, releasing and finally repeating all over again.

‘The shaman will find their trail, though,’ he added sternly. ‘The earth never lies.’

On Nocturne, the earth and its people were one. She was a cruel mother, the world of fire, capable of terrible destruction and death uncountable. During the Time of Trial, she would crack and tear, spill her blood and weep tears of lava that threatened to consume the land and the very people scratching an existence on her rocky flesh. The earth gave as it took, however. It was part of the great cycle of birth, death and rebirth. She would take you back, the fire-

mother, volatile Nocturne, take you back into her heart and her bosom. Life ended in fire; so too was it begun.

Resurrection was merely an aspect of tribal culture, of Promethean Creed. Nothing that ever came to live and die on Nocturne was ever truly gone. It was simply *changed*, reborn into something else.

Am I 'else', am I reborn into this unfamiliar flesh? My bones were like iron, my skin as strong as steel. I was invulnerable. And now… now… just the burning.

The shaman's bond with the earth was great, certainly stronger than any in the modest war party. Ash flakes, smouldering craters, the very grains of the earth spoke to him in a voice only he could understand.

Dak'ir had ridden with them, a long file of tribal warriors mounted on the backs of sauroch.

Scaled, bull-like creatures, the sauroch were known neither for speed nor ferocity. But they were strong and tenacious, their hides thick and capable of bearing great burdens over long distances. Ash nomads, the transient tribes who shunned the Sanctuaries, travelled the Scorian Desert on their broad backs.

I have soared through the skies on wings of thunder…

In the blood red of Helldawn, dactylids circled. The winged lizards, combined with the whispers of the earth, had brought the shaman to a rust-red ridge veined with iron-grey. Slowly, the saurochs had followed him and there at a rocky summit the hue of old blood, they found the rest of the dusk-wraiths. Shrieking, screaming, laughing that hollow sound from throats of dust; it was a cacophony. A heavy and oppressive shroud laid upon them all, the sauroch riders.

Dak'ir could not remember the journey, though he did recall the drygnirr watching from the darkness of caves or the peaks of volcanic hills. It shadowed him, neither guide nor predator, merely an observer only he could see. It was as if the creature's eyes could burn right into his soul and strip away the innermost secrets of his mind.

A scryer, psyker… I know you, brother. Your gaze… it burns. I *burn.*

'We attack from three sides,' N'bel was outlining his plan to the others. He'd dismounted and carved a crude map of the camp with a stick in the dirt, less than twenty warriors gathered around him. He beckoned Dak'ir closer into the circle.

'Brother?' The concern etched N'bel's face as clearly as his honour scars.

I wear them too, burned into my flesh. They are a record of my deeds.

'I'm fine.' Dak'ir nodded for him to continue.

N'bel gave him one last look, before he went on. 'Three prongs,' – he made a trident from his fingers – 'two from the east and west as a diversion. A third, much smaller, party will enter from the north where we are now.'

Dak’ir’s gaze strayed to the deep valley below the ridge as he imagined the route N’bel had inscribed with his stick. The path was strewn with crags and sulphur pits. The cinder and ash blown from the nearby caldera of slumbering volcanoes would render the ground red-hot underfoot.

I have walked across fire. I have felt it beat inside my breast. With it I shall… The rest of the litany is lost to me. The burning… it clouds my mind and thoughts.

At the nadir of the valley was a camp of wire and blades. Sharp structures, little more than metal pavilion tents like spikes, carried markings in a strange script. Even the alien letters were edged, as if merely speaking them could cleave your tongue. More skimmer-machines, like the one lying broken on the ash plains, hovered languidly nearby. Some were tethered to bloodied staves of iron; others roamed the perimeter for the entertainment of their riders. Distant figures fled before those machines, pursued by a savage pack.

One, a dark-skinned Nocturnean limping badly, was skewered by a dusk-wraith’s spear and Dak’ir averted his gaze. The riders screamed mockingly in tune with their victims, parodying their agony.

It was a slave camp this place and, judging by the sheer number of metal tents dotting the ground below, the flesh-tally was high. Dak’ir counted fifteen of the ‘tents’. No telling how many were clustered in those metal cages. A larger one at the centre of the camp drew his eye.

N’bel meant to free his people. The skimmer-machine ambushed on the ash plain had been drawn into a trap so they could follow its trail along the earth and find this graven place. He and Dak’ir had been the bait, the wound upon his face…

The burning.

…was the price of such bravery.

Dak’ir knew this, despite his fragmented memory, the sense of *otherness*, not just about this place, but also this time.

‘Dak’ir…’

He turned and caught a flash of lightning on the sun. It was a sword, its blade serrated and gleaming.

I know this blade… No. I know of one much like it. Its chained teeth sing a symphony of death.

‘You lost it on the ash plain. A warrior is only as good as his weapon, brother.’

You sound like someone I knew, someone I fought with a long time ago… or will a long time from now.

Dak’ir nodded and looked down into the valley. The slavers’ depraved revels were painting the earth a deep, visceral red. The heavy scent of fresh copper tainted the sulphur breeze.

‘With whom do I ride, N’bel?’

That was better. I sound something like myself, the old strength returning…

N'bel brought his sauroch up alongside Dak'ir's. They were both so close to the edge. Another step and they'd be charging down the scree.

'You are with the northern party.' He smiled, but there was no mirth to it. 'You ride with me, brother.'

They abandoned the saurochs a hundred metres from the camp, going the rest of the way on foot. The valley was littered with rocks and deep crevices thick with sulphurous smoke. There were plenty of places to hide from the dusk-wraith sentries. The earth and Nocturne's people were one. They could blend together as fire blends with rock.

Dak'ir sent a whickering metal shaft through the creature's neck. It crumpled, clutching its punctured throat. By the time he and N'bel had reached it, the dusk-wraith was already an emaciated husk.

'Why do they wither to ash like this?' he hissed.

Because they aren't really here… 'Focus on the burning. Use it.' These are not my words inside my mind…

N'bel shook his head. 'No matter how many we kill, there is always the same remaining at the camp. If I believed in it, I would say they cannot die because they are not truly alive.'

And neither are you, my brother…

A second sentry fell to a hurled spear. Another Nocturnean pairing appeared briefly before becoming lost again in the rocks and smoke.

The heart of the slaver camp was close. They'd penetrated the outer ring and were moving into the vicinity of the metal tents. The sun was still low, low enough to cast long, red shadows across the desert.

Dak'ir was about to advance when he saw the drygnirr again. It crouched atop the shell of a dusk-wraith's corpse, blinking with eyes of flame.

'Why do you watch me?'

He sees into your mind… my mind. I feel it… the burning… Vulkan, give me strength.

The drygnirr was occluded by a sudden stream of smoke. Once it had cleared, the creature was gone again.

Another shaft nocked to his bow, Dak'ir moved on.

Six of them crept silently into the dusk-wraiths' camp, slaying sentries invisibly as they went. The rest of the slavers were swollen on carnage, in a drug-induced soporific slumber brought on by the brazier pans blazing lambently around the camp.

Upon reaching the first of the tents, a warning cry rang out.

The others had launched their attack. East and west, sauroch riders drove at the slavers to steal their attention.

'Swiftly now,' whispered N'bel, up off his haunches and running low to the

first of the tents.

Dak'ir was right behind him.

N'bel ushered him on to the next tent, but gripped Dak'ir's arm before he could go.

'What?'

'That's where you'll find what you seek.' N'bel was pointing to the larger structure, the one at the heart of the camp. '*He* awaits.'

'Who, brother? Who awaits?'

I can smell his decaying breath, feel it against my cheek, despite the burning…

'Your enemy is there.'

'My enemy? But what about the people?' Dak'ir was struggling but N'bel would not let him go. Dusk-wraiths had noticed the commotion. Their forces were moving through the camp.

N'bel smiled. 'We are already dead, Dak'ir. We've been dead for aeons, brother. Now, go!' He pushed Dak'ir off, who stumbled and almost fell.

He was about to turn, to demand the truth, when a burst of rifle fire sliced overhead. Shard ammunition tore up the earth and shredded the flank of a tent. Dak'ir was about to loose when he saw another dusk-wraith, then a third and a fourth, heading towards them.

The large tent was near. He dropped his bow and ran.

The whine of automatic fire from the dusk-wraiths' weapons hurt his ears. They merged with the baying of the saurochs as they were slaughtered. Somewhere a skimmer-machine exploded.

'We are dead, Dak'ir, but you still live. Go!' N'bel's final words were a shout.

Dak'ir didn't look back.

Crashing bolter fire rings my ears. I am within my gunmetal cocoon, surging to the planet below.

His path to the large tent was suddenly blocked by one of the dusk-wraiths. She was masked, the face long and elongated to tapered spikes at chin and forehead, and grinned evilly. The sun glinting off her wicked blades, held in either hand, turned the metal to the colour of blood. She was lithe and deadly, with the body of an athlete and a torturer's confidence.

She rushed Dak'ir, a murderer's snarl pulling at ruby lips visible through a slit in the mask.

He scraped his sword along the ground, kicking up a line of cinder-flecked dust into her face. She hissed as the hot flakes stung her, but drove on.

Dak'ir felt a cut to his ribs, then the warm splash of blood down his side. They'd crossed each other, like duelling riders, blade to blade.

I must control my breathing, remember the routines learned in the solitorium. My hearts beat with the thrill of battle.

She came again, the dusk-wraith witch, slashing down with her blades as a pair. Dak'ir parried, sparks spitting off the metal of his sword. A kick to his stomach sent him sprawling across the hot sand and into the tent.

Pain lanced his body. It was like he was on fire.

Must… fight… it… The burning… will consume me if I don't.

Dak'ir waited several moments in the dark, watching the slivered entrance, waiting for his assailant. But she never came. He was alone.

The air smelled strange, like being underground, and the scent of soot and ash was redolent. As his eyes slowly adjusted, Dak'ir reached out a hand to touch the walls of the tent. Half expecting a barb or spike, he was cautious, but instead of a cut, all he felt was stone. The walls were rough and craggy, and hot against his tentative fingers.

The sensation was momentary. As he felt his way ahead in the dark, the walls changed again, smooth and cold as metal should be.

There were no captives, nor any dusk-wraiths. Yet, N'bel had mentioned an enemy.

The tent was larger within than it appeared on the outside. At the end of its gloomy length, Dak'ir saw a figure seated upon a throne. It was a silhouette, a veritable giant, and armoured unless he was mistaken.

'Come forth!' Dak'ir challenged, brandishing his sword.

The figure did not answer, did not even flinch.

'If you are my enemy then face me.'

Still nothing.

Dak'ir crept closer.

From the corner of his eye he thought he saw movement… a flash of reptilian eyes, a streak of blue on black. But when he looked, the drygnirr wasn't there.

He watches, even now… even as I burn.

The figure on the throne was mocking him, Dak'ir was certain. He would cut the–

A thrown spear tore into the side of the tent and a shaft of light spilled in. It lit the figure, a silhouette no longer. His armour was pitted and broken, as if it had been corroded by time or–

The melta's beam cutting across the temple. There is nothing I can do, even when it touches my face…

Though badly damaged, much of the paint chipped away, Dak'ir saw the armour had once been green. A pair of wings with a flame in the centre emblazoned the warrior's shattered breastplate. Fingers of bone poked out from his ruined gauntlets. A chest cavity of dust-choked ribs yawned through the ragged gaps in his plastron. A skull, locked in a rictus-grin, regarded Dak'ir where a battle-helm had long ceased to be.

A word, a name, trembled on Dak'ir's lips as he approached the armoured

cadaver.

‘Ka… Ka…’

He was my captain. My guilt gives him form in this place.

Dak’ir was less than half a metre away – ‘Ka… Ka…’ – when the corpse-warrior reached out with his deathless hands and seized Dak’ir by the neck.

‘Diiiiieeeee…’ it hissed, naming itself and damning Dak’ir in one word, though its rictus jaw never moved.

Yes, that was his name. I cannot forget.

Dak’ir was choking. He scrabbled at the bony fingers but they wouldn’t relent. Blood pulsed in his ears and he felt his eyes bulging as his brain was starved of oxygen.

The burning… Use it!

He had to drag some breath into his lungs or be strangled by the terrible undead thing before him. That was when he noticed the air bleeding out of the room, devoured hungrily by the flames wreathing his body. It burned, a flame so invasive it went to the nerves and threatened to overwhelm Dak’ir.

The skeleton’s grip loosened.

Dak’ir choked through fire-cracked lips.

‘What is happening?’

Let it burn us. Embrace the flame. It is yours to mould…

The fire became an inferno. It roared outwards in a wave, cascading from Dak’ir’s body, exploding the skeleton to ash with its fury, yet he was untouched.

Pain wracked him, bringing him to his knees as the fire rolled out, devouring the tent, sloughing the metal. It boiled outwards in a white-hot tempest. Blinking against the rising sun, Dak’ir watched the rest of the camp as it was consumed. His brothers fled before the flame but none could outrun it. N’bel fell last of all, screaming as the burning stripped flesh from bone and turned a man into a dark shadow upon the scorched earth.

It was out of his control now, a fiery maelstrom engulfing all upon the plain, consuming all of Nocturne in a relentless wave.

Dak’ir threw his head back, as the fire turned on him at last, and screamed.

Pyriel staggered as the blast wave struck him. He was standing in the pyre-chamber below Mount Deathfire. Crushing the totem creature of the drygnirr in his fist, now little more than a simulacra wrought of flame, he hastily erected a psychic shield against which the waves of conflagration broke eagerly. He could barely see the figure crouched at the eye of the flame storm, but heard Dak’ir’s screaming clearly.

White fire lit the Librarian starkly, flickering across the blue of his power armour and the many arcane artefacts chained about his person. The drakescale cloak Pyriel wore on his back snapped and curled with the tangible

heat.

Sweat beaded the Librarian's forehead. He felt it running down to the nape of his neck. Never before had he been so tested, never before seen such a potent reaction to the burning. To his horror, the edges of his psychic barrier were cracking against the fire tide. He tried to reinforce them but found he had neared his limits.

'Vulkan's strength…' he gasped, beseeching his primarch and was answered.

Master Vel'cona emerged from a cascade of flame into the room, his eyes ablaze with cerulean power. His armour, only a suggestion through the heat haze, was more ancient than Pyriel's. Akin in some ways to the earth shamans of old Nocturne, it was festooned with reptilian bones and dripped in scale.

Together, the two Librarians pushed the fire tide back until it was nought but wisps of smoke. A blackened crater outlined Dak'ir's crouched position. He was naked, steam and fire exuding from his scarred flesh. The searing legacy of the melta beam he'd suffered on Stratos flared angrily on the side of his face, a physical reminder of how he was different to his fire-born brothers. The burning had destroyed his armour, rendering it an ashen patina shrouding his body.

Though he remained still and upright, his head tucked into his chest, arms drawn up around his legs protectively, Dak'ir was unconscious.

The entire pyre-chamber was a charred, soot-stained ruin. It was little more than bare rock, its entrance sealed by a pair of reinforced blast doors, but fire-blackened wall to wall. The only void was where Pyriel had been standing. The air was so hot it hazed, and reeked heavily of sulphur.

The ash cocoon encasing Dak'ir cracked and he slumped to the earth.

Vel'cona regarded the would-be Lexicanum impassively. 'He has survived the burning.'

It wasn't a question, but Pyriel answered it anyway.

'Yes.' He was still breathless from his exertions but recovering.

'And?' Vel'cona turned his penetrating gaze onto the other Librarian. The fuliginous darkness of the room seemed to coalesce around him, rendering him indistinct and shadowed.

'Incredible power, like nothing I've ever seen.'

Vel'cona's eyes flared like blazing blue sapphires in the gloom. 'Can it be controlled?'

Pyriel removed his battle-helm, revealing a sweat-swathed face. His scalp was excessively damp. Only now was the cerulean fire in his ember-red eyes fading, such was the power he'd been forced to call upon. He delivered his answer in a low voice.

'On this occasion, he could not.'

'Saviour or destroyer…' Vel'cona muttered. 'Nocturne in the balance… A

low-born, one of the earth, will pass through the gate of fire.’

Pyriel was confused. ‘Master?’

‘The Tome of Fire reveals much,’ said Vel’cona on his way out of the chamber. He had to use a bolt of psychic force to open the metal blast doors. They were fused together. ‘But it does not tell us everything. Who can say what the Ignean’s role will be in the turning tide? His flame may flicker and die, it may roar into a conflagration. Much is not yet known, but I sense a visitor approaching who may help us in our understanding.’

Pyriel had been hoping for a more straightforward explanation, but he had learned long ago not to question the vagaries of the Chief Librarian of the Salamanders.

‘What is your will, master?’

‘Keep training him.’

‘And if he loses control again?’

‘Do what you must,’ Vel’cona’s voice echoed from the darkness beyond the fire-smote room. ‘Destroy him.’

A GOOD MAN

Sandy Mitchell

As the tide of war swept across the Sabbat Worlds, most of us could be forgiven for taking more notice of its rise than of its ebb. But after the battlefronts moved on, leaving rockpools of conflict and its aftermath beached by their withdrawal, the vital task of restoring the Pax Imperialis was only just beginning. On world after shattered world, a veritable second crusade of those with the necessary expertise to manage the reconstruction followed hard on the heels of the first.

Which was how Zale Linder came to Verghast, around the middle of 771, among a swarm of Administratum functionaries charged with the restoration of good order there. He wasn't much to look at, so typical of his brethren that he might have escaped notice altogether, had he not worked so assiduously at coming to my attention; but that was to be later, and to really appreciate his story, I suppose we'd better start at the beginning.

We can only imagine Linder's reaction to his surroundings when he first set foot on the shuttle apron at Kannack. Armed men were everywhere, in the uniforms of PDF regiments, or the Imperial Guard units left to garrison the planet, and the scars of the recent fighting were more than evident on the port facilities surrounding him. Come to that, as most of the shuttles approaching the Northern Collective overflew the glass-walled crater where Vannick had once stood, he'd probably seen some of the worst devastation even before his arrival.

For a man more used to the musty recesses of a scriptorium, the noise, bustle, and constant tang of combustibles from the surrounding manufactoria must have been disconcerting in the extreme. Nevertheless, by all accounts, he rallied at once, chivvying the small knot of brown-robed Scribes towards

the rail terminal, though few of them were quite so quick to adjust to their new surroundings as he was.

The echoing hall with its multitude of platforms, from which services departed to destinations throughout the North Col and beyond, probably seemed as alien to the Administratum adepts as the landing field had been, but they found a local service into Kannack itself without much trouble. The Verghastites had become used to off-worlders by this time, particularly bewildered-looking ones speaking strangely-accented Gothic, and the booking clerk who wrote out their tickets in a flowing copperplate hand directed them to the correct platform with all the polite deference due to customers he'd overcharged by about five per cent.

The train rattled its way to Kannack Hub in little more than an hour, affording Linder a few brief glimpses of the spoil heaps and outlying reclamation zones, before burrowing into the side of the Western Spine like a worm into an apple. The last couple of kilometres of track ran within the lower hab levels, through tunnels and caverns of steel and brick, some spaces large and open enough to seem like small towns in their own right, while in other places the enclosing walls whipped by disorientatingly just the other side of the window.

The Hub terminal was more crowded than anywhere they'd seen so far, and the little knot of off-world adepts navigated it in an apprehensive huddle, following the directions they'd been given as punctiliously as the curlicues of an ancient text being restored to legibility by a fresh layer of ink. Once again, Linder took the lead, although he was by no means the most senior member of the party; but he had more local knowledge than any of the others, furnished to him by a friend and colleague who'd arrived in an earlier wave a year or so before, and who had corresponded diligently in the interim. He already knew how to flag down one of the municipal charabancs thronging the outer concourse, and how to distinguish the combination of numeric and colour coding which marked one heading in the right direction. How grateful his colleagues were for being saved a five-kilometre walk, mostly in an upwards direction, isn't clear, but I presume the majority were relieved to find what seats they could among the shift-change crowds.

What really matters is that Linder eventually ended up where he belonged, at the Administratum Cloister; but the details of his journey are important to someone like me, to whom details are everything. In that relatively brief trip from the landing field, he demonstrated the single-mindedness and adaptability which set him apart from his colleagues, and which were to lead him down darker paths than he could ever have dreamed he would walk.

The first intimation that something was wrong would have been when he registered his arrival at the Codicium Municipalis, where he had been assigned to work, and enquired about the friend who had preceded him to

Verghast.

‘No record of that individual exists,’ the junior Archivist on the other side of the polished wooden counter informed him, with the neutral inflection peculiar to lowly functionaries trying to appear not to relish the chance of making the lives of their superiors more difficult.

‘Please check again,’ Linder said calmly. He’d been navigating his way around the labyrinthine ways of the datastacks for most of his life, and was well aware that information could be lost or mislaid in a myriad of ways. ‘Allow for misspellings, and cross-reference with the arrival records of the landing field.’

‘The results are the same, honoured Scribe,’ the Archivist told him, after a wait no longer than Linder had expected. ‘There is no reference to a Harl Sitrus in any of the informational repositories accessible from this cogitation node.’

‘Then I suggest you commence an immediate archival audit,’ Linder said, ‘since the data I require has clearly been misfiled.’

‘As you instruct, honoured Scribe,’ the Archivist said, suppressing any trace of irritation which might have entered his voice; there were worse ways of wasting his time, which Linder could easily impose if sufficiently irked. ‘Would you like a summary of the results forwarded to your cubicle?’

‘I would,’ Linder said, and returned to his assigned task of tabulating the adjusted output of the Kannack manufactoria, which had altered appreciably in both volume and substance in response to the recent upheavals. The task was a painstaking one, consuming a good deal of time and the greater part of his attention, so he was faintly surprised to find the report he’d requested dropping from the pneumatic tube over the angled surface of his writing desk less than a week later.

Setting aside the work he was supposed to be doing, Linder began working his way through the thick wad of paper, annotating it as he went with an inkstick. The anonymous Archivist had been thorough, within the limits of his competence, but Linder’s greater experience and expertise soon began to pay dividends, and by the time he was making excuses to the senior Lexicographer for failing to finish his assigned task by the compline bell, he’d discovered a number of discrepancies in the archive records, each accompanied by marginalia in his elegantly cursive hand.

The majority of the anomalies he identified were in the files administered by the Bureau of Population Management, the department responsible for collating records of birth, death, and off-world migration, which it would then use to allocate resources where they were most urgently required. The devastation wrought on Verghast had rendered much of this material unreliable, so Linder was hardly surprised by this discovery, but one discrepancy perturbed him greatly. There was still no official record of Harl

Sitrus's arrival on Verghast, even though the date was known to him; turning to his data-slate, he invoked Sitrus's first missive after landing.

We touched down at Kannack on 439 770, he read, frowning in perplexity. *That's a fair-sized hive, one of the largest left standing after the razing of Vervun and the scouring of Ferrozoica. Klath got us to the scriptorium eventually, after a few wrong turnings...* Linder read on, skimming through the familiar words. Nothing else struck him as significant, but the date was unequivocal. The frown deepening, he turned back to the hardprint on his lectern, and paged through the summary of transits from orbit that day.

Shuttle Damsel's Delight, *grounded pad seventeen, Administratum charter. Twelve passengers, personal effects, cargo amounting to 497 tonnes (stationery sundries).* That must have been the one.

To confirm the fact, he invoked the cogitator link, and examined the manifest in detail. Galen Klath, Lexicographer, and eleven other names. Sitrus's was not among them.

Troubled, Linder spent a further few minutes in search of Klath's whereabouts. His personal quarters were listed as within the bounds of the Administratum Cloister, but Linder lacked the seniority to access their precise location. That didn't matter, though; the department the Lexicographer was attached to was a mere thirty levels away, and a chance meeting would be easy enough to contrive. Perhaps he would be able to shed some light on the anomaly.

'Sitrus?' Klath asked, his face crumpling in perplexity. He was much as Linder remembered him, short and rotund, which, together with his hairless pate, made him look uncannily like an oversized toddler dressed for masquerade in adult clothes. 'Why do you ask?'

'I've been looking for him,' Linder said evenly. Having to explain the obvious was another thing he remembered about the plump Lexicographer, which was one of the reasons he'd been so pleased to be transferred to his present duties, away from Klath's supervision. 'In his letters, he mentioned you were still colleagues.'

'I see.' Klath glanced round the crowded buttery, as though afraid of eavesdroppers. There were none Linder could see, just the usual crowd of men and women in inkstained robes, chattering idly as they grabbed some pottage or a mid-shift mug of caffeine before returning to their data-slates and hardprints. 'But I'm afraid I haven't seen him since the transfer.'

'He's transferred?' Linder asked.

Caught unawares by the brevity of the question, Klath nodded, chewed and swallowed, and replied with a stifled hiccup. 'To another department. He didn't say which.'

Linder echoed the nod, more slowly. There were over seven thousand

separate bureaux within the cloister, dealing with everything from the disposition of tithing revenue to the certification of left-handed writing implements, and with nothing further to go on, his friend might just as well be on a different planet. ‘Did he ever mention where he was living?’ he asked, and Klath shook his head.

‘He had a flat somewhere up on the Spine. Lots of people live outside the Cloister, if they can afford it. You young ones, anyway. Too much bustle if you ask me.’

Linder nodded again. He was still in the rooms assigned to him on his arrival, having little inclination to expose himself to the ceaseless activity of the wider hive, but Sitrus would have relished the proximity of taverns and bars, theatres and brawling pits. Ever since their first meeting, as callow Archivists, Sitrus had been hungry for experience, eager to meet life head-on, instead of vicariously through text and picts. It was an attitude uncommon within the sheltered precincts of the Cloister. Perhaps that was why Linder was so determined to see his friend again, instead of accepting that their paths had diverged forever when Sitrus boarded the first transport to Verghast over a year before.

‘It must have taken everything he had,’ he said. Rents on the Spine were high, the few adepts he’d met living outside the Cloister barely being able to afford a couple of rooms in a worker’s hab.

Klath leaned closer, assuming a confidential air. ‘Between you and me,’ he said, ‘I don’t think he paid in cash. *Cherchez la femme*, and all that.’

‘Really?’ Linder considered this unexpected information. Sitrus had always enjoyed feminine company, he knew, but the only women he’d had any contact with before had been other Administratum adepts; which, given the circumscribed nature of the lives they led, had hardly been surprising. None of them could have afforded lodgings in the hive’s most salubrious quarter, any more than Sitrus could. ‘You mean he’d taken up with a local woman?’

Which would have been impossible, of course. Nothing in any of the letters he’d received had so much as hinted at such a liaison. But Klath was nodding slowly. ‘I believe so,’ he confirmed, with the self-satisfied air of someone passing on a juicy bit of scandal. ‘For the last six months, at least.’

Six months in which Linder had received three missives from his friend. The first had dwelt at length on some interesting cross-referencing practices the Verghastite Archivists were continuing to cling to in the face of the filing protocols imposed by the new arrivals, and the compromise eventually arrived at to general satisfaction, before rambling off into a description of a few of the local festivals; the second had consisted mainly of enthusiastic comments about the local cuisine, which Sitrus appeared to be finding very much to his taste; and the third contained little apart from an account of an inspection of one of the protein reclamation plants, to which Sitrus had been attached to

take notes, and which he'd enlivened with caustic pen portraits of the rest of the delegation. None had so much as hinted at a romantic liaison.

Klath had to be mistaken. Nevertheless, Linder supposed, he might as well follow it up, if only to eliminate the possibility. In that regard, the mind of a diligent bureaucrat isn't so far removed from the dispassionate pursuit of hidden truths peculiar to my own profession. Which meant that, from the moment Linder uttered his next remark, our paths would inevitably cross.

'Do you happen to remember her name?' he asked.

As it turned out, Klath wasn't sure, but a little more patient probing on Linder's part elicited the vague recollection that Sitrus had mentioned meeting someone called Milena once. That was little enough to go on, but for a fellow of Linder's skills and resources, it was sufficient; there were only so many women of that name living in the Spine, and not all of them were of the right age to be of romantic interest to Sitrus; and not all those remaining on the list were single. That didn't discount them entirely, of course, but Klath had implied that Sitrus was living with his inamorata, and a husband about the place would have put paid to so cosy an arrangement. Knowing his friend as he did, I'm sure Linder was able to eliminate a few more potential candidates without too much difficulty, but whatever other criteria he chose to apply, he didn't bother to share with me during our subsequent conversation on the subject.

Once he'd got the list down to an irreducible minimum, the streak of determination which had first surfaced during his eventful journey from the landing field displayed itself again. Undaunted by the scale of the task he'd set himself, he began using the limited amount of free time at his disposal to contact the remaining candidates, eliminating them one by one.

Most were polite, if puzzled, simply assuring him they weren't acquainted with his friend; an assurance he generally believed, as a lifetime spent in the service of the Administratum had left him able to detect evasion or unease in the harmonics of the voice. A few were clearly suspicious of his motives, and a handful decidedly hostile; these he annotated for possible further enquiry, if he reached the end of his list without any useful result. Whatever his reception, he plodded on, until one of the voices on the vox reacted in a fashion he'd not experienced before.

'Good shift-change,' he began, for the fifty-seventh time. 'Is that Milena Dravere?'

'Speaking.' The voice was brisk, brittle behind a sabre-rattle of confidence. 'And you would be...?'

'Zale Linder. We've never met, but we might have a friend in common. Do you know a Scribe named Harl Sitrus?'

'You're a friend of Harl's?' The woman's voice cracked a little. 'Where is

he? Is he all right?'

'I was hoping you could tell me,' Linder said, a fresh wave of bewilderment dousing the sudden flare of hope at her first words. 'I arrived on Verghast a few weeks ago, and I've been looking for him ever since.'

'Arrived?' The vox circuit hummed with speculative silence for a second or two. 'From off-world?'

'Khulan. I'm with the Reconstruction Administration.' Linder hesitated, wondering if this would be too much to take in. But it seemed to be the right thing to say.

'Oh, you're *that* Zale. Harl talked about you.'

'Did he?' Linder asked, conscious that the conversation seemed to be slipping away from him. 'What did he say?'

'That I could trust you.' The admission seemed a reluctant one. 'We should meet. Compare notes. Maybe we can find him together.'

'I could visit you,' Linder suggested, wondering if perhaps that was the wrong thing to say. The woman was clearly nervous, and might not feel comfortable about inviting him into her home. But she took the suggestion in her stride.

'Sixty-four Via Zoologica,' she said, barely hesitating. 'Can you find it?'

'I can,' Linder told her with confidence. He had a plan of the hive in his data-slate, newly updated with the latest alterations to roads and transit routes, where fresh construction was scabbing over the scars of Ferrozoican bombardment. 'But I won't be off shift until after compline.'

'An hour after compline, then,' Milena agreed, and broke the connection.

Cheered by the unexpected acquisition of an ally, Linder returned to work with his usual diligence, and had apparently made considerable progress in disentangling the cat's cradle of information on his desk when he was unexpectedly interrupted by a diffident knock on the door.

'What is it?' he asked, with some asperity, resenting the disruption of his concentration.

'There's someone here to see you, honoured Scribe,' a pale-looking Archivist informed him, inserting just enough of his body across the cubicle's threshold to become visible.

'I'm busy. Tell them to wait.' Linder returned to his collection of slates and hardprints, already dismissing the matter from his mind.

'That won't be convenient,' I said, pushing past the Archivist, who promptly fled, his duty done. Linder turned back to the door, to find it clicking to, while I leaned casually against its inner surface. I extended a hand. 'Wil Feris, Adeptus Arbites.'

'Of course,' Linder said, as though my uniform hadn't already told him precisely what I was. Surprise was smeared across his face like a harlot's

lipstick, but his handshake was firm, and once he'd registered that I was real and wasn't going away until I was good and ready, his expression became curious rather than alarmed. 'What can I do for you?'

'You've been looking for Harl Sitrus,' I said, resigning myself to leaning against the door for as long as the interview took. There was only one place to sit in the narrow room, and Linder showed no inclination to vacate it. 'So have I.'

'Do you know where he is?' Linder asked, and I shook my head.

'No,' I admitted, 'and that irks me. I'm not used to being hidden from. Not for this long, anyway.'

'Why would he be hiding?' Linder asked, an unmistakable frown appearing on his face. 'Surely you can't suspect him of anything?'

'Everyone's guilty of something,' I said. That was the first thing I'd learned on joining the Arbites, and before you ask, of course I include myself in that. But there are degrees of guilt, and culpability, and sometimes things aren't as clear cut as they seem.

'Not Harl,' Linder said, which surprised me; people usually react to that kind of insinuation by asserting their own innocence. 'Not of anything that would justify your interest, anyway.'

'I'm interested in a great deal,' I told him. Which was true; law enforcement on Verghast was in as big a mess as any of its other institutions, and the Arbitrators brought in to sort it out had been forced to take on cases which would have been handed to the locals on more smoothly functioning worlds. 'Including the falsification of records.'

'Harl would never do something like that,' Linder said, sounding genuinely angry. Most Administratum adepts would as soon profane the name of the Emperor as knowingly tamper with the data they were charged to protect.

'Don't you think it a little odd that so many records relating to him have disappeared?'' I asked, refusing to raise my voice in return.

Linder looked thoughtful. 'That might be the result of tampering,' he conceded. 'But you've got no proof that Harl's responsible.'

'Nothing definite,' I agreed. 'But innocent men seldom disappear into thin air. Unless foul play's involved.'

Linder paled; clearly this possibility hadn't occurred to him. 'You think he's been murdered?' he asked at last.

'It's possible,' I said evenly, 'but I doubt it. I think he wiped his own records to cover his tracks, and hide whatever else he tampered with.'

'Harl wouldn't do a thing like that,' Linder said again, glaring at me with unmistakable dislike. 'And I'll prove it.'

'I'll be delighted if you can,' I told him. He clearly knew nothing of any use to me. 'In the meantime, if he should get in touch, or you find some trace of him, be sure to let me know.'

‘You can count on it,’ Linder said, in tones which made it clear he regarded the interview as over.

How much of his interrupted chain of thought Linder was able to pick up after my departure I can only guess, but given his stubborn streak, I imagine he’d pretty much completed his task for the day by the time he left the scriptorium and headed uphive to meet Milena Dravere. He found his way with little trouble, consulting his data-slate from time to time, but generally moving through the shift-change bustle with a resolute determination which left the local operatives I’d assigned to watch him scurrying to keep up; no mean feat, given that most of them were Kannack born and bred. True to the picture I was beginning to form of him, he took little notice of the barrage of noise and spectacle most men would have found distracting, but remained obdurately fixed on his goal.

The only time he showed any visible sign of surprise was when he reached the Via Zoologica itself, and realised that the road broke through into the open air. He paused for a moment, looking down the long, sloping flank of the hive shining like a beached galaxy below, then strode on, his shadow flickering in and out of existence as it merged momentarily with the patches of deeper darkness between the waylights. As he neared his destination, skirting a crowded tavern from which jaunty zither music floated incongruously on the night air, he slowed his pace, paying greater attention to the address plates screwed to the smog-eaten bricks of the overhanging housefronts.

At length he came to his destination, and knocked, a little hesitantly. After a few moments a woman opened the carved wooden door a wary crack.

‘Milena?’ he asked, unsure of his reception. ‘It’s me, Zale.’

‘Then you’d better come in.’ The door opened wider, and he stepped inside, finding himself in an airy, well-lit entrance hall. His hostess was petite, dark-haired, and carried a small-calibre autopistol in her left hand. Linder had never seen a genuine weapon before, and was taken aback; but before he could protest, Milena had closed and bolted the door, and deposited the gun on a nearby occasional table. From the number of faint scratches in the marquetry surface, Linder surmised that the gun generally rested there, where it could be picked up easily whenever the woman answered the door.

She motioned him through one of the arches leading off the hall, and he found himself in a comfortably appointed living room roughly the size of his entire lodgings. He looked around curiously, noting the opulent decor, the artful scattering of antiques and *objets d’art*, utterly unlike the contents of any room he’d ever been in before.

‘You have a very elegant home,’ he said, hoping to break the awkward silence.

‘Thank you.’ Milena perched on the edge of a sofa, opposite the armchair

Linder had selected as seeming least likely to swallow him whole. He was astonished at how comfortable it was; the furniture he was used to was generally selected for its utility, rather than comfort. Milena glanced round, as though lost in her own house. ‘Harl found it for me.’

‘He did?’ Linder prompted, hoping for more detail. He couldn’t imagine Sitrus combing the property vendors, even on a friend’s behalf. Perhaps his new department had something to do with accommodation allocation, and he’d found out about it that way.

‘He’s helped a lot of people,’ Milena said. Her face was drawn and tense. ‘He’s a good man. Whatever some people say about him.’

‘People like Feris?’ Linder asked, and the woman nodded, suddenly tense again.

‘How do you know Feris?’ she asked, her left hand clenching as though closing on the butt of her gun. Her eyes fixed on Linder’s, disturbing in their intensity. She shifted, almost imperceptibly, a few millimetres further away from where he sat.

‘I don’t,’ Linder assured her, ‘and I don’t want to. He came to the scriptorium, not long after I voxed you, and threw his weight around.’

Milena nodded. ‘I thought he was monitoring my vox calls. He’s probably hoping Harl gets in touch with me.’ A flash of panic illuminated her eyes. ‘If he does, they’ll be bound to catch him!’

‘He’s too clever for that,’ Linder assured her. ‘But why would the Arbites think he’s been doing anything wrong? The idea’s absurd.’

‘Of course it is,’ Milena said, her voice blazing with indignation. ‘But Feris needs someone to blame, even if he can’t prove anything. When Harl disappeared, he just jumped to the conclusion that he must be guilty.’

‘More or less what he told me,’ Linder agreed. He hesitated a little before going on. ‘He did have another idea about what might have happened. But I’m afraid it’s rather unpleasant.’

‘Let me guess,’ Milena said. ‘He suggested Harl’s been murdered, and someone’s trying to cover it up.’ She smiled, registering Linder’s shocked expression. ‘He tried the same trick on me. He doesn’t believe that any more than we do.’

‘Then why suggest it?’ Linder asked.

Milena’s posture became a little less hunched. ‘To see if you’d let anything slip, of course. In case you were in on it.’

‘In on what?’ Linder began to feel completely out of his depth.

‘Whatever he imagines Harl was involved in,’ Milena said, as though explaining things to a child. I suppose it was at that point Linder first began to realise quite how out of his depth he was.

‘Have you any idea what that might be?’ he asked.

The woman regarded him steadily. ‘Data falsification’s about the worst

thing an Administratum adept could be accused of, isn't it?'

Linder nodded. 'Short of heresy. I'm sure Harl told you that.'

'He did.' Milena's voice was low, as if, even here, they might be overheard. 'It wasn't a decision he took lightly.'

Linder felt the breath gush from his body, as though her words had been a physical blow. Slowly, he stood.

'I shouldn't have come here,' he said, biting back the angry words seething behind his tongue. 'I'm sorry to have intruded on you.'

'Sit down and listen, damn it!' Milena jumped up too, her fists clenched. 'I told you, he did nothing wrong!'

'You also just told me he falsified records,' Linder snapped back, 'and I've known him most of my life. Harl wouldn't do something like that, whatever the reason.'

'And I lived with him for more than half a year,' Milena said, her voice softening. 'Perhaps I saw a side of him you never did. But if you don't want to know the truth, then leave. You know where the door is.'

'All right.' Linder seated himself again. The desire to make sense of the data was ruling him, as it always would. 'I'm listening. But I don't promise to believe you.'

'Fair enough.' Milena breathed deeply, and began pacing the room. 'I told you Harl found this place for me. Before he did, I had nothing. Literally. I'm from Vannick, and I was in one of the outhabs when the nuke went off. I'd just stepped into an underpass, crossing the Vervunhive road, at the time. A few seconds either way, and I'd have been vaporised, like everything else above ground. All my idents went up in the fireball, along with my home and my family.' She took a long, shuddering breath, and Linder found himself wondering if she'd finished.

'That's...' he began, but Milena cut him off with a sharp hand gesture.

'Eventually, I made it here. It wasn't easy, and I had to do a lot of things I never want to think about again. But without idents I couldn't find a job, or a place to live. That limits your options, believe me.'

'So what happened?' Linder asked, not sure he wanted to know the answer.

'Harl did. We got talking in a bar I used to work. Don't get me wrong, he was never a client, but he used to drink there sometimes, and we got to know each other. One night I was in a bad way, and it all came pouring out. He never said much, but he listened, and the next time I saw him he gave me an ident. Genuine. Some Spiner girl who'd picked the wrong time to visit Vervunhive and never come back.'

'I see.' Linder thought about the unthinkable. In circumstances like that, the Sitrus he remembered might have been tempted to alter the records to help the woman. It would have been easy; he could even picture the expression on his friend's face as he shuffled the requisite pieces of data round the cogitator net,

the sardonic smile which never quite became a sneer. He'd seen it many times in their early years as lowly Archivists, generally directed at him, as he failed to follow Sitrus in some minor transgression of the regulations. Sitrus would have relished the challenge of getting away with it, although the risk of being caught would have been relatively low. Dealing with any hardprint copies that existed would have been a little more difficult, but not too much so; a Scribe's robe could hide a great deal more than a few sheets of paper, and once they were gone, it would be easy to ascribe their loss to the turmoil of the war.
'And something went wrong?'

'No.' Milena shook her head. 'No one noticed. Not at first.'

'At first?' Linder tried to get his reeling thoughts under control. 'What changed?'

'Harl did, I suppose. He must have got overconfident. After he helped me, he decided to rescue some of the other dispossessed.'

'Yes, he would.' Linder nodded. Once he'd crossed the line, and got away with it, Sitrus would have been unable to resist the impulse to carry on outwitting his superiors. He was constitutionally incapable of refraining from pushing his luck. Sometimes that had been an asset, propelling him up the Administratum hierarchy at a rate some of their contemporaries had been openly envious of, and sometimes a liability; Linder had seen him lose a month's remuneration on a single hand of cards before now.

'Like I said, he's a good man. And now Feris is treating him like a criminal!' Milena paced the room, her slight frame seeming too frail to contain her boiling rage.

'That must be why he wiped his records,' Linder said, considering the matter as dispassionately as he could. 'To protect you. With his access keys deleted from the system, there's no way of telling which files he accessed.'

He probably even believed that; a sufficiently devout tech-priest might be able to reconstruct them, given enough time to enact the proper rituals, but that kind of knowledge is well outside the purview of the Administratum.

'You won't tell Feris, will you?' Milena asked, twisting her hands together anxiously.

'Of course not,' Linder said, wondering if it was true. A lifetime of devotion to his calling was warring within him against the demands of friendship and compassion. It was all too much to take in.

'Thank you.' Milena smiled, with genuine warmth for the first time, the tension suddenly draining from her body. Then, to Linder's astonishment, she hugged him. 'I've been so afraid without Harl.'

'We'll find him,' Linder said, with a confidence he didn't feel, and hesitantly returned the embrace.

When he left, it was close to dawn, a faint greyish glow becoming visible

through the clouds of smoke rising from the manufactoria below and to the east. The rumble of industry continued unabated in the background, mere distinctions of day and night irrelevant to the vast majority of Kannack's population. Up on the Spine, though, the affluent remained more aware of the diurnal round, and the streets were accordingly quiet, which forced my observers to keep their distance; otherwise things might have been concluded a great deal more quickly than they were.

'Take this,' Milena said suddenly, as Linder turned away from the closing door. He held out his hand automatically, and found his fingers wrapping themselves around the compact weight of the miniature autopistol she'd collected from the hall table before undoing the bolt. 'I've got another.'

'No thank you.' The metal was cold, smelling faintly of lubricants, and the wooden butt felt warm where she'd been gripping it. It seemed astonishingly heavy for something so small, and Linder fumbled, almost dropping it. 'I haven't a clue how it works anyway.'

'You point it and pull the trigger,' Milena said. 'It's been blessed by a tech-priest to ensure accuracy. But you need to flick the safety off first.' Noticing Linder's blank expression, she smiled indulgently. 'That's the switch by your thumb.'

Linder almost refused again, then stuffed the little firearm into the depths of his robe. The gift was well meant, and he didn't want to hurt her feelings. 'I'll be in touch,' he said instead, 'as soon as I find out anything else.' He wasn't sure how he was going to do that, but had a vague idea of seeing if Klath remembered anything else Sitrus might have said about people or places he knew.

'I'll be waiting,' Milena said. 'But come by anyway. I don't see many people now Harl's gone.'

'I will,' Linder promised, and was rewarded with another fleeting smile.

The predawn wind was chill, unwarmed by the thermal currents rising from the industrial sectors, and Linder huddled deeper inside his robe as he hurried back towards the tunnel mouth leading to the enclosed depths of the hive below. His footsteps echoed eerily in the unaccustomed quiet, and the shadows between the waylamps seemed impenetrable pools of darkness. The tavern was open again as he passed it, if it had ever closed, the indefatigable zither player still going strong; he considered the unlikelihood of that for a moment, before realising it must have been a recording. His attention attracted by the music, he paused, considering the prospect of a reviving mug of caffeine and a warm butter roll, then dismissed the idea; he would be cutting the time of his arrival at the scriptorium fine enough as it was.

But the brief hesitation was enough. As he listened to the echoes of his footfalls die away, another, caught unawares, smacked into the pavement at exactly the moment his next stride would have done.

‘Who’s there?’ Linder looked round, seeking the source of the sound, but the shadows between the waylights kept their secrets. Unbidden, his hand sought the suddenly comforting weight of the gun. ‘Come on out!’

No one answered. Feeling vaguely foolish, and inclined to blame his fears on an overactive imagination, Linder began walking again, listening to the steady beat of echoes against the enclosing brickwork. His hand curled round the butt of the autopistol, the small excrescence of the safety catch snuggled against the ball of his thumb.

Abruptly he turned, looking back the way he’d come, and was rewarded with a flash of movement, just leaving the pool of luminescence cast by the waylight behind him. Emboldened by the feel of the weapon in his hand, he took a step towards it, drawing the gun as he did so.

‘Who are you?’ he shouted. But the only answer he got was the slithering of shoe soles against cobbles, as his unseen pursuer turned and fled. A dark robe billowed for a moment in the cone of lamplight, and the diminishing echo of hurrying footsteps rebounded from the surrounding walls.

I suppose most men of Linder’s profession would have resumed their journey at that point, perhaps with a brief prayer of thanks to the Throne for their deliverance, but, as I’ve noted before, he could be a stubborn fellow when the mood took him; and it took him then. Without any thought for his safety, he ran after the fleeting shadow, pausing now and then to catch his breath, and listen out for the fugitive echoes. The pursuit took him away from the thoroughfare he’d been following, ever deeper into a maze of alleyways, and thence inside the rising slope of the hive spine. He was vague about the details of the route he took, but I was able to reconstruct it later, bringing us to the market hall where he finally confronted his quarry.

At that hour it was still deserted, the stalls shuttered and empty, but the floodlamps in the ceiling had been kindled, ready for the vendors to set out their wares, and Linder blinked in the sudden brightness. As his dazzled eyes adjusted, he heard more footfalls echoing between the stands, and rounded the corner of the nearest row, aiming the gun ahead of him.

‘Stop. Or I’ll shoot.’

A hooded figure in a night-blue robe was crouched over a manhole cover in the middle of the aisle, frozen in the act of lifting it aside. It straightened slowly, and began to turn.

‘Would you really, Zale?’ The words were delivered in an amused drawl, as though the speaker was waiting for the punchline of a joke. ‘You should never make a threat you’re not prepared to carry out, you know. It makes you look weak.’

‘Harl?’ Linder lowered the weapon, stupefied with astonishment. ‘What’s going on?’

‘I’m sure Milena filled you in,’ Sitrus said, with a dismissive glance at the

gun. ‘You must have made quite an impression on her. She doesn’t usually let other people play with her toys.’

‘She told me what you did for her,’ Linder said, tucking the weapon away, with a sudden flare of embarrassment.

Sitrus shrugged. ‘It wasn’t hard. I’d been thinking for some time about how you could match up a dormant identity with just about anyone, and she seemed the perfect person to give it a try.’

‘Feris doesn’t seem to feel that way,’ Linder said, trying to assimilate this new and unexpected development. ‘If he finds you, he’ll charge you with record falsification at the very least.’

‘Feris couldn’t catch a cold showering naked in a blizzard,’ Sitrus said, with tolerant amusement. He glanced down at the manhole next to his feet. ‘But if you want to continue this conversation without interruption, we’d better get below. He’s annoyingly persistent, and he’s bound to have watchers trailing you.’

‘Why me?’ Linder asked, feeling his way down a rickety ladder. After a couple of metres his shoe soles scraped rockcrete, and he stepped aside to let his friend descend after him. The pillar of light from above cut off with a scrape and a clank as Sitrus replaced the iron cover, and the dimmer illumination of sparsely scattered glow-globes replaced it.

‘Because you might lead him to me,’ Sitrus said, the smile Linder had pictured so recently visible on his face as he stepped off the ladder into the gloom-shrouded tunnel. ‘You really are out of your depth here, aren’t you?’

‘Of course I am!’ Linder snapped. ‘I’m a Scribe, not some dreg from the underhive! I’m not used to this kind of thing.’

‘You seem to have more of a knack for it than you think,’ Sitrus said. ‘Which is why I took the risk of bringing you here.’

‘In case you hadn’t noticed, I was chasing you,’ Linder said.

Sitrus smiled again. ‘It saved a lot of explanation. If I’d approached you in the open, you’d start asking questions, and we’d still be talking when Feris’s plodders turned up. But I had intended getting a lot closer to this little bolthole before I let you see me.’ He nodded appreciatively. ‘You’re full of surprises, Zale.’

‘Then I’m not the only one.’ Linder fell into step with his friend, strolling along the dank utility duct as though they were ambling through a garden together. ‘What are you going to do now?’

‘Keep my head down, and wait for Feris to die of old age.’ Sitrus smiled again. ‘I set up a nice new life for myself before I erased the old one. I’ve got money, and connections, and I can well afford a juvenat or two.’

‘Then why do you want to talk to me?’ Linder asked, as they descended a ramp into a vaulted brick gallery lined with humming power relays.

‘Because I trust you,’ Sitrus said, ‘and you were able to find Milena. I’d

like you to pass on a message for me.'

'Of course,' Linder said. 'She's worried sick about you.'

'Then you won't mind putting her mind at rest. Just tell her I'm safe, and I've left the hive. Can you do that?'

'Consider it done,' Linder said. They were crossing a deep channel of lichen-encrusted brick, along which some thick tarry liquid flowed sluggishly into the distance, their footsteps ringing on the metal mesh bridge spanning it. 'Is there anything else?'

'I doubt it,' Sitrus said, the half-contemptuous smile back on his face. 'You're already sticking your neck out more than you're comfortable with.'

'I'll decide what I'm comfortable with,' Linder snapped. For the last year he'd been living outside the shadow cast by his friend, and he'd forgotten how annoyingly superior he could sometimes seem.

'Good for you.' Sitrus stopped walking, and looked at him appraisingly in the light from a nearby glow-globe. They'd reached a nexus of tunnels, half a dozen radiating from the circular chamber they found themselves in. When he spoke again, his voice was lower. 'There are plenty more like Milena, you know. Desperate, with nowhere to turn, and I can't help them anymore. But if you're willing to take the risk, you could.'

'Me?' For a moment Linder was too stunned even to speak. When he forced the syllable out, it sounded more like a strangulated gasp than an intelligible word.

Sitrus nodded. 'You could give them their lives back, Zale.' Then he shrugged. 'Somebody's life, anyway. It's got to be better than the one they have now.'

'Falsify records?' Linder felt nauseous at the very idea. 'No, I couldn't.'

'No, I don't suppose you could.' Sitrus gave him the look again, and a flare of resentment took Linder by surprise. It had been like that for as long as he could remember, Sitrus taking it for granted that he lacked the guts to follow where he led.

'Suppose I was able to help,' he said, surprising himself almost as much as Sitrus, judging by the unfamiliar expression of astonishment on his friend's face. 'How would I go about it?'

'You'd have to go through me,' Sitrus said. 'At least to begin with. I've got the contacts in place, and the Dispossessed trust me.' He looked at Linder appraisingly again. 'No offence, Zale, but these are damaged people, who don't give their confidence easily. You'll have to earn it.'

'None taken,' Linder said, before honesty compelled him to add, 'I'm not promising to do it, Harl. But I will think about it.'

'That's all I can reasonably expect.' Sitrus clapped him playfully on the back. 'You're a good man, Zale. I know you'll make the right choice.'

'I hope so.' Linder coughed uncomfortably. 'When I do decide, how do I let

you know?’

‘Ask Milena to hang something red from the second-floor balcony. When I hear it’s there, I’ll arrange a meeting, and we can discuss the details.’

‘Something red. Right.’ Linder nodded.

‘Good.’ Sitrus turned away, then paused, and indicated one of the tunnel mouths facing them. ‘Head down that way for about three hundred metres, and you’ll find a green access hatch. It opens into the tertiary storage area of the scriptorium.’ Then he smiled again, the familiar mocking expression returning to his face. ‘So you would have had time for that caffeine you were thinking about after all.’

Then he was gone, only the fading echo of his footsteps remaining.

‘I’m a little disappointed,’ I said, strolling into Linder’s cubicle unannounced. ‘I thought we had an agreement.’

‘An agreement?’ he responded, setting aside the hardprint he’d been annotating, with a deliberation which made it plain my visit was less of a surprise than I’d hoped.

I nodded, taking up my former position against the door. I didn’t think he’d make a run for it, but there was no harm in closing off the option. ‘To inform me if you heard from Harl Sitrus. I could count on it, apparently.’

‘As you can see,’ he returned, ‘I’m rather busy. And I don’t recall agreeing to speak to you immediately.’

‘Fair enough,’ I conceded. ‘I should have emphasised the urgency of the matter. But you don’t deny you spoke to him this morning?’

‘No, I don’t,’ he returned levelly.

‘And the substance of the conversation?’

‘Was personal.’ The fractional hesitation was enough to betray that he was holding something back, but they always do at first. ‘He asked me to reassure Miss Dravere that he’s safe and well, which I agreed to do.’

‘How kind.’ I shifted the focus of the questions. ‘And did you discuss the charges against him?’

Linder nodded, reluctantly. ‘We did. It seems I owe you an apology.’

‘Accepted, of course,’ I assured him. ‘So he admitted it?’

‘He told me he’d falsified a few records. As you can imagine, it came as rather a shock.’

‘I imagine it did,’ I said, trying to sound sympathetic. ‘And was he any more specific than that?’

‘He said he’d been giving the identities of people killed in the war to destitute refugees. I can’t condone it, but he does seem to have been acting out of a misguided sense of altruism.’

‘Then it seems he’s been a little selective with his recollections,’ I replied, wishing there was somewhere else to sit. ‘Did he mention how we got on to

his activities in the first place?'

Linder shifted uncomfortably in his seat. 'That didn't come up in the conversation,' he admitted.

'No,' I said, 'somehow I didn't think it would. It was when a man named Werther Geist returned to Kannack a couple of months ago, after an absence of nearly three years. Geist's quite wealthy as it happens, with interests all over Verghast, and the last anyone heard of him, he was visiting Vervunhive. So of course he was listed among the missing.' I paused, groping automatically in my pocket for a packet of lho-sticks, before remembering I was definitely giving them up again. Probably a bad idea to light one up surrounded by a million tonnes of paper anyway. 'The thing of it was, he left a couple of hours before the Ferrozoican attack, and ended up in Hiraldi, where he got mobilised along with a whole bunch of the local auxiliaries. And once the security situation eased, he got kicked back into civilian clothes again. Are you with me so far?'

Linder nodded. 'So when he returned to Kannack, he found another Geist already living in his house?'

'Got it in one,' I told him. 'But the thing is, they could both prove they were the genuine Geist. In the end we had to run a genetic comparison to find out who the imposter was.'

'Which I take it you did,' Linder said, sounding genuinely interested.

I nodded. 'The really interesting thing was who he turned out to be. He was a refugee, right enough. But from Ferrozoica.'

I watched Linder's face crumble. He shook his head. 'That can't be right. Harl would never help one of them.'

'But he did. I can show you the transcripts if you like.' In the end I did, just to prove the point, but I could see at the time he believed me. 'Once he realised we were going to turn the case over to the Inquisition, our suspect got positively voluble. Laid out the whole thing for us step by step. What Sitrus was doing, and how much he charged for the privilege.'

'How much?' Linder was getting angry again, but it didn't seem directed at me this time.

'Ten per cent of the assets the new identity had access to. Seems like a bargain to me,' I said.

'And how many ten per cents do you think he collected?' Linder asked, his voice thickening.

'I've no idea,' I admitted. 'I suspect his lady friend was one, but I can't prove it.'

'Then why haven't you arrested her?' Linder asked.

'Because the Arbites isn't the Inquisition,' I explained. 'We serve the law, and we operate within the letter of it at all times. Without evidence, I've no grounds to detain her. I've got a list of names as long as your arm who

reappeared suddenly after being presumed dead, but I can't move against any of them either.'

'So you need Harl,' Linder said.

'I do.' I nodded slowly. 'And I'm open to suggestions.'

'Thank you,' Milena said. She was smiling, but there were tears on her face. 'Just to know he's all right...'

Linder shuffled his feet, uncomfortable with the display of emotion. 'I'm sure you'll see him again soon,' he said awkwardly.

'I don't have a soon,' Milena said, matter-of-factly.

'I'm sorry?' Linder felt his face twist in a frown of confusion.

'I'm dying, Zale. For Throne's sake, haven't you worked it out? I was only a couple of kilometres from a nuclear explosion!'

'The radiation,' Linder said, with sudden understanding.

'That's right.' Milena nodded. 'I'm getting the best care money can buy, but all it can do in the end is manage the pain.'

'How long?' Linder asked, regretting the question at once. But Milena didn't seem to mind.

'Who knows?' She shrugged. 'None of us do really. But I definitely won't see the end of the year.'

'I'm sorry.' Linder took her hand, hoping the gesture would convey what he couldn't find the words for. She smiled wanly, and returned the pressure for a moment, before withdrawing it.

'Thank you. Come to the funeral, if you can stand it. I'd like to think I'll have a friend there now Harl's gone.'

'I will,' Linder said. He probably hesitated after that, conscience, duty and friendship contending for the last time within him. Then he went on. 'Do you have something red in the house?'

Sitrus hadn't mentioned how he intended getting in touch again, so when a standard missive capsule dropped from the pneumatic tube over his desk, Linder's first thought was that it was simply another piece of paperwork to deal with. Only when he unrolled the scrip inside did he discover otherwise.

Tunnels behind the scriptorium, he read. The message was unsigned, but the handwriting was unmistakably Sitrus's. His heart hammering, he left the cubicle.

It took him several minutes to reach the green access hatch he remembered; when he did so it was ajar. Pulling it open enough to admit himself, he scrambled through, then drew it almost closed again behind him, leaving only a faint filament of light to sketch its position in the wall.

'Harl?' Only echoes answered him, chasing one another down the dimly lit passageways. Then he saw the fresh impression of an arrow, scored into the

crumbling brickwork opposite the hatchway. It pointed in the opposite direction to the section he'd traversed before, but the corridor was broad and high enough to walk down unobstructed, so he followed the mute instruction without hesitation.

After a few moments it opened out into a wide, circular chamber, with passageways leading off from it at the cardinal points of the compass. It was high, with a ceiling of domed industrial brick some forty or fifty metres overhead, and a series of galleries circled the walls, connected by a pair of spiralling staircases which mirrored one another all the way up the shaft. Each gallery also gave on to a number of tunnel mouths, four or six generally, although a couple seemed to have as many as eight.

'You took your time,' Sitrus said, in what seemed no more than a normal conversational tone. Fooled by the acoustics, Linder glanced around, expecting to find his friend a few paces away; only when the words were followed by a chuckle of amusement did he look up, to find him leaning casually on the balustrade of a gallery three levels above.

'I came as quickly as I could,' Linder replied, without raising his voice either. The cavernous space lent it a faintly echoing timbre, but it carried clearly. He began to walk towards the nearest staircase. 'Interesting place for a meeting.'

'It works well,' Sitrus said. 'Plenty of exits if you didn't come alone.' He was strolling casually as he talked, keeping the width of the chamber between them, and scanning the tunnel mouth behind Linder with wary eyes.

'Who would I bring?' Linder asked.

'Well, it did cross my mind you'd invite Feris,' Sitrus said.

Linder began to climb the stairway. 'He came to see me. Same old story, with a few fresh embellishments. I think he was hoping I'd turn you in.'

'More than likely.' Sitrus began to climb the steps on the other side, maintaining the distance between them. 'So you thought about what I said.'

'I did.' Linder reached the first gallery, and began to circle it, tilting his head back to keep his friend in sight. 'But I'm still a little unclear about something.'

'And what might that be?' Sitrus asked, a wary edge entering his voice.

'Whether helping Milena was really the first time you'd falsified records. I checked her new idents, and the substitution was flawless.'

'I'd massaged a few files before,' Sitrus admitted, unabashed. 'It's easy once you know how. I'm surprised everyone doesn't do it.'

Linder fought down his instinctive revulsion, keeping his voice as calm as he could, thanking the Emperor for the echoes which helped him to conceal his feelings. 'And what files would those be? Your own personal ones?' Which would explain Sitrus's rapid rise to a position of influence within the Administratum.

‘Of course,’ Sitrus admitted. ‘You know how it is. You need every little edge you can get if you want to get on.’

‘And any others?’ Linder persisted.

‘A few. I smoothed a few career bumps for you, for instance.’

‘Me?’ This time Linder wasn’t quite able to conceal his shock, prompting another indulgent chuckle from above.

‘You surely didn’t believe you got where you are on merit, did you?’

‘It had crossed my mind,’ Linder said, refusing to rise to the bait. Sitrus was goading him, that was all, trying to assess his trustworthiness. ‘But if you helped, I won’t be resigning on principle.’

‘Good man,’ Sitrus said. ‘Anything else bothering you?’

‘Just one thing,’ Linder said, starting up the next staircase. ‘Werther Geist. Did you know you were helping a Ferrozoican?’

Sitrus shrugged. ‘Omelettes and eggs, Zale. You know how it is.’

‘Yes, I’m afraid I do.’ Linder shook his head. ‘You know the worst part?’

‘I’m sure you’re going to tell me.’ Sitrus was moving more quickly now, towards a tunnel mouth. It was now or never.

‘I wanted to believe you.’ Linder drew the little pistol Milena had given him. ‘However convincing Feris was, I kept telling myself that at least you meant well.’

‘I’ll take that as a no, then, shall I?’ The smile was back on Sitrus’s face. ‘I knew you’d be too spineless to go through with it. But I let myself hope a little too. So much we could have done together, Zale; so much money we could have made.’ He waved, mockingly. ‘Enjoy your files; it’s all you were ever really fit for.’

‘Stop or I’ll shoot!’ Linder shouted, seeing his former friend about to flee. Footsteps were hurrying along the tunnel behind him, and with a surge of relief he realised I’d got his message after all.

‘Of course you will,’ Sitrus said mockingly, turning to leave.

Linder never remembered firing the gun in his hand; just a loud report, which deafened him for a moment, and a jolt as though someone had punched him in the arm. To this day I’m convinced he never intended to hit his former friend, just startle him, but the tech-priest’s blessing must have been a strong one; because, when he looked again, Sitrus was staggering, an expression of stunned disbelief on his face.

‘Harl!’ Linder ran for the stairs, as Sitrus took a couple of steps towards the nearest tunnel mouth, and collapsed to the floor. By the time I joined them, Sitrus’s face was grey, and he was fighting for breath.

‘Hell of a time to grow a backbone, Zale,’ he said, the sardonic smile flickering on his face for the last time.

Linder turned an anguished face in my direction. ‘Call a medicae!’ he implored.

‘On the way,’ I said calmly, although if the voices in my comm-bead were right about their location, they’d find nothing but a corpse when they arrived. I knelt on the grubby brickwork, next to Sitrus. ‘How many other Ferrozoicans did you give new identities to? You know every damn one of them will be tainted by Chaos. Do you want to face the Emperor with that on your conscience?’

‘You’re so clever, you work it out,’ Sitrus said. Then he turned to Linder. ‘Tell Milena I’ll see her again sooner than we thought.’

‘I’ll tell her,’ Linder said, his voice quaking; but I doubt that Sitrus ever heard.

I couldn’t close the case without a formal identification of the body; and as the closest thing Sitrus had to next of kin on Verghast was Milena, I had to ask her. She held up well, all things considered, only showing signs of emotion when Linder gave her Sitrus’s final message. She heard him out without speaking, then nodded curtly.

‘Remember what I said about my funeral?’ she asked.

‘Of course,’ Linder said.

‘I’d rather you didn’t come after all.’ Then she swept out of the Sector House like a mourning-clad storm front.

‘What now?’ Linder asked, looking faintly dazed, which I could hardly blame him for.

‘Now we do it the hard way,’ I said. ‘Go back to our list of suspects, and pull their records apart. Check for any anomalies, however small, that might indicate they’re not who they say they are.’ I looked at him appraisingly. ‘Your expertise would be very useful, if the Administratum can spare you.’

‘I’ll make sure they can,’ he said. ‘But what about Milena? Aren’t you going to bring her in?’

I shook my head. ‘She’s a low priority,’ I said. ‘We know she’s not from Ferrozoica, so she’ll keep. We’ll get around to her case in a year or two.’ Technically, I suppose, that was Obstruction of Justice, but there was no point in prosecuting her; she’d be dead before the case came to trial. Like I said, everyone’s guilty of something, even me.

Linder looked at me strangely. ‘You’re a good man,’ he said.

SUFFER NOT THE UNCLEAN TO LIVE

Gav Thorpe

Yakov caught himself dozing as his chin bowed to his chest, lulled by the soporific effect of the warm sun and the steady clatter of hooves on the cobbled street. Blinking himself awake, he gazed from the open carriage at the buildings going past him. Colonnaded fronts and tiers of balconies stretched above him for several storeys, separated by wide tree-lined streets. Thick-veined marble fascias swept past, followed by dark granite facades whose polished surfaces reflected the mid-afternoon light back at him.

Another mile and the first signs of decay began to show. Crumbling mosaics scattered their stones across the narrowing pavements, creeping plants twined around balustrades and cornices. Empty windows, some no longer glazed, stared back at him. With a yell to the horses, the carriage driver brought them to a stop and sat there waiting for the preacher to climb down to the worn cobbles.

'This is as far as I'm allowed,' the driver said without turning around, sounding half apologetic and half thankful.

Yakov walked around to the driver's seat and fished into the pocket of his robe for coins, but the coachman avoided his gaze and set off once more, turning the carriage down a sidestreet and out of sight. Yakov knew better – no honest man on Karis Cephalon would take payment from a member of the clergy – but he still hadn't broken the habit of paying for services and goods. He had tried to insist once on tipping a travel-rail porter, and the man had nearly broken down into tears, his eyes fearful. Yakov had been here four years now, and yet still he was adjusting to the local customs and beliefs.

Hoisting his embroidered canvas pack further onto his shoulder, Yakov continued his journey on foot. His long legs carried him briskly past the ruins

of counting houses and ancient stores, apartments that once belonged to the fabulously wealthy and the old Royal treasury, abandoned now for over seven centuries. He had already walked for half a mile when he topped the gradual rise and looked down upon his parish.

Squat, ugly shacks nestled in the roads and alleys between the once-mighty edifices of the royal quarter. He could smell the effluence of the near-homeless, the stench of unwashed bodies and strangely exotic melange of cooking which swept to him on the smoke of thousands of fires. The sun was beginning to set as he made his way down the long hill, and soon the main boulevard was dropped into cool shadow, chilling after the earlier warmth.

Huts made from corrugated metal, rough planks, sheets of plasthene and other detritus butted up against the cut stones of the old city blocks. The babble of voices could now be heard, the screeching of children and the yapping and barking of dogs adding to the muted racket. The clatter of pans as meals were readied vied with the cries of babes and the clucking of hens. Few of the inhabitants were in sight. Most of them were indoors getting ready to eat, the rest still working out in the fields, or down the mines in the far hills.

A small girl, perhaps twelve Terran years, came running out from behind a flapping sheet of coarsely woven hemp. Her laughter was high-pitched, almost a squeal, as a boy, slightly younger perhaps, chased her down and bundled her to the ground. They both seemed to notice Yakov at the same time, and instantly quelled their high spirits. Dusting themselves down they stood up and waited respectfully, heads slightly bowed.

‘Katinia, isn’t it?’ Yakov asked as he stopped in front of the girl.

‘Yes, preacher,’ she replied meekly, looking up at him with her one good eye. The other was nothing more than a scabbed, red mass which seemed to spill from the socket and across her face, enveloping her left ear and leaving one half of her scalp bald. She smiled prettily at him, and he smiled back.

‘Shouldn’t you be helping your mother with the cooking?’ he suggested, glancing back towards the ramshackle hovel that served as their home.

‘Mam’s at church,’ the girl’s younger brother, Pietor, butted in, earning himself a kick on the shin from his sibling. ‘She said we was to wait here for her.’

Yakov looked at the boy. His shrivelled right arm and leg gave his otherwise perfectly human body a lopsided look. It was the children that always affected him the most, ever cheerful despite the bleakness of their future, the ghastliness of their surroundings. If all the Emperor’s faithful had the same indomitable spirit, He and mankind would have overcome all evil and adversity millennia ago. Their crippled, mutated bodies may be vile, he thought to himself, but their souls were as human as any.

‘Too early for church, isn’t it?’ he asked them both, wondering why anyone

would be there at least two hours before mass was due to begin.

‘She says she wants to speak to you, with some other people, Preacher Yakov,’ Katinia told him, clasping her hands behind her back as she looked up at the tall clergyman.

‘Well, get back inside and make sure everything’s tidy for when your mother returns, you two,’ he told them gently, hoping the sudden worry he felt hadn’t shown.

As he hurried on his way, he tried to think what might be happening. He had heard disturbing rumours that in a few of the other shanties a debilitating plague had begun to spread amongst the mutant population. In those unhygienic close confines such diseases spread rapidly, and as slaves from all over the world congregated in the work teams, could leap from ghetto to ghetto with devastating rapidity.

Taking a right turn, Yakov made his way towards the chapel that was also his home. Raised five years ago by the mutants themselves, it was as ramshackle as the rest of the ghetto. The building leaked and was freezing in the winter, baking hot in the summer. Yet the effort put into its construction was admirable, even if the result was deplorable, if not a little insulting. Yakov suspected that Karis Cephalon’s cardinal, Prelate Kodaczka, had felt a perverse sense of satisfaction when he had heard who would be sent to tend the mutant parish. Coming from the Armormants, Yakov strongly believed that the edifices raised to the Emperor should be highly ornamented, splendid and glittering works of art in praise of the Holy Father of Mankind. To be given charge of something he would previously had declared unfit for a privy was most demeaning, and even after all this time the thought still rankled. Of course, Kodaczka, like all the native clergy of Karis Cephalon and the surrounding systems, was of the Lucid tendency, preferring poverty and abstinence to ostentation and excessive decoration. It had been a sore point between the two of them during more than one theological discussion, and Yakov’s obstinate refusal to accept the prevailing beliefs of his new world did his future prospects within the Ecclesiarchy no favours. Then again, he mused ruefully to himself, his chances of any kind of elevation within the hierarchy had all but died when he had been assigned the shanty as a parish.

As he walked, he saw the rough steeples of the chapel rising over the squat mutie dwellings. Its battered, twisted roofs were slicked with greying mould, despite the aggressive efforts of the voluntary work teams who maintained the shrine. As he picked his way through a labyrinth of drying lines and filth-strewn gutters, Yakov saw a large crowd gathered outside the chapel, as he expected he would. Nearly five hundred of his parishioners, each mutated to a greater or lesser degree, were stood waiting, an angry buzz emanating from the throng. As he approached, they noticed him and started flocking in his direction, and he held up his hands to halt them before they swept around

him. Pious they might be, but kind on the nose they were not. They all started babbling at once, in high-pitched squeaks down to guttural bass tones, and once more he raised his hands, silencing them.

‘You speak, Gloran,’ he said, pointing towards the large mining overseer whose muscled bulk was covered in a constantly flaking red skin and open sores.

‘The plague, preacher, has come here,’ Gloran told him, his voice as cracked as his flesh. ‘Mather Horok died of it this morning, and a dozen others are falling ill already.’

Yakov groaned inwardly but kept his craggy, hawk-like face free of expression. So his suspicions were correct, the deadly scourge had arrived in the parish.

‘And you are all here because…’ he asked, casting his dark gaze over the misshapen crowd.

‘Come here to ask Emperor, in prayers,’ replied Gloran, his large eyes looking expectantly at Yakov.

‘I will compose a suitable mass for this evening. Return to your homes and eat; starving will not aid you against this plague,’ he said firmly. Some of the assembly moved away but most remained. ‘Go!’ snapped Yakov waving them away with a thin hand, irritated at their reticence. ‘I cannot recall suitable prayers with you taking up all my attention, can I?’

After a few more murmurs the crowd began to dissipate and Yakov turned and strode up the rough plank stairs to the chapel entrance, taking the shallow steps two at a time. He pulled aside the sagging roughspun curtain that served as a barrier to the outside world and stepped inside. The interior of the chapel was as dismal as the outside, with only a few narrow gaps in the planking and crudely bent sheets of metal of the walls to let in light. Motes of dust drifted from the rough-cut ceiling, dancing lightly in the narrow shafts of the ruddy sunlight. Without thought he turned and took a candle from the stand next to the entrance. Picking up a match from next to the pile of tallow lights, one of the few indulgences extracted from the miserly Kodaczka, he struck it on the emery stone and lit the candle. Rather than truly illuminating the chapel the flickering light created a circle of puny light around the preacher, emphasising the gloom beyond its wavering light.

As he walked towards the altar at the far end – an upturned crate covered with an altar spread and a few accoutrements he had brought with him – the candle flame flickered in the draughts wheezing through the ill-built walls, making his shadow dance behind him. Carefully placing the candle in its holder to the left of the altar he knelt, his bony knees protesting at the solidity of the cracked roadway that made up the shrine’s floor. Cursing Kodaczka once more – he had taken away Yakov’s prayer cushion, saying it was a sign of decadence and weakness – Yakov tried to clear his turbulent thoughts,

attempting to find that place of calm that allowed him to bring forth his litanies to the Emperor. He was about to close his eyes when he noticed something on the floor in front of the altar. Looking closer, the preacher saw that it was a dead rat. Yakov sighed, it was not the first time. Despite his oratories against it, some of his parishioners still insisted on their old, barbaric ways, making such offerings to the Emperor in supplication or penance. Pushing these thoughts aside, Yakov closed his eyes, trying to settle himself.

As he stood by the entrance to the shrine, nodding reassuringly to his congregation as they filed out, Yakov felt a hand on his arm and he turned to see a girl. She was young, no older than sixteen standard years by her looks, and her pale face was pretty, framed by dark hair. Taking her hand off his robe, she smiled and it was then that Yakov looked into her eyes. Even in the gloom of the chapel they looked dark and after a moment he realised they were actually jet black, not a trace of iris or white could be seen. She blinked rapidly, meeting his gaze.

‘Yes, my child?’ Yakov asked softly, bowing slightly so that he could hear her without her needing to raise her voice.

‘Thank you for your prayers, Yakov,’ she replied and her smile faded. ‘But it will take more than prayers to heal your faithful.’

‘As the Emperor sees fit,’ the preacher murmured in reply, keeping his gaze steady.

‘You must ask for medical supplies, from the governor,’ she said calmly, not asking him, but stating it as a fact.

‘And who are you to tell me what I must and must not do, young lady?’ Yakov responded smoothly, keeping the irritation from his voice.

‘I am Lathesia,’ was her short reply causing Yakov’s heart to flutter slightly. The girl was a wanted terrorist. The governor’s Special Security Agents had been hunting her for months following attacks on slave pens and the homes of the wealthy landowners. She had already been sentenced to death in absentiaat in a trial several weeks ago. And here she was talking to him!

‘Are you threatening me?’ he asked, trying to keep his voice level even though a knot of fear had begun to tighten in his stomach. Her blinking rapidly increased for a moment before she gave a short, childish laugh.

‘Oh no!’ she squealed, stifling another giggle by covering her mouth with a delicate hand, which Yakov noticed had rough skin peeling on each slender knuckle. Taking control of herself, her face became serious. ‘You know what you must do for your parish. Your congregation has already started dying, and only treatment can help them. Go to the prelate, go to the governor, ask them for medicine.’

‘I can already tell you what their answer will be,’ Yakov said heavily,

gesturing for her to follow him as he pulled the heavy curtain shut and started up the aisle.

‘And what is that?’ Lathesia asked, falling into step beside him, walking with quick strides to keep up with his long-legged gait.

‘Medicine is in short supply; slaves are not,’ he replied matter-of-factly, stopping and facing her. There was no point trying to make it easier. Every one of Karis Cephalon’s ruling class could afford to lose a thousand slaves, but medical supplies, bought at great expense from off-world, could cost them half a year’s profits.

Lathesia understood this, but had obviously railed against the fate the Emperor had laid down for her.

‘You do realise you have put me in a very awkward position, don’t you, child?’ he added bitterly.

‘Why so?’ she answered back. ‘Because a preacher should not be conversing with a wanted criminal?’

‘No, that is easy to deal with,’ Yakov replied after a moment’s thought. ‘Tomorrow when I see the prelate I will inform him that I saw you and he will tell the governor, who will in turn send the SSA to interrogate me. And I will tell them nearly everything.’

‘Nearly everything?’ she said with a raised eyebrow.

‘Nearly,’ he replied with a slight smile. ‘After all, if I say that it was you who entreated me to ask for medical supplies, there is even less chance that I will be given them.’

‘So you will do this for me?’ Lathesia said with a bright smile.

‘No,’ Yakov replied, making her smile disappear as quickly as it came.

He stooped to pick up a strip of rag littering the flagstones of the floor. ‘But I will do it for my parishioners, as you say. I have no hope that the request will be granted, none at all. And my poor standing with the prelate will be worsened even more by the confrontation, but that is not to be helped. I must do as my duty dictates.’

‘I understand, and you have my thanks,’ Lathesia said softly before walking away, disappearing through the curtained doorway without a backward glance. Sighing, Yakov crumpled up the rag in his hand and moved to the altar to finish clearing up.

The plexiglass window of the mono-conveyor was scratched and scuffed, but beyond it Yakov could see the capital, Karis, stretched out beneath him. Under the spring sun the whitewashed buildings were stark against the fertile plains surrounding the city. Palaces, counting houses, SSA courthouses and governmental office towers reared from the streets towards him as the conveyor rumbled noisily over its single rail. He could see other conveyor carriages on different tracks, gliding like smoke-belching beetles over the city,

their plexiglass-sided cabs reflecting the sun in brief dazzles as it moved in and out from the clouds overhead.

Turning his gaze ahead, he looked at the Amethyst Palace, seat of the governor and cathedral of Karis Cephalon. Its high walls surrounded the hilltop on which it was built, studded with towers from which fluttered massive pennants showing the symbol of the revolutionary council. Once each tower would have hung the standard of one of the old aristocratic families, but they had been burnt, along with those families, in the bloody coup that had overturned their rule seven hundred and thirty years ago.

The keep, punctured at its centre by the mysterious mile-high black Needle of Sennamis, rose above the walls, a conglomeration of millennia of additional wings, buttresses and towers obscuring its original architecture like successive layers of patina.

Under his feet, the conveyor's gears began to grind and whirr more loudly as the carriage pulled into the palace docking station. Yakov navigated his way through the terminus without thought, his mind directed towards the coming meeting with Prelate Kodaczka. He barely acknowledged the salutes of the guards at the entrance to the cardinal's chambers, only subconsciously registering that they carried heavy-looking autorifles in addition to their ceremonial spears.

'Ah, Constantine,' Kodaczka murmured as the doors swung closed behind the preacher, looking up at Yakov from behind his high desk. A single laserquill and autotablet adorned its dull black surface, reflecting the sparsity of the rest of the chamber. The walls were plainly whitewashed, like most of the Amethyst palace's interior, with a single Imperial eagle stencilled in black on the wall behind the cardinal. He was a handsome man in his middle ages, maturing with dignity and poise. Dressed in a plain black cassock, his only badge of office the small steel circlet holding back his lustrous blond hair, the cardinal was an elegant, if severe, figure. He wouldn't have looked out of place as a leading actor on the stage at the Revolutionary Theatre; with his active, bright blue eyes, chiselled cheekbones and strong chin he would have enthralled the ladies had he not had another calling.

'Good of you to see me, cardinal,' replied Yakov. At a gestured invitation from Kodaczka the preacher sat in one of the high-backed chairs that were arranged in a semi-circle in front of the desk.

'I must admit to a small amount of surprise at receiving your missive this morning,' Prelate Kodaczka told him, leaning back in his own chair.

'You understand why I felt it necessary to talk to you?' inquired Yakov, waiting for the customary verbal thrust and parry that accompanied all of his conversations with Kodaczka.

'Your parish and the plague? Of course I understand,' Kodaczka nodded as he spoke. He was about to continue when a knock at the door interrupted him.

At Kodaczka's call they opened and a servant in the plain livery of an Ecclesiarchal servant entered with a carafe and glass on a small wooden tray.

'I suspect you are thirsty after journeying all this way,' Kodaczka indicated the drink with an open palm. Yakov nodded his thanks, pouring himself a glass of the crisp water and sipping it carefully. The servant left the tray on the desk and retired wordlessly.

'Where was I? Oh yes, the plague. It has struck many of the slave communities badly. Why have you waited until now before requesting aid?' Kodaczka's question was voiced lightly but Yakov suspected he was, as always, being tested somehow. He considered his reply for a moment, sipping more water as an excuse for not answering.

'The other slaves are not my parishioners. They are not my concern,' he said, setting the empty glass back on to the tray and raising his eyes to return the gaze of the cardinal.

'Ah, your parish, of course,' agreed Kodaczka with a smile. 'Your duty to your parishioners. And why do you think I can entreat the governor and the committee to act now, when they have let so many others die already?'

'I am simply performing my duty, as you say,' replied Yakov smoothly, keeping his expression neutral. 'I have made no promises other than to raise this with yourself, and I do not expect any particular success on your part. As you say, there has been an abundance of time to act before now. But still, I must ask. Will you ask the governor and the committee to send medical aid and staff to my parish to help defend the faithful against infection by this epidemic?'

'I will not,' Kodaczka answered curtly. 'They have already made it clear to me that not only is the expense of such resources unjustified, but the lifting of the ban on full citizens entering slave areas may prove a difficult legal wrangle.'

'My congregation is dying!' barked Yakov, though in his heart he felt less vehement. 'Can you not do something to help them?'

'I will offer up prayers for them,' the cardinal responded, showing no sign of being perturbed by Yakov's outburst. Yakov caught himself before he said anything. This was one of Kodaczka's traps. The cardinal was desperate to find some reason to discredit Yakov, to disband his unique parish and send him on his way.

'As I already have,' Yakov said eventually. There was an uncomfortable silence for several seconds, both preacher and cardinal gazing at each other over the desk, weighing up the opposition. It was Kodaczka who broke the quiet.

'It irks you to preach to these slaves?' the cardinal asked suddenly.

'Slaves are entitled to spiritual guidance even by the laws of Karis Cephalon,' the preacher replied.

‘That is not an answer,’ Kodaczka told him gravely.

‘I find the… situation on this world difficult to align with the teachings of my faith,’ Yakov admitted finally.

‘You find slavery against your religion?’

‘Of course not!’ Yakov snorted. ‘It is these mutants, these creatures that I preach to. This world is built upon the exploitation of something unholy and abhorrent and I believe it denigrates everyone involved in it.’

‘Ah, your Armormant upbringing,’ the prelate’s voice dripped with scorn. ‘So harsh and pure in intent, and yet so soft and decadent in execution.’

‘We are an accepted and recognised sect within the Ministorum,’ Yakov said defensively.

‘Accepted? Recognised, I agree, but acceptance… That is another matter entirely,’ Kodaczka said bluntly. ‘Your founder, Gracius of Armorm, was charged with heresy!’

‘And found innocent…’ countered Yakov. He couldn’t stop himself from adding, ‘After a fair trial in front of his peers.’

‘Yes,’ agreed Kodaczka slowly, his sly smile returning once more.

Yakov’s audience with the cardinal had lasted most of the afternoon and once again the sun was beginning to set as he made his way back to the shanty town. As on the previous night there were many of the mutants gathered around the shrine. Rumour of his visit to the cardinal had spread and he was met by a crowd of eager faces. One look at his own expression quelled their anticipation and an angry murmur sprang up. It was Menevon who stepped forward, a troublemaker by nature in Yakov’s opinion. He looked down at Menevon’s bestial features and not for the first time wondered if he had been sired by unholy union with a dog or bear. Tufts of coarse hair sprung in patches all across his body, and his jaw was elongated and studded with tusk-like teeth stained yellow. Menevon looked back at him with small, beady eyes.

‘He does nothing,’ the mutant stated. ‘We die and they all do nothing!’

‘The Emperor’s Will be done,’ replied Yakov sternly, automatically echoed by some of the gathered mutants.

‘The Emperor I trust and adore,’ Menevon declared hotly, ‘but the governor I wouldn’t spit on if he were burning.’

‘That is seditious talk, Menevon, and you would do well to curb your tongue,’ warned Yakov, stooping to talk quietly to the rabble-rouser.

‘I say we make him help us!’ shouted Menevon, ignoring Yakov and turning towards the crowd. ‘It’s time we made ourselves heard!’

There were discontented growls of agreement from the others; some shouted out their approval.

‘Too long have they lorded over us, too long we’ve been ignored!’

continued Menevon. ‘Enough is enough! No more!’

‘No more!’ repeated the crowd with a guttural roar.

‘Silence!’ bellowed Yakov, holding his arms up to silence them. The crowd fell quiet instantly at his commanding tone. ‘This discord will serve for nothing. If the governor will not listen to me, your preacher, he will not listen to you. Your masters will not tolerate this outburst lightly. Go back to your homes and pray! Look not to the governor, but to yourselves and the master of us all, the Holy Emperor. Go now!’

Menevon shot the preacher a murderous look as the crowd heeded his words, dispersing with backward glances and muttered curses.

‘Go back to your family, Menevon. You can do them no good dead on a scaffold,’ Yakov told him quietly. The defiance in the mutant’s eyes disappeared and he nodded sadly. He cast a long, despairing glance at the preacher and then he too turned away.

The touch of something cold woke Yakov and when he opened his eyes his gaze fell first upon the glittering knife blade held in front of his face. Tearing his eyes away from the sharpened steel, he followed the arm to the knife’s wielder and his look was met by the whitened orbs of the mutant he knew to be called Byzanthus. Like Lathesia, he was a renegade, and hunted by the Special Security Agents. His face was solemn, his eyes intent upon the preacher. The ridged and wrinkled grey skin that covered his body was dull in the silvery light which occasionally broke through the curtain swaying in the glassless window of the small chamber.

‘I had your promise,’ Yakov heard Lathesia speak from the shadows. A moment later she stepped forwards, her hair catching the moonlight as she passed in front of the window.

‘I asked. They said no,’ Yakov replied, pushing Byzanthus’s arm away and sitting up, the thin blanket falling to his waist to reveal the taut muscles of his stomach and chest.

‘You keep in good shape,’ she commented, noticing his lean physique.

‘The daily walk to the capital keeps me fit,’ Yakov replied, feeling no discomfort as her penetrating gaze swept over his body. ‘I must stay physically as well as spiritually fit to serve the Emperor well.’

A flickering yellow light drew the preacher’s attention to the window and he rose from the thin mattress to pace over and look. Lathesia smiled at his nakedness but he ignored her; fleshy matters such as his own nudity were beneath him. Pulling aside the ragged curtain, Yakov saw the light came from dozens of blazing torches and when he listened carefully he could hear voices raised in argument. One of them sounded like Menevon’s, and as his eyes adjusted he could see the hairy mutant in the torchlight, gesticulating towards the city.

‘Emperor damn him,’ cursed Yakov, pushing past Lathesia to grab his robes from a chair behind her. Pulling on his vestments, he rounded on the mutant girl.

‘You put him up to this?’ he demanded.

‘Menevon has been an associate of mine for quite some time,’ she admitted, not meeting his gaze.

‘Why?’ Yakov asked simply. ‘The governor will not stand for this discontent.’

‘Too long we have allowed this tyranny to continue,’ she said with feeling. ‘Just as in the revolution, the slaves have tired of the lash. It is time to strike back.’

‘The revolutionary council was backed by two-thirds of the old king’s army,’ spat Yakov, fumbling in the darkness for his boots. ‘You will all die.’

‘Menevon’s brother is dead,’ Byzanthus growled from behind Yakov. ‘Murdered.’

Yakov rounded on the grey-skinned man. ‘You know this? For sure?’

‘Unless he slit his own throat, yes!’ replied Lathesia. ‘The masters did this, and no one will investigate because it is just one of the slaves who has died. Justice must be served.’

‘The Emperor judges us all in time,’ Yakov replied instinctively. He pointed out of the window. ‘And He’ll be judging some of them this evening if you let this foolishness continue. Damn your souls to Chaos. Don’t you care that they’ll die?’

‘Better to die fighting,’ Lathesia whispered back, ‘than on our knees begging for scraps and offal.’

The preacher snarled wordlessly and hurried out through the chapel into the street. As he rounded the corner he was met by the mutant mob, their faces twisted in anger, their raucous, raging cries springing to life as they saw him. Menevon was at their head, holding a burning brand high in the air, the embodiment of the revolutionary ringleader. But he wasn’t, Yakov thought bitterly; that honour belonged to the manipulative, headstrong teenage girl back in his room.

‘What in the name of the Emperor do you think you are doing?’ demanded Yakov, his deep voice rising to a deafening shout over the din of the mob. They ignored him and Menevon pushed him aside as the crowd swept along the street. The preacher recognised many faces in the torchlight as the mob passed by, some of them children. He felt someone step up beside him, and he turned and saw Lathesia watching the mutants marching past, her face triumphant.

‘How did one so young become so bloodthirsty?’ muttered Yakov, directing a venomous glare at her before setting off after the mutants. They were moving at some speed and Yakov had to force his way through the crowd

with long strides, pulling and elbowing aside mutants to get to the front. As they neared the edge of the ghetto the crowd began to slow and he broke through to the front of the mob, where he saw what had stalled their advance. Across the main thoroughfare stood a small detachment of the SSA, their grey and black uniforms dark against the glare of a troop transport's searchlamp behind them. Each cradled a shotgun in their hands, their visored helms reflecting the flames of the torches. Yakov stopped and let the mutants swirl around him, his mouth dry with fear. Next to him the pretty young girl, Katinia, was staring at the SSA officers. She seemed to notice Yakov suddenly and looked up at the preacher with a small, uncertain smile. He didn't smile back, but focussed his attention on the law enforcers ahead.

'Turn back now! You are in violation of the Slave Encampment Laws,' screeched a voice over a loudhailer.

'No more!' shouted Menevon, hurling his torch at the security agents, his cry voiced by others. Stones and torches rattled off the cobbles and walls of the street and one of the officers went down to a thrown bottle which smashed across his darkened helmet.

'You were warned, mutant scum,' snarled the SSA officer's voice over the hailer. At some unheard command the agents raised their shotguns. Yakov hurled himself across Katinia just as gunfire exploded all around him. There were sudden screams and shouts; a wail of agony shrieked from his left as he and the girl rolled to the ground. He felt something pluck at his robes as another salvo roared out. The mutants were fleeing, disorder reigned as they scrabbled and tore at one another to fight their way clear. Bare and booted feet stamped on Yakov's fingers as he held himself over Katinia, who was mewling and sobbing beneath him. Biting back a yell of pain as a heel crushed his left thumb between two cobbles, Yakov forced himself upright. Within moments he and the girl were alone in the street.

The boulevard was littered with dead and wounded mutants. Limbs, bodies and pools of blood were scattered over the cobblestones, a few conscious mutants groaned or sobbed. To his right, a couple he had wed just after arriving were on their knees, hugging each other, wailing over the nearly unrecognisable corpse of their son. Wherever he looked, lifeless eyes stared back at him in the harsh glare of the searchlight. The SSA were picking their way through the mounds of bodies, kicking over corpses and peering at faces.

Yakov heard the girl give a ragged gasp and he looked down. Half her mother's face lay on the road almost within reach. He bent and gathered the girl up in his left arm, and she buried her face in his robes, weeping uncontrollably. It was then he noticed the silver helmet of a sergeant as he clambered down from the turret of the armoured car.

'You!' bellowed Yakov, pointing with his free hand at the SSA man, his anger welling up inside him. 'Come here now!'

The officer gave a start and hurried over. His face was hidden by the visor of his helmet, but he seemed to be trembling.

‘Take off your helmet,’ Yakov commanded, and he did so, letting it drop from quivering fingers. The man’s eyes were wide with fear as he looked up at the tall preacher. Yakov felt himself getting even angrier and he grabbed the man by the throat, his long, strong fingers tightening on the sergeant’s windpipe. The man gave a choked cough as Yakov used all of the leverage afforded by his height to push him down to his knees.

‘You have fired on a member of the Ministorum, sergeant,’ Yakov hissed. The man began to stammer something but a quick tightening of Yakov’s grip silenced him. Releasing his hold, Yakov moved his hand to the top of the sergeant’s head, forcing him to bow forward.

‘Pray for forgiveness,’ whispered Yakov, his voice as sharp as razor. The other agents had stopped the search and helmets bobbed left and right as they exchanged glances. He heard someone swearing from the crackling intercom inside the sergeant’s helmet on the floor.

‘Pray to the Emperor to forgive this most grievous of sins,’ Yakov repeated. The sergeant started praying, his voice spilling almost incoherently from his lips, his tears splashing down his cheeks into the blood slicking the cobbles.

‘Forgive me, almighty Emperor, forgive me!’ pleaded the man, looking up at Yakov as he released his hold, his cheeks streaked with tears, his face a mask of terror.

‘One hour’s prayer every sunrise for the rest of your life,’ Yakov pronounced his judgement. As he looked again at the bloodied remnants of the massacred mutants and felt the tears of Katinia soaking through his tattered priestly robes, he added, ‘And one day’s physical penance a week for the next five years.’

As he turned away from the horrific scene Yakov heard the sergeant retching and vomiting. Five years of self-flagellation would teach him not to fire on a preacher, Yakov thought grimly as he stepped numbly through the blood and gore.

Yakov was tired and even more irritable than normal when the sun rose the next day. He had taken Katinia back to her home, where her brother was in a fitful, nightmare-laden sleep, and then returned to the site of the cold-blooded execution to identify the dead. Some of the mutants he did not recognise from his congregation, and he assumed they were more of Lathesia’s misguided freedom fighters.

When he finally returned to the shanty town, the preacher saw several dozen SSA standing guard throughout the ghetto, each carrying a heavy pistol and a charged shock maul. As he dragged himself wearily up the steps to the chapel, a familiar face was waiting for him. Just outside the curtained portal

stood Sparcek, the oldest mutant he knew and informal mayor-cum-judge of the ghetto.

Yakov delved into his last reserves of energy as the old mutant met him halfway, his twisted, crippled body making hard work of the shallow steps.

'A grim night, preacher,' said Sparcek in his broken, hoarse voice. Yakov noticed the man's left arm was splinted and bound with bandages and he held it across his chest as much as his deformed shoulder and elbow allowed.

'You were up there?' Yakov asked, pointing limply at Sparcek's broken arm.

'This?' Sparcek glanced down and then shook his head sadly. 'No, the SSA broke into my home just after, accused me of being the leader. I said they couldn't prove that and they did this, saying they needed no proof.'

'Your people need you now, before they…' Yakov's voice trailed off as his befuddled mind tried to tell him something. 'What did you just say?'

'I said they couldn't prove anything…' he started.

'That's it!' snapped Yakov, startling the old mutant.

'What? Talk sense, you're tired,' Sparcek snapped back, obviously annoyed at the preacher's outburst.'

'Nothing for you to worry about,' Yakov tried to calm him with a waved hand. 'Now, I am about to ask you something, and whether you answer me or not, I need your promise that you will never tell another living soul what it is.'

'You can trust me. Did I not help you when you first arrived, did I not tell you about your congregation, their secrets and traits?' Sparcek assured him.

'I need to speak to Lathesia, and quickly,' Yakov said, bending close so that he could whisper.

'The rebel leader?' Sparcek whispered back, clearly amazed. He thought for a moment before continuing. 'I cannot promise anything but I may be able to send her word that you wish to see her.'

'Do it, and do it quickly!' insisted Yakov, laying a gentle hand on the mutant's good arm. 'With all of these trigger happy agents around, she's bound to do something reckless and get more of your people killed. If I can speak to her, I may be able to avoid more bloodshed.'

'I will do as you ask, preacher,' Sparcek nodded as he spoke, almost to himself.

The dank sewers resounded with running water and constant dripping, punctuated by the odd splash as Yakov placed a booted foot in a puddle or a rat scurried past through the rivulets seeping through the worn brick walls. Ahead, the glowlamp of Byzanthus bobbed and weaved in the mutant's raised hand as he led the way to Lathesia's hidden lair. Though one of the larger drainage systems, the tunnel was still cramped for the tall preacher and his neck was sore from half an hour's constant stooping. His nose had become

more accustomed to the noxious smell which had assaulted his nostrils when the grey-skinned mutant had first opened the storm drain cover, and his eyes were now used to the dim, blue glow of the lantern. He was thoroughly lost, he was sure of that, and he half-suspected this was the point of the drawn out journey. They must have been walking in circles, otherwise they would be beyond the boundaries of the mutant encampment in the city proper, or out in the fields.

After several more minutes of back-breaking walking, Byzanthus finally stopped beside an access door in the sewer wall. He banged four times, paused, then banged twice more. Rusted locks squealed and the door opened a moment later on shrieking hinges.

‘You should loot some oil,’ Yakov couldn’t stop himself from saying, earning himself a cheerless smile from Byzanthus, who waved him inside with the lantern.

There was no sign of the doorkeeper, but as Yakov preceded Byzanthus up the wooden steps just inside the door he heard it noisily swinging shut again.

‘Shy?’ Yakov asked, looking at Byzanthus over his shoulder as he climbed the stairwell.

‘Suspicious of you,’ the mutant replied bluntly, giving him a hard stare.

The steps led them into a small hallway, decorated with flaking murals on the walls, they were obviously inside one of the abandoned buildings of the royal district.

‘Second door on the left,’ Byzanthus said curtly, indicating the room with a nod of his head as he extinguished the lamp.

Yakov strode down the corridor quickly, his hard-soled boots clacking on the cracked tiles. Just as he reached the door, it opened to reveal Lathesia, dressed in ill-fitting SSA combat fatigues.

‘Come in, make yourself at home,’ she said as she stepped back and took in the room with a wide sweep of her arm. The small chamber was bare except for a couple of straw pallets and a rickety table strewn with scatters of parchment and what looked like a schematic of the sewer system. The frescoes had been all but obliterated by crudely daubed black paint, which had puddled on the scuffed wooden floor. The remnants of a fire smouldered in one corner, the smoke drifting lazily out of a cracked window.

‘We had to burn the carpet last winter,’ Lathesia said apologetically, noting the direction of his gaze.

‘And the walls?’ Yakov asked, dropping his haversack onto the bare floor.

‘Byzanthus in a fit of pique when he heard we’d been found guilty of treason,’ she explained hurriedly, moving over to drop down on one of the mattresses.

‘You share the same room?’ Yakov asked, recoiling from her in disgust. ‘Out of wedlock?’

‘What of it?’ she replied, genuinely perplexed.

‘Is there no sin you are not guilty of?’ he demanded hotly, regretting his decision to have anything to do with the wayward mutant. He fancied he could feel the fires of Chaos burning his soul as he stood there. It would take many weeks of repentance to atone for even coming here.

‘Better that than freezing because we only have enough fuel to heat a few rooms,’ she told him plainly before a smile broke over her pretty face. ‘You think that Byzanthus and I… Oh, Yakov, please, allow me some standards.’

‘I’m sure he doesn’t see it that way,’ Yakov pointed out to her with a meaningful look. ‘I saw the way he looked at you in my bedchamber last night.’

‘Enough of this!’ Lathesia snapped back petulantly. ‘I didn’t ask you to come here to preach to me. You wanted to see me!’

‘Yes, you are right, I did,’ Yakov admitted, collecting his thoughts before continuing. ‘Have you any other trouble planned for tonight?’

‘What concern is it of yours, preacher?’ she asked, her black eyes narrowing with suspicion.

‘You must not do anything. The SSA will retaliate with even more brutal force than last time,’ he warned her.

‘Actually, we were thinking of killing some of them, strutting around with their bludgeons and pistols as if their laws apply here,’ she replied venomously, her cracked hands balling into fists.

Yakov went over and sat down beside her slowly, meeting her gaze firmly.

‘Do you trust me?’ he asked gently.

‘No, why should I?’ she said, surprised.

‘Why did you come to me before, to ask the cardinal for help?’ he countered, leaning back on one hand but keeping his eyes on hers.

‘Because… It was… I was desperate, it was foolish of me, I shouldn’t have,’ she mumbled back, turning her gaze away.

‘You are nothing more than a child. Let me help you,’ Yakov persisted, feeling his soul starting to roast at the edges even as he said it.

‘Stop it!’ she wailed suddenly, springing to her feet and backing away. ‘If I don’t do this, no one will help us!’

‘Have it your way,’ sighed Yakov, sitting upright again. ‘There is more to this than the casual murder of Menevon’s brother. I do not yet know what, but I need your help to find out.’

‘Why do you think so?’ she asked, her defiance forgotten as curiosity took over.

‘You say his throat was slit?’ Yakov asked and she nodded. ‘Why? Any court on Karis Cephalon will order a mutant hung on the word of a citizen, so why the murder? It must be because nobody could know who was involved, or why he died. I think he saw something or someone and was murdered so he

couldn’t talk.’

‘But that means, if a master didn’t do it…’ Lathesia started before her eyes widened in realisation. ‘One of us did this? No, I won’t believe it!’

‘You might not have to,’ Yakov countered quickly, raising his hand to calm her. ‘In fact it’s unlikely. The only way we can find out is to go to where Menevon’s brother died, and see what we can find.’

‘He worked in one of the cemeteries not far from here, just outside the encampment boundary,’ she told the preacher. ‘We’ll take you there.’

She half-ran, half-skipped to the open door and called through excitedly, ‘Byzanthus! Byzanthus, fetch Odrik and Klain. We’re going on an expedition tonight!’

The functional ferrocrete tombstones had little grandeur about them, merely rectangular slabs plainly inscribed with the name of the family. The moon was riding high in the sky as Yakov, Lathesia and the other mutants searched the graveyard for any sign of what had happened. Yakov entered the small wooden shack that served as the gravedigger’s shelter, finding various picks and shovels stacked neatly in one corner. There was an unmistakable red stain on the unfinished planks of the floor, which to Yakov’s untrained eye seemed to have spread from near the doorway. He stood there for a moment, gazing out into the cemetery to see what was in view. It was Byzanthus who caught his attention with a waved arm, and they all gathered on him. He pointed to a grave, which was covered with a tarpaulin weighted with rocks. Lathesia gave Byzanthus a nod and he pulled back the sheeting.

The grave was deep and long, perhaps three metres from end to end and two metres down. Inside was a plain metal casket, wrapped in heavy chains from which hung numerous padlocks.

‘Why would anyone want to lock up a coffin?’ asked Lathesia, looking at Yakov.

Yakov stood in one of the rooms just down the hall from where he had met Lathesia, gazing at the strange casket. The mutant leader was beside him looking at it too, a small frown creasing her forehead.

‘What do you…’ she started to ask before a loud boom reverberated across the building. Shouts and gunshots rang out along the corridor as the two of them dashed from the room. Byzanthus came tearing into view from the doors at the far end, a smoking shotgun grasped in his clawed hands.

‘The SSA!’ he shouted to them as he ran up the corridor.

‘How?’ Lathesia asked, but Yakov ignored her and ducked back into the room to snatch up his satchel. More gunfire rattled from nearby, punctuated by a low bellowing of pain. As the preacher returned to the corridor Byzanthus smashed him across the jaw with the butt of the shotgun, sending

Yakov sprawling over the tiled floor.

‘You betrayed us, governor’s lapdog!’ the mutant hissed, pushing the shotgun barrel into Yakov’s chest.

‘Emperor forgive you!’ spat the preacher, sweeping a booted foot into one of Byzanthus’s knees, which cracked audibly as his legs folded under him. Yakov pounced forward and wrestled the shotgun from his grip, turning it on Lathesia as she stepped towards him.

‘Believe me, this was not my doing,’ he told her, backing away. ‘Save yourselves!’

He took another step back and then threw the shotgun to Lathesia. Sweeping up his bag, Yakov shouldered his way through the doorway that led to the sewer stairs as she was distracted. Yakov’s heart was hammering as he pounded down the steps three at a time, almost losing his footing in his haste. At the bottom someone stepped in front of him and he lashed out with his fist, feeling it connect with a cheekbone. He spun the lockwheel on the door and splashed out into the sewers, cursing himself for ever getting involved in this mess. Two hundred years of penance wouldn’t atone for what he had done. As the sounds of fighting grew closer he hurried off through the drips and puddles with long strides.

Yakov sat on his plain bed in a grim mood, brooding over the previous night’s and day’s events. He had spent the whole day a hostage to himself in the chapel, not daring to go out into the light, where some roving SSA man might recognise him from the raid on the rebels’ hideout.

He had prayed for hours on end, tears in his eyes as he asked the Emperor for guidance. He had allowed himself to get involved in something beyond him. He was a simple preacher, he had no right to interfere in such matters. As his guilt-wracked day passed into evening, Yakov began to calm down. His dealings with the mutants may have been sinful, but he had discovered something strange. The chained coffin, and the murder of the mutant for what he knew about it, was at the heart of it. But what could he do? He had just decided to confess all to Prelate Yodaczka when footsteps out in the chapel attracted his attention.

Stepping into the shrine, he saw a figure kneeling before the altar, head bowed. It was Lathesia, and as he approached she looked up at him, her eyes red-rimmed from weeping.

‘Byzanthus is dead, hung an hour ago,’ she said dully, the black orbs of her eyes catching the light of the candle on the altar. ‘He held off the agents to make sure I escaped. None of the others got out.’

‘I did not betray you,’ Yakov told her, kneeling beside her.

‘I know,’ she said, turning to him and laying a hand on his knee.

‘I want to find out what is in that coffin,’ Yakov said after a few moments

of silence between them. ‘Will you help me?’

‘I watched them; they didn’t take it anywhere,’ she replied distractedly, wiping at a tear forming in her eye.

‘Then will you go back there with me?’ he asked, standing up again and reaching a hand down to help her up.

‘Yes, I will,’ she answered quietly. ‘I want to know why they died.’

They took the overground route to the old aristocratic household, Lathesia leading him up a fire escape ladder onto a neighbouring rooftop. From there they could see two SSA stationed at the front entrance and another at the tradesman’s entrance to the rear. She showed him the ropeline hung between the buildings, tied there for escape rather than entry, but suitable all the same. Yakov kept his gaze firmly on his hands as he pulled himself along the rope behind the lithe young rebel leader, trying not to think of the ten metre drop to the hard road beneath him. As she helped him onto the rooftop of her one-time lair, a gentle cough from the darkness made them freeze. Out of the shadows strolled a man swathed in a heavy coat, his breath carving mist into the chill evening air.

‘A strange pastime for a preacher,’ he said as he stepped towards them, hands in the pockets of his trenchcoat.

‘Who are you?’ demanded Lathesia, her hand straying to the revolver wedged into the waistband of her trousers at the small of her back.

‘Please don’t try and shoot me,’ he replied calmly. ‘You’ll attract some unwanted attention.’

‘Who are you?’ Yakov repeated the question, stepping between the stranger and Lathesia.

‘An investigator, for the Inquisition,’ he told them stopping a couple of paces away.

‘An inquisitor?’ Lathesia hissed, panic in her eyes.

‘Don’t worry, your little rebellion doesn’t concern me tonight,’ he assured her, pulling his hands free from the coat and crossing his arms. ‘And I didn’t say I was an inquisitor.’

‘You are after the casket as well?’ Yakov guessed, and the man nodded slightly.

‘Shall we go and find it, then?’ the investigator invited them, turning and walking away.

The scene before Yakov could have been taken straight from a drawing in the Liber Heresius. Twelve robed and masked figures knelt in a circle around the coffin, five braziers set at the points of a star drawn around the casket. The air was filled with acrid smoke and the sonorous chanting of the cultists filled the room. One of them stood and pulled back his hood, and Yakov almost gasped

out loud when he recognised the face of the governor. Holding his arms wide, he chanted louder, the words a meaningless jumble of syllables to the preacher.

‘I think we’ve seen enough,’ the investigator said, crouched beside Yakov and Lathesia on the patio outside the room. He drew two long laspistols from holsters inside his coat and offered one to Yakov. Yakov shook his head.

‘Surely you’re not opposed to righteous violence, preacher,’ the stranger said with a raised eyebrow.

‘No,’ Yakov replied. Pulling his rucksack off, the preacher delved inside and a moment later pulled out a black enamelled pistol. With a deftness that betrayed years of practice he slipped home the magazine and cocked the gun. ‘I just prefer to use my own weapon.’

Lathesia gasped in astonishment.

‘What?’ asked Yakov, annoyed. ‘You think they call us the Defenders of the Faith just because it sounds good?’

‘Shoot to kill!’ rasped the stranger as he stood up.

He fired both pistols, shattering the windows and spraying glass shards into the room. A couple of the cultists pulled wicked-looking knives from their rope belts and leapt at them; the governor dived behind the casket shrieking madly.

Yakov’s first shot took a charging cultist in the chest, punching him off his feet. His second blew the kneecap off another, his third taking him in the forehead as he collapsed. The investigator’s laspistols spat bolts of light into the cultists fleeing for the door, while the boom of Lathesia’s heavy pistol echoed off the walls. As Yakov stepped into the room, one of the cultists pushed over a brazier and he jumped to his right to avoid the flaming coals. A las-bolt took the traitor in the eye, vaporising half his face.

In a few moments the one-sided fight was over, all the cultists were dead, their blood soaking into the bare boards. Suddenly, the governor burst from his hiding place and bolted for the door, but Lathesia was quicker, tackling him to the ground. He thrashed for a moment before she smashed him across the temple with the grip of her revolver. She was about to pistol-whip him again but the stranger grabbed her wrist in mid-swing.

‘My masters would prefer he survived for interrogation,’ he told the girl, letting go of her arm and stepping back.

Lathesia hesitated for a moment before standing. She delivered a sharp kick to the governor’s midriff before stalking away, emptying spent casings from her gun.

‘I have no idea what is going on here,’ Yakov confessed, sliding the safety into place on his own pistol.

‘No reason you should,’ the man assured him. ‘I suppose I do owe you an explanation though.’

Slipping his laspistols back into his coat, the man leant back on the wall.

‘The plague has been engineered by the governor and his allies,’ the investigator told him. ‘He wanted the mutants to rebel, to try to overthrow him. While Karis Cephalon remains relatively peaceful, the Imperial authorities and the Inquisition are content to ignore the more-or-less tolerant attitude to mutants found here. But should they threaten the stability of this world, they would be swift and ruthless in their response.’

The man glanced over his shoulder at Lathesia, who was studying the casket intently, then looked Yakov squarely in the eye before continuing quietly. ‘But that’s not the whole of it. So the mutants are wiped out, that’s really no concern of the Inquisition. But the governor’s motives are what concerns us. I, that is we, believe that he has made some kind of pact with a dark force, some kind of unholy elevation. His side of the deal was the delivery of a massive sacrifice, a whole population, genocide of the mutants. But he couldn’t just have them culled; the entire economy of Karis Cephalon is based on mutant labour and no one would allow such a direct action to threaten their prosperity. So, he imported a virus which feeds on mutants. It’s called Aether Mortandis and costs a lot of money to acquire from the Mechanicus.’

‘And the coffin?’ Yakov asked. ‘Where does that fit in?’

‘It doesn’t, not at all!’ the stranger laughed bitterly. ‘I was hiding it when the gravedigger saw me. I killed him, but unfortunately before I had time to finish the burial, his cries brought an SSA patrol and I had to leave. It’s just coincidence.’

‘So what’s so important about it then?’ Yakov eyed the casket with suspicion. Lathesia was toying with one of the locks, a thoughtful look on her face.

‘I wouldn’t open that if I were you,’ the stranger spoke up, startling the girl, who dropped the padlock and stepped back. The investigator put an arm around Yakov’s shoulders and pulled him close, his voice dropping to a conspiratorial whisper.

‘The reason the governor has acted now is because of a convergence of energies on Karis Cephalon,’ the man told Yakov slowly. ‘Mystical forces, astrological conjunctions are forming, with Karis Cephalon at its centre. For five years, the barrier between our world and the hell of Chaos will grow thinner and thinner. Entities will be able to break through, aliens will be drawn here, and death and disaster will plague this world on an unparalleled scale. It will be hell incarnate. If you wish, for your help today I can arrange a transfer to a parish on another world, get you way from here.’

Yakov looked at the man for a minute, searching his own soul.

‘If what you say is true,’ he said eventually, ‘then I respectfully decline the offer. It seems men of faith will be a commodity in much need over the

coming years.’

He looked up at Lathesia, who was looking at them from across the room.

‘And,’ Yakov finished, ‘my parishioners will need me more than ever.’

ORPHANS OF THE KRAKEN

Richard Williams

I am not yet dead.

I am only on the brink. I cannot tell anymore how long I have been here. My first heart begins its beat. I count the minutes until it finishes and begins again. I clutch at the sound as long as I can. It is my only reminder that I am still alive.

It is not fear that holds me from the edge. I see what is ahead and it welcomes me. But I have made an oath. Until I have held to my word, I cannot allow myself to fall.

The tyranid hive ship drifted silently in space. I watched it through my window. It was vast and it was an abomination, ugly beyond description, organic but no creation of any natural god. It was also, as best as we could determine, very, very dead.

My name is Brother Sergeant Tiresias of the Astartes Chapter Scythes of the Emperor, and I came here searching for legends.

I command the 21st Salvation Team, and if that sounds like a grand title then let me correct you now. It is not. There were eight of us at the beginning, myself and seven neophytes. Battle-brothers in training, youths, juveniles, children. I am told that they are our future. I know better; we do not have a future.

By that day I had been in their company, and they in mine, for over two years. Our time together had not been easy, nor without loss. The three empty seats beside me were testimony to that. But the three we had left behind had not disappointed me nearly as greatly as the four who remained. They had slunk to the far end of the assault boat, gathered around one of their number

who was making some small adjustment to the squad's heavy bolter. They spoke softly, thinking they would not be heard.

'There… I think it'll work better that way.'

'Are you sure, Brother Narro? It is not Codex.'

'Of course he's sure, Hwygir. Who're you going to trust? Your brother here who's been slicing up these vermin as long as you have, or a book written by some hoary old creaker? These bugs weren't even around back then so the codex is as much use as a–'

'Show some respect, Vitellios,' the fourth of them interrupted. 'The sergeant can hear you.'

'Pasan. I tell you, after all he's put us through, I don't give a scrag if he does.'

It had not always been like this. At the start, in our first few insertions, their voices had been full of hope and they had spoken of what we might find. They had repeated the stories they had heard during their training: rumours of Space Marines wearing the insignia of the Scythes still alive inside the tyranid bio-ships; stories of naval boarding parties surrounded, nearly destroyed, before being saved by such warriors who then disappeared back into the depths; stories of bio-ships convulsing and crumpling in the midst of battle, though untouched by any external force. Stories. Legends. Myths.

They believed, though. They fantasised that, in every dead bio-ship we sought, whole companies of Astartes waited. That they had not been annihilated in the onslaught of Hive Fleet Kraken at all. That Hive Fleet Kraken, that almighty judgement upon us which had destroyed fleets and consumed worlds, might have simply overlooked them. And so they had survived, forgotten, until these seven brave neophytes arrived to rescue them and become heroes to the Chapter, and become legends themselves.

Myths. Fantasies. Lies. As I already knew and they, once they stepped aboard a bio-ship for the first time, quickly discovered.

'Ten seconds!' the pilot's voice crackled over the intravox. 'Brace! Brace! Brace!'

I braced. Here we went again. Another legend to chase, another myth to find, another lie to unmask. How many more before we finally accept it? How many more until we finally decide to end it all?

My wards advanced cautiously from our insertion point into the ship. They fell into their formation positions with the ease of long experience. The hivers, the up-spire Narro and the trash Vitellios, took turns on point and edge. The trog savage Hwygir carried the heavy bolter on his shoulder further back as snath. Pasan, one of the few of the neophytes to have been born, as I, on noble Sotha, walked in the tang position to allow him to command.

If our auspices and scanners had not already told us that the hive ship was

dead, we would have known the instant we stepped aboard. The corridors were dark; the only light our own torches. As they illuminated our path ahead we could see the skin of the walls sagging limply from its ribs, its surface discoloured and shrivelling. The door-valves gaped open, the muscles that controlled them wasted.

We waded through a putrid sludge. Though it moved like a sewer it was no waste product, it was alive. It was billions of microscopic tyranid organisms, released by the bio-ship at the moment of its death and designed solely to consume the flesh of their dead parent, consume and multiply. More creatures, gigantic to the microbes, tiny to us, floated amongst them, eating their fill, then were speared and devoured by larger cousins who hunted them.

The hive ship was dead, and in death it became filled with new life. Each creature, from the sludge-microbe up, was created to feed and to be fed upon in turn, concentrating the bio-matter of the ship into apex predators that would bound gleefully aboard the next bio-ship they encountered to be re-absorbed and recycled. In this way, the tyranid xenoforms transformed the useless carcass of their parent into another legion of monsters to take to the void. The carcass of their parent, and any other bio-matter foolish enough to have stepped onboard.

‘Biters! To the right!’ Vitellios called. The lights on the gun barrels swung around in response. I heard the double shot as Vitellios and Pasan fired and then the screech of their target.

‘Step back! Step back!’ Pasan ordered automatically. ‘Narro!’

Scout Narro had his bolter ready and triggered a burst of fire at the creatures. The shells exploded in their midst, bursting their fat little bodies and tossing them to the side.

The shots would alert every active tyranid nearby. Pasan swivelled his shotgun with its torch across the leathery walls of the chamber, searching for more. Vitellios simply blasted every dark corner. There was another screech for his trouble. The Scouts swung their weapons towards the noise, illuminating the target with blazing light.

There was nothing there. The corner was empty. The sludge rippled slightly around the base of the armoured buttress supporting the wall, but that was all.

I waited for Pasan to order Vitellios to investigate. I saw the acolyte’s helmet turn to the hiver, his face shining gold from his suit lights. I waited for him to give the order, but he did not. He turned his head back and started to move out of position himself.

‘Scout Pasan, hold!’ I ordered angrily. ‘Scout Vitellios, assess that area.’

Vitellios, expecting the order, stepped forward with a confidence no one in his situation should have. He enjoyed it, though, defying the others’ expectations, claiming that places like this reminded him of home. Though having seen myself the lower hive levels on the planet where he was born, I

would not disagree.

Vitellios prodded the floor beneath the sludge to ensure it was solid and then stepped right into the corner. He shone his torch up to where the armoured buttress ended just short of the roof.

‘Vitellios!’ Narro whispered urgently. ‘It’s moving!’

Vitellios had an underhiver’s instincts. He did not question. He did not waste even a split-second to look at the buttress that had suddenly started shifting towards him; he simply ran.

‘Hwygir!’ he called as he sprinted clear, kicking up a spray of sludge behind him.

Hwygir pulled the trigger on the big gun. The hellfire shell sped across the chamber and smashed into the buttress even as it launched itself at the Scout fleeing away. The sharp needles within the shell plunged into the creature’s body, pumping acid, and it spasmed. It tore itself from the wall, revealing the tendrils and sucker-tubes on its underside and collapsed into the sludge, there to be recycled once more.

What it revealed, what it had slowly been consuming, was even more horrific. Three metres high, even collapsed against the wall, was a tyranid monster the size of a Dreadnought. Its skin was armoured like a carapace, its limbs ended in claws like tusks, its face was all the more dreadful for having been half-eaten away.

‘Fire!’ Vitellios shouted, and he, Pasan and Narro poured a half dozen rounds into the juddering, foetid corpse.

‘It is dead already, neophytes. Do not waste your ammunition.’ Shaking my head, I rechecked the auspex for the beacon’s signal. ‘This way.’

I had begun with seven neophytes under my command. On the hive ship identified as #34732 *Halisa*, we stumbled across a colony of dormant genestealers and Neophyte Metellian was killed. On #10998 *Archelon*, Neophyte Quintos lost an arm and part of his face to a tyranid warrior corpse that had more life in it than he had assumed. It almost bested me before I caught it with my falx and finally put an end to it. On #51191 *Notho*, Neophyte Varos slipped through an orifice in the floor. When we finally located him in the depths of the ship, he had been crushed to death.

We have inserted into over a dozen dead hive ships now. We Salvation Teams have probably stepped aboard more bio-ships than any other human warrior. Perhaps more than any alien as well. When I speak it is with that experience. For all the vaunted diversity of the tyranid fleet, for all that Imperial adepts struggle to catalogue them into thousands of ship classes; the truth is that once you are in their guts they are all the same: the same walls of flesh, the same valve portals; the same cell-chambers leading to the major arteries leading to the vital organs at the ship’s heart.

But for all the now routine horrors I have witnessed within these ships, on occasion they can still surprise me.

‘God-Emperor…’ Narro whispered as he looked out across the expanse.

The beacon had taken us up, but the tubule we followed did not lead into another cell-chamber, nor even into an artery. Instead it dropped away into a cavity so vast that our torches could not reach the opposite wall. At our feet, the sludge slovenly poured over the ledge in an oozing waterfall into the darkness on the floor. To our left, one side of the cavity was filled with a row of giant ovoids; each one as big as, bigger even, than our mighty Thunderhawks. They glistened with a sickly purple sheen as we shone a light upon them. Several of them were split open. One was cracked. Inside, emerging from it, still clenched tight upon itself in a rigor of death, I saw the creature these birthing sacs contained.

Bio-titans.

Bio-titans. Massive war-engines that, even hunched like spiders, towered over our heaviest tanks on the battlefield. Screaming, hideous, living machines bristling with limbs, each one a weapon, which had carved apart so many Imperial lines of defence.

‘There… there’s another one,’ Pasan said and I shone my torch after his. It wasn’t just one. The cavity was filled with these monsters, every one collapsed, knocked aside, dead. Their bloated bodies and scything limbs were barely distinguishable from the flesh of the hive ship beneath them.

It was Narro who finally broke the silence.

‘Hierophants,’ he concluded as he peered at them. ‘Immature, judging from their size.’

‘You mean these are runts?’ Vitellios exclaimed, his usual cocksure manner jolted from him.

‘Oh, indeed,’ Narro replied, ‘certain reports from defence troopers quite clearly–’

‘Of course they are, Scout Vitellios,’ I interrupted. ‘Do not underestimate our foe in the future. Acolyte Pasan, the beacon leads us forwards, organise our descent.’

Pasan stepped along the cliff-face, examining the floor far beneath. The other neophytes watched the path or checked their weapons.

‘Honoured sergeant… could you… could you look at this?’ Pasan asked me quietly.

Throne! Could this boy not even command as simple a task as this by himself?

‘What is it, acolyte?’ I said, biting down on my irritation as I went over to him.

‘The floor…’ He lay down flat and angled his torch to the base of the

cavity directly beneath us. ‘They look… they’re biters, aren’t they? It’s covered with them.’

I looked; he was right. What appeared to be solid ground was indeed the segmented backs of a thousand biters packed together as though they were crammed in a rations can.

‘And what will you do about it, acolyte?’

Pasan hesitated. Vitellios did not.

‘We should head back, we can find a way around–’

I cut him off. ‘An Astartes does not retreat in the face of common insects, neophyte. He finds a way through.’

I turned back to Pasan and watched the youth think. He finally produced an answer and looked at me for approval. His plan was sound, but still I was unimpressed by his need for my validation.

‘What are you waiting for, acolyte? That is your plan, issue your orders.’

‘Yes, sergeant. Culmonios, load a hellfire shell and deploy here.’

Hwygir nodded with all the eagerness of one who knows his inferiority and only wishes to be accepted. He had been birthed Hwygir, most certainly on some dirt rock floor on Miral. He had chosen the name Culmonios when he became an Astartes, I found it distasteful to address a stunted savage such as he with such a noble appellation. I used it in speech at first, but I could never bring myself to think it. Only Pasan still used it now.

The trog hefted the bulky heavy bolter to the lip of the ledge.

‘He’ll need bracing,’ Vitellios muttered.

‘I was just coming to that,’ Pasan replied. ‘Vitellios, dig in and brace him. Narro too. Have the next shell ready as soon as he fires.’

Finally I saw something of command coming to Pasan. He organised the squad into a firing team slowly and methodically. He even carved into the tubule wall itself to provide a steadier base to shoot directly down at the floor and strapped the heavy weapon to Hwygir tightly to ensure the recoil at such an awkward angle did not tear it from his hand.

‘Fire!’ Pasan ordered finally. The squad braced and Hwygir pulled the trigger. ‘Reload. Adjust aim. Fire. Reload. Adjust aim. Fire. Reload.’ Pasan continued, the squad following along. ‘Halt!’

He and I looked over the edge. The flesh scouring acid of the hellfire had eaten into the biters and, without a foe close by, they had scattered away from the wall and started to feed instead on the corpses of the bio-titans, leaving a path clear across the cavity. It was as I had expected.

What I had not expected was what had now been revealed, the food on which the biters had been feasting. I looked down, my throat tight in horror, at the field of damaged and pockmarked power armour now on display, black and yellow like my own. The feast had been my brothers.

I had only ever seen such a sight before in my dreams, my nightmares of Sotha's destruction. I was there at the fall, but I did not witness the worst of it. By the time our last lines were being overrun, I was already aboard a Thunderhawk, unconscious, my chest and legs a mess of cuts and bio-plasma burns. A sergeant had pulled me from the barricade as I fell, thrown me upon an exhausted ammo-cart returning for fresh supplies and then stepped back into the battle. None who survived knew my rescuer's name.

I do not know how I made it from the ammo-cart onto one of the escaping Thunderhawks. I do remember how the Thunderhawk spiralled and dropped as it desperately sought to dodge through the rain of landing spores still pouring down, now unopposed, upon my home. I was awake in time to feel the last tug of Sotha's gravity upon me as we left it to be consumed by our foe, and to know that we had failed our holy duty.

We cleared the bio-titan birthing cavity of the biters and lesser xenoforms. It took nearly a full day, with the mysterious beacon still a steady pulse upon our auspex, but it had to be done. This place was no longer a simple obstacle to be surmounted in our larger search; it was sacred ground. We called back to the boat and ordered our retainer workers despatched to join us. When they arrived they added their firepower to our own in the final clearance of the cavity. My wards stayed on watch while our retainers began their work to recover our fallen brothers. We counted, as best we could, the armour of thirty-seven battle-brothers. Over a third of a company had died in this place, battling the fledgling bio-titans as they burst from their sacs. What a fight it must have been.

The armour bore the markings of the 5th Company. They had not been on Sotha when Kraken came. They had fought and died months before. Chapter Master Thorcyra had despatched them to the very edges of the sectors the Scythes protected, responding to reports of rebellion and xenos incursion, while he himself led a force to counter an uprising to the galactic north. He did not know then that those incursions were the mere tip of the emerging Hive Fleet Kraken. We received a few routine reports back from the 5th, garbled by psychic interference, and then they were swallowed by the shadow in the warp.

By the time another company was free to go after them the truth of the Kraken had emerged, as had the threat it posed to Sotha itself. A general recall was ordered, every battle-brother was called back in defence of our home. And so the 5th became just another mystery, a hundred warriors amongst the millions who had already died at the talons of the Kraken and the billions more who were to follow.

'So it's true,' Senior Retainer Gricole said as he approached me in the birthing

cavity. ‘Another mystery solved.’

‘Get your men working with all speed, Gricole. Secure the area so I can lead my wards on. We are here for the living more than the dead.’

Gricole ordered his men to their tasks, as I did my wards. But then he returned to my side and regarded me sceptically.

‘You have something you wish to say?’ I asked.

A Chapter retainer, a servant, would never consider questioning a full battle-brother. But not Gricole. I had found him on Graia, a hydropon-sprayer turned militia captain in the face of the hive fleet. His woman was long dead, spared the sight of the tyranid assault, his children died fighting under his command. He had seen the worst that the galaxy held; he was not going to be intimidated by me. He spoke his mind when it pleased him. I respected him for that.

‘You can’t think there’s any chance they’re still kicking,’ Gricole said in his broad Graian accent. ‘That they’ve been living, battling, inside one of these monsters all this time?’

I looked down at him. ‘You are human, Gricole. I know it is hard for you to understand. The human soldier needs regular supply: food, ammunition, shelter, sleep, even fresh orders from those of a higher rank to reassure him that he has not been forgotten. Without any one of those the human soldier cannot function. He weakens and breaks. We are Astartes; we are not the same as you. We can eat what you cannot, sleep yet still be on our guard, and to give an Astartes a mission is to give him a purpose which he will seek to fulfil until ordered to stop or until the Emperor claims him.’

Gricole listened to me closely, nodding in thought, then he spoke again. ‘So d’ya think there is a chance?’ he repeated.

Gricole was being wilful. ‘Consider for whom we are searching here.’ I assented. ‘This is the 5th Company: Captain Theodosios, Commander Cassios, Lieutenant Enero, Ancient Valtioch. If anyone could survive it would be warriors such as these.’

‘I understand.’ Gricole nodded. ‘And so… do you think there is a chance?’ he asked a third time. He smiled, bearing his stained brown teeth. Such stubborn impertinence, if it had been from a neophyte I would not have stood it for a moment, but unlike them Gricole had earned such familiarity with blood.

‘The truth then?’ I drew breath and looked away. ‘Of course not. Death is all we will find in this ship. It is all we will ever find on these missions. You have seen the same as I. Even dead, these ships consume all within them. How can there be survivors? Master Thracian’s Salvation Teams are a fool’s errand.’

I had let my bitterness against the new Chapter Master show again. It did not matter in front of Gricole, however; I trusted his discretion.

‘He told me he called us Salvation Teams for we will be the salvation of the Chapter,’ I continued, still angry at the far distant commander. ‘Do you know what the brothers of the battle company call us?’

Gricole shook his head gently.

‘Salvage Squads,’ I said.

‘Hmph,’ he muttered. ‘Catchy.’

Salvage Squads. It was meant as an insult, but I found the name more fitting with each new insertion. Despite our efforts, we had found none of our missing. None living, at least. What we did find was salvage. The tyranid xeno-species can plunder every last atom of use, but their booty of choice is biological material. Our flesh. This they choose over any other.

The fruit of our own labours then were those items a hive ship, especially if crippled by an assault party’s attack, might overlook. Weapons, armour; our tools of destruction. It did not come only from fellow Scythes; the Astartes equipment we found came in an array of colours: yellow and red, blue, silver, black and green. Irrespective of whether those Chapters might consider it sacrilegious, we took it. Our orders were precise: salvage it all.

Gricole’s men worked quickly and with determination. Like Gricole himself, they were born on worlds that had fallen to Kraken: Miral, Graia, and others, worlds that we had tried to defend in our long retreat from Sotha. The Chapter’s original retainers all died defending Sotha; no matter how young, how old, how injured or frail, they had picked up a weapon and given their lives to buy a few more seconds for their masters, for we Astartes, to escape.

We did escape, but at that time our flight appeared only to delay our destruction. The survivors of Sotha stumbled back to the Miral system, there to report the loss of our home to our returning Chapter Master. Thorcyra was stunned, near-shattered by the news. Some advised further retreat against such overwhelming odds, but he rejected the notion and led us all in oaths of defiance. The Kraken was approaching and we would stand and die in the jungles of Miral.

The Kraken came, and we made our stand on the rocky crags of a place named the Giant’s Coffin. We fought hard, and we died once again. I do not know if Thorcyra believed some miracle would save us, that perhaps his faith alone might bring the blessing of the Emperor upon us and grant us some astounding victory. It was not to be. Thorcyra fell, torn apart by his foes, and Captain Thracian ordered the retreat. And, once more, I survived.

If you think I was grateful for my life, you would be mistaken. To leave behind so many brothers once was a tragedy that cut deep into my soul. To have to do so again was more than any man could endure. My body survived Miral, but my spirit did not. As I watched Captain Thracian swear the oaths of a Chapter Master on the bridge of *The Heart of Cronus*, I was certain that my

next battle would be my last.

But after Miral, I am ashamed to say, we grew more cautious. Thracian did not believe any other world worth the extinction of our Chapter, short of Holy Terra itself. We were told no longer to contemplate the possibility of victory, only of what damage we could cause before we would retreat again. Thracian planned our withdrawals to the last detail and demanded their precise execution. Brothers died, but none without reason. But I felt the dishonour burn inside me each time the order was given to abandon another world to the Kraken, to retreat while others fought on. I obeyed, but I rejected Thracian's orders to leave all other defenders to their fate and I brought back with me those I could who had proven themselves worth saving. I was not alone in such actions and those brothers and I shamed Thracian into allowing such noble men as Gricole to remain with us.

The signal from the beacon led us deeper into the ship. We located one of the major arterial tubes, but we found it packed with biters. They were not feeding, rather they had fed themselves to bursting and were dragging their distended bodies along the ground, all heading into the ship. A few hellfire shells here would not have made a dent in their number, and so reluctantly I ordered the Scouts to find another route. The hard muscle wall of the artery cut across all the chambers on our level, barring any further progress, until Pasan noticed the sludge draining in a corner. There was a valve in the floor, kept from closing by the thick sludge's flow. It was too small for us, but we wedged it open wider. I should have sent one of the Scouts first, but I did not wish to be trapped above a panicking neophyte who had lost his nerve. I stowed my pistol, drew my falx, and plunged headfirst straight down into the tight shaft.

At once, I felt that the sludge might suffocate me as I forced myself down. I had only my helmet light to shine ahead of me, but there was nothing to see except the sludge seeping ahead. I moved slowly, leading with my falx and levering the shaft open, then deliberately pressing the wall back and widening the area as I went. My only comfort was the thought that any tyranid xenoform who might have lurked in such a place would have been dissolved by the sludge long before.

The line about my waist pulled tight and then went slack as my wards climbed down after me.

World after world fell to the Kraken, but under Thracian we small remnant of the once proud, once brave, once honourable Scythes of the Emperor survived. But then, against such odds, I told myself still that it was solely a matter of time. The absolution of a violent death would still be mine. Then came Ichar IV.

The tendrils of the Kraken had concentrated against that world and there, ranged against them, amidst a great gathering of Imperial forces stood the Ultramarines. Together, they smashed the body of the Kraken. The planet was nearly destroyed, its defenders were decimated, but the tyranids were scattered.

It was the victory for which we Scythes had prayed so fervently, the victory that Thracian had told us we could no longer achieve.

And we were not there.

Word of the victory at Ichar IV filtered through to the latest planet on which we had taken refuge. Bosphor, I think its name was. Still, even then we did not know the extent to which the Kraken had been cast back. We continued to prepare the planet's defences, trained their wide-eyed troops in the combat doctrines we had learned at bitter cost. We waited for the Kraken to come and turn the skies red with their spores. But the bio-ships never came.

It was only then that I realised that I had survived. That I would survive, not just a few more days, a few more weeks, until the next battle, but decades more. It was only then that we counted the cost and the truth of our plight struck home. Of all my battle-brothers, only one in ten survived. One in ten.

Our officers, who had stood and fought even as they ordered others to retreat, were wiped out nearly to a man. Our vehicles, our machines of war, had been abandoned; our own blessed ancestors in their Dreadnought tombs had been torn to pieces by the Kraken's claws. Their voices and memories, our connection to our legacy and that of the Chapter before us, were lost to us forever.

Thracian told us that it was not the end. That the dead would be honoured, but that their ranks would be filled, that we would rise once more and be as we once were.

I knew, even as I stood listening to his words, how wrong he was. More youths might be recruited, more Astartes might wear the colours, more mouths might shout our battle cries and recite our oaths. But it would not be us. Everything that had made us a Chapter of Space Marines, everything beyond the ceramite of our armour, the metal of our weapons, the cloth of our banners, was gone.

The termagants scuttled across the slope. The tendrils that covered the area, the curved floor, the walls, even hanging from the roof, would normally have reached out at any movement and grasped at it, but instead they lay flaccid. One of the termagants paused and lowered its head, sniffing; it turned quickly to the rest of its brood and they changed direction. They moved with purpose, they sensed an intruder. They saw a light ahead of them and closed in around it. The leader reached down with one of its mid-claws to pick up the torch, while the others sniffed closer, discerning that the scent-trails had divided. It

was then that the trap was sprung.

The half-dozen tendrils closest to the torch suddenly burst as the frag grenades tied to them detonated. The termagants howled as the shrapnel tore into their bodies. Narro, Pasan and Vitellios rose up from their hiding places on to one knee and targeted those few creatures still standing. When the last of them fell, hissing and jerking, I ordered ceasefire and had the Scouts cover me as I approached the carnage. The termagants appeared dead: their weapon-symbiotes hung limply from their claws, limbs were severed and all were covered in their own tainted ichor. I took no chances and raised my falx and cut the head off each one. It was little victory. I felt no more revenged for having done so. I never did. Soon the biters would move in and begin to eat, and through them the dead flesh of these 'gaunts would be reformed into the next generation.

'These freaks wouldn't last a minute in the underhive,' Vitellios said as he lit his helmet light and swaggered over to admire his handiwork. 'Even a yowler would scope a dome before picking up a piece of trash. These 'gaunts are not too smart.'

I looked down at the torch. In the midst of the violence it was still shining. I picked it up and switched it off.

'Extinguish your helm-light, neophyte,' I ordered. 'Pasan, form a watch. Don't assume that these were alone. Narro, come here.'

The Scouts followed my orders instantly, even Vitellios. He was an arrogant upstart, but not when his own neck was on the line. He had been picked out from amongst the scum pressed into service as militia in the defence of the hive-world Radnar. Barely into his teens, he was already the leader of several gangs of juves who had run rampage through a few underhive sectors. The Scythe Apothecaries had removed his gang markings, tattoos and the kill-tags of the dozen men he claimed to have bested, but they could not extract the smug superiority he carried with him. His training record identified him as a natural leader. I disagreed. To lead, one must first learn how to follow, a task he continually failed. He may have been born to lead a gang of hive-trash, but never command Astartes.

'What do you think, Narro?' I asked, indicating the tyranid bodies. Unlike Pasan, Scout Narro always grasped instantly whatever task I had for him. He had been recruited from Radnar as well and he, at least, had come from one of the noble families. He had already been tapped for additional training that would lead him to become a Techmarine when he became a full battle-brother. He picked up one of the severed heads and peered fascinated at its sharp and vicious features.

''Gaunt genus, obviously. Termagant species.'

'Correct,' I replied. 'Go on.'

'Strange, though, to see them here…'

‘Within a hive ship? Yes, truly bizarre, neophyte,’ I directed him back. ‘Are they fresh? Have they just been birthed?’

We had learned the hard way that newborn xenoforms were one of the danger signs. Even within a dead ship, certain vestigial reflexes might induce fresh tyranid fiends from their sacs if an interloper triggered them. Yet another defence against grave robbers such as us. If these termagants were freshly hatched then more of them might descend upon us at any moment.

‘It is…’ Narro murmured. ‘It is not easy to say conclusively.’

‘Then give me your best guess,’ I replied curtly. ‘Show me that Forge Master Sebastion’s efforts with you were not wasted.’

Narro put the head down and ran a gloved hand down the flank of the slug-body, examining the texture of the flesh. I grimaced in disgust at such contact.

‘No. They are not,’ he said finally, and I let a fraction of the breath I had held escape. ‘You see this scarring, and the skin, and this one here has lost part of its…’ he began to explain.

‘Thank you, neophyte,’ I dismissed him before he could digress.

‘But what Sebastion said was…’ he began with fervour, then faltered when he saw my expression. But then I relented and nodded for him to continue.

‘Master Sebastion, in his teachings, speaks of how in the assault upon Sotha and Miral and the rest, the ships of the Kraken released millions of such creatures and expended them as… as a company of Marines would the shells of their boltguns. Yet we Salvation Teams have rarely encountered them. He believed that, because they must be so simple to produce and had so little purpose once their ship was dead, that they were the first to be reabsorbed…’

Beneath my gaze, his voice trailed away.

‘Thank you, neophyte,’ I told him clearly. ‘That is all.’

I looked towards our path ahead. If the auspex could be trusted then the beacon was close. Once it was recovered I could quit this insertion and leave the ship to rot. I did not want to delay any further, but then, out of the corner of my eye, I saw Narro reach down and grasp something. He had picked up the ’gaunt head again and was about to stow it in his pack.

‘Drop it,’ I told him.

He fumbled to explain: ‘But if it is rare I only thought it might provide insight, if I could study–’

‘Drop it, neophyte,’ I ordered again. It had been Narro’s affinity with the holy ways of the machine that had first brought him to Sebastion’s attention, but his curiosity had bled from the proper realm of the Imperial enginseer into the living xenotech of the tyranid. I had overheard him speak to his brothers of his fanciful ideas of where such study could lead; to a weapon, some ultimate means to destroy the Kraken and its ilk and drive them back into the void. He did not understand the danger. The young never did.

‘And consider in future to what infection or taint such trophies may expose

you and your brothers. Save your thoughts of study until you are assigned to Mars. Until then, do not forget that you are here to fight.'

Shamed, Narro released it and the snarling, glassy-eyed trophy rolled a metre down the slope until it was lost in a knot of tendrils.

'There is an explanation for why these 'gaunts may have survived,' he said.

'And that is?'

'This ship… It is not dead.'

It was a ridiculous idea, but even so I felt the briefest chill at the thought. Every scan we had done of the hive ship before insertion told us that it was exactly as it appeared to be: a lifeless husk. But what if…? Could it still…?

No, I told myself as we continued on. I was no whelp neophyte. I would not fall prey to such paranoia. Every instinct I had, instincts honed from two long years of such expeditions, told me that this ship was dead. If it had been alive, we would never have made it this far. We would have been surrounded and destroyed within the first hundred steps. We certainly would not have been able to ambush those 'gaunts; some creature, some tiny insect would have been watching us and through it, the ship would have seen through our design.

We went deeper, the atmosphere thickening as we went. We climbed ridges of flesh and traversed the crevices between, squeezed our way through tiny capillaries and valves, and down passages ribbed with chitinous plates or covered with polyps crusted with mucus. We passed over caverns crammed with bulbs on stalks so that they resembled fields of flowers, and under roofs criss-crossed with lattices of tiny threads like spiders' webs. And everywhere we saw the same decay, the slow deconstruction of this grotesque, complex organism back into raw bio-matter by the biters and the smaller creatures they fed upon.

'There it is!' the cry finally went up. Vitellios shone his torch into a wall-cavity and there it was indeed, driven into the flesh-wall like a service stud. A piece of human technology, bound in brass and steel, as alien in this place as any tyranid xenoform would be aboard a human craft.

Excited, my wards crowded in to see. I batted them back, telling them to set watch. I did not wish to be taken unawares now of all times. Narro scraped away the translucent skin that had grown over the metal. I saw him instinctively reach to deactivate the signal and I grabbed his hand away. He looked at me askance and I slowly shook my head. He nodded in understanding and levered open the beacon's cover, exposing its innards. He groaned in dismay.

'What is it?' Pasan backed towards us, shotgun up, and glanced at the beacon.

‘The data-slate,’ Narro explained. ‘Acid. It’s been burned through.’

There was something more though. I looked closer. There were markings on the interior of the casing, distorted by the acid-damage, but still recognisable. They had been scratched by human hand and not tyranid claw.

‘But it doesn’t make sense…’ Narro thought out loud.

‘What doesn’t make sense?’ Pasan replied, the concern clear in his voice.

VIDESUB, it read. Vide Sub. It was not code. It was High Gothic. An order. A command.

‘Why would they destroy the message and leave the beacon transmitting?’

Look down.

The floor burst into a mass of scythes and talons as the monster exploded from its hiding place. The force of its eruption launched me into the air and threw me to the side. I smashed headfirst into a flesh-wall and slumped down to my knees.

‘God-Emperor! Get back!’ I heard someone cry as I slipped to the ground.

I forced myself onto my back. The gun-torches danced across the chamber as the Scouts moved. Pasan’s was stationary, skewed at an angle, far to the other side. Vitellios’s jumped as he sprinted away. One still remained in the centre; Hwygir was turning, bringing his heavy weapon to bear. His light caught the monster for an instant; it reared, jaws and mandibles gaping wide, as it swept two scything claws above its head to cut down the diminutive figure standing in its way. The Scout pulled the trigger and the monster’s black eyes sparked orange with the ignition of the shells.

The first bolt clipped the bone of the claw even as it cut down towards him and ricocheted away. The second passed straight through the fleshy arm before detonating on the other side. But the third struck hard between two ribs of its exoskeleton. The explosion jolted the monster from its attack even as its blowback blinded Hwygir for a critical moment. The injured claw retracted early, the other was forced off its line and carved a bloody streak down the side of the Scout’s leg instead of chopping his head in two.

Both Hwygir and the monster stumbled back for a moment. The savage dropped the sights of the heavy bolter, trying to blink his eyes clear, and his torch swivelled away from the monster just as it sprang and flipped over, digging back underground. Its thick snake-tail shot from the darkness, puncturing the casing of the heavy weapon on Hwygir’s shoulder with such force as to knock it into the side of his head and leave him stunned.

‘Burrower! Get clear!’ It was Vitellios, shouting from cover.

Vitellios on one side and Pasan on the other desperately flashed their torches in every direction, hoping to catch a glimpse of the creature before it struck again.

‘There!’ Vitellios shouted.

‘There!’ Pasan cried.

They were facing in different directions. Vitellios had already fired; the hollow bark of a shotgun blast hitting nothing but the empty air echoed back to us. I pulled the torch from my pistol and twisted it in my hand. It blossomed with light in every direction.

'Quiet, you fools!' I hissed at them, drawing my falx as well. 'It's a ravener. It goes after the vibrations!'

They both stopped talking at that. I looked about the cavern in the dim, grey light. There was nothing on the surface to suggest any movement beneath. Hwygir was moving slightly beside the hole from which the ravener had burst. I saw Narro as well; he was lying beneath the beacon, smashed between it and the ravener's first attack. Hwygir saw him too and started slowly to crawl over to him, leaving the heavy bolter where it had fallen.

'No, you…' I cursed, but the trog did not hear me. Pasan did though. He suddenly stepped forwards, then picked up his feet and started to run. Great, booming, heavy steps. Not towards the heavy weapon, but away from it. I sensed, rather than saw, the ravener below us twist within the ship's flesh to go after him.

'Pasan! I order you–' I called after him, but I knew he was not going to stop.

I jerked my head around to Vitellios. 'Get the bolter. I'll get him.' I snapped, and powered after the running Scout.

Pasan knew both I and the ravener were after him now and quickened his pace over the leathery surface. In a shower of flesh and fluid, the ravener burst not from the floor, but from the wall. Pasan leapt and rolled, but the tyranid beast caught his leg in one of its grasping hands, flicked him around and hammered him against a chitinous strut. The shotgun flew from Pasan's hands as his body went limp, and it drew a claw back to slice him in two.

I bellowed at the beast as I ran and fired my pistol as fast as it allowed. My snap-shots blew the flesh from the walls and the beast indiscriminately and it twisted in pain. It coiled, ready to burrow again, and I dropped my pistol and raised my falx with both hands. The ravener leapt. I swung. The falx's tip pierced its carapace and hooked inside. I was yanked off my feet as the ravener dug down at an extraordinary rate. It dragged me on and I braced as I sped towards the hole it had created. My body hit the ground splayed across the hole and went no further. The ravener threatened to pull my weapon from my hands, but my grip was like steel. It thrashed beneath me, churning up the ship-flesh around it. Its tail, still in the air, whipped back and forth, battering at my side. I held on. It strained even harder against the hook of the falx and I felt it begin to tear itself clear. The next time the tail struck, I seized it with one arm, then released the falx and grasped it with my other.

'Vitellios!' I called. He was already running towards me, the heavy bolter cradled in his arms.

Beneath me, the ravener spiralled in my grip to try and escape; its scythes lashed up and punctured my armour, but I was too close for it to cut deep. Vitellios, only a few steps away, brought the bolter up, ready to fire. With a heave, I wrenched it out of the ground to give Vitellios a clear shot and, as I did so, it coiled into the air. Part of its thorax came free and I saw it grow an ugly pyramid-like cyst. It was a weapon, and it was pointed straight at me.

Vitellios and the ravener fired at exactly the same instant. The hive-trash pumped the beast full of bolt-shells that burrowed down along the length of its body and exploded. The bio-weapon shot a burst of slugs into me that burrowed up into my body and did nothing more.

I collapsed over the tyranid's remains. I did not know then what had hit me, only that my armour had been pierced. There was pain, but it was not incapacitating. I had seen brothers hit by tyranid weapons go mad or be burnt from the inside out, but as my hearts beat all the harder to race my blood around my veins I felt neither come upon me.

'How do, sergeant? You okay?' Vitellios had fallen to his knees beside me, his tone even more self-satisfied in victory. 'Caught ourselves a big one today.'

'Coward,' I replied coldly.

'What?' He looked shocked. 'Coward? I just saved your–'

'After you ran. After you fled.'

'I… That wasn't…' He was incensed. Almost ready to reload that bolter and use it on me. I did not care. 'That was doctrine! You're ambushed, you break free! Then you look to strike back!'

'Leaving your brothers to fend for themselves? Do not use doctrine to try to excuse that.'

Pasan had come round and was struggling upright. I heaved myself to my feet; my blessed body was raging, fighting to repair the damage done to it, but I would not show these neophytes even a hint of my weakness.

'You're pathetic. Both of you,' I told them. 'Pasan, get yourself up. Vitellios, go back. Check on the others.'

Vitellios stomped away and called after his brothers.

'Narro! Hwygir! If you're dead, raise your hands…' After a moment's pause, he turned back to me: 'They're good.'

Then he made a gesture in my direction that I am certain would have meant something to me had I been born amongst hive-trash like him, and continued away. Pasan was on his feet now, his helmet facing shattered, his face cut, bruised and crumpled.

'Honoured sergeant–' he began.

'Later,' I said. 'You will explain your actions later. Let us just get ourselves off this piece of thrice-damned filth.'

We hobbled back to where Narro and Hwygir had fallen. In spite of

Vitellios's ignoble sense of humour, both still lived. I caught sight of the beacon again and the order scrawled there: VIDESUB. Look down. Another joke.

But it wasn't. For Vitellios spoke up again, and this time his voice was neither smug nor bitter. It was in awe.

'Sergeant Tiresias.' He shone his torch down into the hole below the beacon where the ravener had hibernated. In the violence of its awakening, however, it had scratched open a cavity even further beneath. Down there, glinting back in the light, shone the shoulder armour of a Space Marine. And upon that armour was inscribed the legend:

CASSIOS

The Space Marine's vital signs barely registered on our auspex. His metabolism was as slow as a glacier. He might easily have been mistaken for dead, but we knew better. Even in suspended animation, he was an impressive figure. His chest was the size of a barrel, his armour was crafted and worked with a pattern of lamellar, festooned with images of victories and great feats through the owner's life. The neophytes stood, slack-jawed, gaping at him. For once, I shared their sense of wonder.

We dug him from his cradle and commenced the ritual to rouse him there. It was not worthy of a survivor, a hero such as he, to be borne back to his home as though he were an infant. I would not have the retainers see him in such a state. I would give him the chance to stand alone, if he willed it, and return as a hero should.

We waited on guard, expectant, for an hour or more. Tending our own wounds, but staying silent aside from checking the auspex readings. Then, finally, his chest heaved. His eyes opened.

Commander Cassios stepped from the darkness of the tunnel and into the beams of the powerful floodlights set up by the retainer crews working within the cavern of the bio-titans.

Gricole saw him at once and called his workers to order. They stood, hushed, as Commander Cassios walked amongst them. He, in turn, acknowledged them, and appeared about to speak, and then he saw what their work was. He dropped to his knees, resting his hands upon the armour of his men. His head was bowed, he was praying. Gricole ordered his men away and I did the same with my wards. A warrior such as Cassios deserved to be allowed to keep such a moment private.

After they had cleared away from the cavity, he stood and moved through the rest of the armour and possessions that Gricole's men had been carefully storing.

'Valens. Nikos. Leo. Abas. Tiberios. Messinus. Herakleios.' Names; he could name each one just from what little remained.

'Theodosios. He was my captain.' I realised that Cassios was addressing me. 'It was so hard for him to ask me to lead the diversionary attack. I volunteered. I insisted! I knew that our company only stood a chance of escape if he was leading the way…' his voice trailed off.

I brought Cassios out with me and took him back to the boat. Only Gricole was waiting for us there. He looked at me, concerned. He tried to see to my wounds, but I waved him away. My Astartes physiology had started healing me from the moment I was wounded; whatever poison the ravener had pumped into me, my body would defeat that just as I had overcome the beast. In any case, I had a more pressing task to address, though it was one I would have given my life not to have to fulfil.

The 5th Company had fought and died against the Kraken before the rest of us had even known it had emerged from the void. Cassios had been here ever since. He believed he had lost his men. He did not know he had lost so much more.

The days and weeks after Ichar IV were ones of celebration for the militia defenders of Bosphor, who had never fought the Kraken and now never would. My brother Astartes and I were in no mood to join them and we retreated to our ships.

Some of us immersed ourselves in prayer, others in rage. A few, gripped by madness at what they had seen and what they had lost, rampaged around the ship until they were forcibly restrained. There were accidents. At least, we called them accidents. We Astartes have no word for the act where a brother chooses to end his service in such a manner. It is not spoken of, but his gene-seed is sequestered, marked as potentially deviant, as though it was a disease of the body and not of the soul.

I thought I had seen every reaction there was to the tragedy of our Chapter. I was wrong. When I told Cassios of the battles, of the losses, of what we had been reduced to, he showed me something different. He showed me the response of a hero.

Cassios had had his eyes closed, standing perfectly still, for nearly a minute. Then his face screwed up in rage, but he did not shout, he breathed. He took great heaving breaths as though he could blow the emotion out from his body and into the air. Then his eyes opened.

'And what is being done?' he asked.

‘About what?’

‘What is being done to revenge ourselves against this abomination? What is being done to strike back? What is being done to rid our space of this bastard xenos curse for good?’

I placed my hand upon his shoulder.

‘As soon as we return to *The Heart of Cronus* they will tell you all. We will leave at once. Your brothers will be most eager to see you again.’

I smiled at him, but he did not return it.

‘We cannot leave before we are finished here.’

‘Before we are finished?’ I asked. ‘You are here with us. What more is there?’

Cassios tilted his head a fraction, indicating out the window. ‘This ship, nearly half my company, it killed them, feasted on them.’

‘And it is dead now,’ I reassured him.

‘We did not kill it.’

‘No, but perhaps our brother-Chapters did on Ichar IV or perhaps it was the servants of the Navy. I understand you want satisfaction, commander. Believe me, I want that for every brother we lost. But our service is done. You cannot kill it again.’

‘You misunderstand me, brother-sergeant. It was never killed. The ship still lives.’

Thracian disappeared from our midst then; for several days we were told he had secluded himself to meditate upon the Emperor’s will for our Chapter, but then we discovered he had left us entirely on some secret task. He had told us before that we would take the time to rebuild, restore ourselves, and there were many who disagreed with that intention.

I do not expect you to understand. We are Astartes. We are not like you. We do not wake in the morning and muse upon what our purpose may be that day. We know. From the day we are chosen to the day that we die we know what our purpose is. We fight in the name of the Emperor. If we are ordered, then we go. If we are struck, we strike back. If we fall, then we do so knowing that others will take our place. We do not pause, we do not hold back, we do not relent.

We fight. That is our service to the Emperor. That is what we are. If we do not fight, then we do not serve Him. If we do not serve Him, we are lost. One might as soon as tell a mechanicus not to build, a missionary not to preach, a telepath not to think, a ship not to sail. How can they? What use are they without it? And yet that was what Thracian was asking us to do because if we were to suffer the casualties of even the most minor of campaigns, it would be enough to finish us for good. If we wanted to survive, we could not lose anymore. We could not lose anymore, so we could no longer fight. And for

how long?

Our armoury, our training grounds, a whole world of our recruits that had been lost with Sotha, perhaps those could be restored. But what of the gene-seed? Both in our living brothers and in our stores lost with Sotha, both now devoured by the Kraken. Without gene-seed there could be no more Astartes, and gene-seed can only be grown within an Astartes, from the progenoid glands implanted in us as youths. There were barely more than a hundred of us left. Most had already had their glands taken when they had matured, to be kept safe in the gene-banks of Sotha. Those few of us in whom they had still not matured… how many new generations would it take to recover our numbers? How many years would the Chapter be leashed, unable to put more than a bare company into the field? Fifty? A hundred? Could we ever recover or would we just fade into ghosts of what we had been? A cautionary tale: the Chapter that feared its own end so greatly they placed themselves above their oaths, their service to Him.

No, better to end it all with a final crusade. That is what my commander, Brother-Sergeant Angeloi, said to me, and I agreed as many others did in the corridors of *The Heart of Cronus*. When Thracian returned to us we would tell him what his men had decided and we would require his acceptance. This was not for glory, this was for our souls. We had been great once, let our story end well in a great crusade that would end only when the last of us fell. Other Chapters would then stand forward to take up our duty and our spirits would join His light as His proud warriors and our names would be spoken with glory as long as mankind endured.

‘Trust me, commander–’ I raised my voice higher, trying to make him see sense.

‘You may trust me, sergeant. I have been aboard that monster for nearly three years. Do not doubt what I say.’

‘The auspex–’

‘The auspex is wrong. Our technology, blessed be His works, has been wrong as often as it has been right. We are not some dependent xenos like the tau, we rely on human flesh and blood, and there is a spark of life there, I know it.’

‘Even so,’ I declared, ‘it does not matter.’

Cassios blinked. That had surprised him.

‘It does not matter?’ Cassios raised his eyebrow. ‘Explain yourself, sergeant.’

‘So it lives, despite the auspex, despite what we saw aboard, the ship lives. It does not matter. We will still leave. We will send a despatch to the battlefleet, they will send a warship and destroy it for good.’

‘You said yourself, sergeant, the battlefleet is fully engaged with the hive

fleets splintered from Ichar IV. There will be no warship, and this abomination will heal and be the death of further worlds. It is not befitting an Astartes to pass his duty on to lesser men.'

'Then we will return with all our brothers. With *our* warships. We shall destroy this beast ourselves.'

'We are here now. We shall finish it now. Make your preparations for reinsertion. That is my last word on the matter.'

'But it is not mine…' I told him.

'Are you challenging my authority, sergeant?'

'No,' I replied calmly. 'You are challenging mine, commander. This team is mine. This mission is mine. And you… are not permitted to command.'

'What?'

'You have been aboard that ship three years, brother,' I spoke softly. 'Surrounded by the xenos, one of them just centimetres from you. We do not know what has happened to you. *You* do not even know. Doctrine is clear. Until you return with us, until you are examined by the Apothecary and purified, you have no authority to hold.'

To that, Cassios had no answer.

I left Cassios to himself and started walking back along the narrow corridors of the assault boat. I headed for the Apothecarion. I was sick. I did not know if it was the other injuries or the infection of the ship, but whatever war was being waged inside me against the ravener's venom, I was losing. My guts burned, my head felt as though it was floating above my body. I stumbled on a step and, at that noise, the neophytes appeared from the next cabin. Concerned, they rushed to my side, but I waved them away. No weakness. No weakness in front of them.

'Get away… get away…' I tried to push them off, and stagger on. I saw them back away as my vision dimmed. I did not feel the deck hit me.

Even in my poison-fever, I could not escape my wards. They plagued my mind as the toxin did my body. In my dreams I saw them clearly. I saw how each would add to the slow disintegration of my Chapter; to its reduction to a shadow of its former self. Hwygir was unable to step beyond the feral thinking of the savage world on which he had been born. Was that the purpose for which the Astartes were created? To be unthinking barbarians? No.

Narro was the reverse, his mind too open. His young fascination with the xenos was a danger he did not comprehend. He thought to save humanity by studying the technology of its enemies, using such xenotech against them, integrating it within our own forces, within ourselves. His path would lead us to create our own monsters, corrupt our blessed forms and thereby our spirits. We Astartes may have bodies enhanced to be greater than any normal human,

but our souls remain those of men. The only knowledge an Astartes needs of a xenos is how it may be destroyed. Anything more is heresy.

Vitellios, I could see however, was destined for a different kind of heresy. Years of training, hypno-conditioning in the ways of the Chapter, and still he clung to his old identity. His arrogant presumption of self-importance. That he might be right and the Chapter might be wrong. Our history lists those Astartes who doubted the Emperor, and each of their names is blackened: Huron, Malai, Horus, and the rest.

Pasan, though, was my greatest disappointment. Every advantage that could be offered, a destiny nigh pre-ordained, and this lacklustre boy was the result. Insipid, full of self-doubt, unable to grasp the mantle of leadership even when presented to him. If half-men like him were to be the future of the Scythes then, Emperor help me, I would have rather the Chapter have stood and died at Sotha.

'Gricole,' I croaked when next I awoke. 'How am I?'

Gricole raised the dim light a fraction and bent to study the readings from the medicae tablet.

'Your temperature is down. Your hearts are beating slower. And your urine… is no longer purple. I would guess you are through the worst.'

I coughed. It cleared my throat. 'Good,' I said, my voice stronger. 'Too much time has been wasted already.'

I levered myself up and off the tablet. I felt a touch of weakness in my legs.

'The time has not been completely wasted,' Gricole began. 'We have been making some progress–'

'We have set out for home?' They should have waited until I was conscious again, but in this instance I would forgive them. 'How far have we gone?'

I looked into Gricole's stout, troubled face. I pushed past him, out of the Apothecarion, and to a porthole. The hive ship filled my view.

I turned back to my retainer, my thoughts gripped with suspicion. 'They have not gone onto the ship without me?' I strode across the room, my weakness vanishing before my anger. 'I expressly forbade it!'

I stalked out into the antechamber. My four wards were there. Startled, they stumbled to attention.

'Who was it?' I demanded. 'One of you? All of you? Who here did not understand my orders?'

I looked pointedly at Vitellios, but he stared straight ahead, not moving a muscle.

'You will find your tongues or I will find them for you,' I said sternly.

'Honoured sergeant.' It was Pasan. 'Your orders were understood and followed. We have not left this craft.'

His words were bold, but the slightest quiver in his voice betrayed his

nervousness. I stepped close to him and studied him carefully.

‘Then explain to me, Neophyte Pasan, what is this progress that you have made?’

I saw his eyes flick for an instant behind me, to Gricole, and then away. He blinked with a moment’s indecision.

‘We found a–’ Narro started.

‘Quiet,’ I overruled. ‘Neophyte Pasan can speak for himself.’

‘We have… we have been mapping the surface,’ he spoke, gaining confidence with each word. ‘We found an aperture that we believe will lead us straight to our target.’

‘Is this impertinence, Pasan? We recovered the beacon. What target is this?’

‘My men,’ Cassios said from the entrance hatch. He stepped into the antechamber. ‘My apologies, brother-sergeant, we could not make you aware during your indisposition. These Scouts were fulfilling my instructions.’

‘It is a second beacon, honoured sergeant.’

I looked from Cassios to Pasan. ‘Another beacon? Our auspex read only the one.’

Vitellios chipped in. ‘It signalled only once, at the exact time we discovered the commander’s beacon.’

‘It makes sense, sergeant,’ now Narro spoke again. ‘If some of the xenoforms can detect the beacon’s signal you would not wish to lead them to all your hiding places. You would wait until a rescue party might be close, close enough to reach a primary beacon. Then once we accessed that, it must have sent a signal to all the secondary beacons to begin transmitting.’

‘And one replied. Once.’ I looked back at Cassios, but he was concentrated upon the neophytes’ explanation. ‘Our auspex did not detect a second signal at that time.’

‘Not our squad auspex, no,’ Narro continued, ‘but the one on the boat did. It is noted within the data-log. It is at the far end of the ship, so deep inside we would not have detected it.’

‘Very well. Commander?’ I fixed my gaze upon Cassios. ‘Do you know what we may find?’

‘Our boarding parties struck all across the ship. There are several for whom I have not accounted.’ He shook his head sadly. ‘I only pray they were as lucky as I and that we may reach them in time.’

My wards appeared convinced, but I was not. Yet if more of our brothers were still sent abourd that abomination, I could not leave them behind.

‘So, Scout Pasan, tell me. What is this aperture that you have discovered?’

‘Arse!’ Vitellios swore as he took another grudging step along the dim tunnel. ‘I can’t believe I have to climb up this bio-ship’s arse.’

His overblown irritation elicited a smattering of laughter from the other neophytes.

‘Keep the chatter off the vox!’ I snapped at them all, my patience worn thin. There was no atmosphere in this part of the ship so we were fully encased within our armour with only the squad-vox to keep in contact. I was still not recovered, I felt weak, uncomfortable, and my discomfort frustrated me even further. Such petty inconveniences should be nothing to an Astartes. My body should be healed fully, not still ailing. I pushed on, the temperature rising and my temper shortening with each step.

How had I come to this? Reduced to a haemorrhoid on a hive ship’s backside! Was this what heroes of the Astartes did? Would, one day, a new generation of battle-brothers listen in hushed tones to the tale of this adventure?

‘Brother-sergeant?’ Cassios’s voice came through to me. He had set it to a private channel. Cassios, though, would be my salvation. When we returned home after this insertion, we would not be met by a Techmarine adept to catalogue our salvage. No, we would have an honour guard fitting for the hero we would restore.

‘Commander?’

‘I asked the neophytes, during the days you were inconvenienced, of the circumstances of my rescue.’

‘With what purpose?’ I had intended my query to be polite, but as I heard it back through the vox it had the tinge of accusation.

‘No more than to further my understanding of them. It struck me that Scout Pasan in particular showed considerable courage in leading the ravener away, allowing the heavy bolter to be retrieved.’

‘It would have shown considerable courage had I ordered him to do it,’ I said, my voice sounding testy, ‘but in the midst of battle, you must act as one. You cannot have a single person deciding to act alone, expecting everyone else to understand his meaning.’

‘And yet at other times you have remarked on his failure to use initiative. That he has waited for orders.’

‘He must learn to judge between the two. That is also part of leadership; when to act and when to listen to others.’

‘You truly believe he is the right one to groom as acolyte?’

I knew to whom Cassios was referring, but I held firm in my opinion. ‘Pasan is Sothan. Like you and I. One of the last. He has it within him. He merely needs to discover it.’

The conversation ended shortly after that. Cassios did not understand; he had spent two days with the neophytes. I had fought alongside them for over two years. My mind dwelt on Cassios’s behaviour. It had been the neophytes who had pushed for this second insertion yet I knew it was exactly what he

wished. There are reasons why any Space Marine discovered still living aboard a hive ship must be examined by the Apothecarion before returning to duty. It is not the constant danger and warfare, our minds are enhanced so that we may fight without rest, but it is the unknown influence of the greater tyranid consciousness that bears down on each and every living thing within its grasp. No one yet knows what effect that may have.

There is another reason as well. Not all tyranid xenoforms are created simply to destroy their enemies. Many are designed to infiltrate their minds, turn them against their friends and lead them into traps to be devoured. Cassios's behaviour seemed normal, but then perhaps that was a sign. How normal should a man be after such an experience?

I led them on in silence. The torches on our suits illuminated only a fraction of the gloom ahead of us. In truth, we did not know what function this part of the hive ship performed. Pasan had found the entrance at the stern of the vessel; it had been small, shrivelled, but the tunnel had widened out considerably after we had penetrated the initial portal. The bio-titan birthing cavity was nothing to the size of this cavern. Walking along the middle, the lowest point, we could see neither wall nor roof. We might as well have been walking upon the surface of a planet, the only difference being that the ground sloped upwards rather than down as it disappeared into the darkness on either side. It was desolate; there were no remains here of any of the lesser tyranid creatures that we had waded through in our earlier expeditions. The floor was bare, a series of shallow crests as though we were on the inside of a giant spring, and the footing was firm. It appeared as though we had found the one part of the vessel where nothing had ever lived.

Or I may have spoken too soon. I noticed to my right Cassios stop suddenly, he kneeled and held his gauntleted hand on the ground.

'Something's coming. Take cover,' his commanding voice coming through the vox crackled around the inside of my helmet. What cover? I asked myself, but Cassios was already breaking to one side.

'To the right,' I ordered my wards after him. They responded instantly, ready to follow him. We ran for a minute until the rising wall hove up into view, soaring above our heads into the shadow. Cassios climbed the slope until it was as steep as we could manage and then stopped there, looking further ahead.

'What is it?' I asked him. The auspex showed nothing.

'Do you not see them?'

I peered into the gloom. 'No,' I said.

He bade us wait, however, and within a few moments I saw what he had seen. A ridge emerged ahead of us, stretching across the horizon, as though a mighty hand had gripped the ship from the outside and was squeezing it up towards us. I heard my wards gasp as they saw it too.

‘Holy Throne…’

‘God-Emperor…’

‘Sotha preserve us…’

‘What in the name of a hive-toad’s spawn-baubles are those?’

The ridge was no muscle contraction: it was a phalanx of huge tyranid creatures of a sort I had never seen before. Each as big as a tank, as big as a Baneblade, packed tightly together so there was not a centimetre between them, and moving as a line slowly towards us. Their armoured eyeless heads were down, so low as to be ploughing over the surface in front of them, dragging their bulbous bodies behind. Their limbs had atrophied so they oozed their way forward like snails. I did not know what their slime would do, but their weight alone would crush us. I looked to the left, to the right, there was no way around; they ringed the circumference of the cavern, somehow sticking to the walls even as they arched round and became the ceiling. I doubted whether all the weaponry we had to hand would be enough to stop one of these brutes in its tracks.

I looked down the line, searching for a tank-beast that appeared smaller or weaker. If we targeted one with concentrated fire there might be a chance, but my attention was dragged away when my wards suddenly let out a great cheer. Cassios was advancing, climbing the curving slope as he went. He had gone mad, I realised, the sight of his foe had driven his wits from him.

‘After him!’ I ordered the Scouts. I would be damned if I would let him die now, after all he had survived, before he could be welcomed back home. We chased him as quickly as we could, struggling at the steep angle this close to the wall. He charged ahead of us, not even drawing his weapon. Scrabbling higher, he leapt from the cavern wall onto the top of the nearest tank-beast’s head. Then, balanced precariously as the beast chomped forward, his power sword appeared in his hand and he stabbed down.

The tank-beast did not seem to notice.

‘Back!’ I shouted, appalled, to the others. ‘Back! Firing positions!’

The beasts’ pace had appeared slow from a distance, but up close they ground forwards with surprising speed. On such a slope, it was as if a Land Raider was barrelling towards us, teetering on a single tread.

‘Stay on the curve! Stay high!’ Cassios’s voice blasted into our helmets as we fell back and he stabbed down again. I glanced behind, this time the beast acknowledged the strike with a flicker of its head that nearly threw Cassios off, but then it returned to its path and he regained his grip.

The Scouts stood ready to fire, but I hesitated, fearing the volley would hit the commander.

‘Fire above me!’ Cassios ordered, and we fired a battery of shells and shot over Cassios’s head as he ducked and swung again. He cut to the right side of the beast’s head, on the underside of where he was crouching. This time the

beast shied slightly away from the barrage, but again returned to its course.

‘Again!’ He cut. We fired, the beast looming before us as though we were insects.

‘Again!’ he cried one last time before the beast steamrollered over us. We fired and he jammed the sword in as deep as it would go. The beast reacted. It squirmed away from our shot and lazily snapped towards the pinprick causing it pain. Its weight shifted and the upper edge of its body detached from the wall. For the first time we glimpsed the immense pores and suckers that had held it fast. As those came away from the surface, its weight shifted even further and more suckers came loose. With the inertia of a battleship ramming another, it slowly toppled down upon the tank-beast to its side and both monstrous creatures halted for a moment in confusion. Above them, their collision had left a gap. None of us needed to be told what to do.

We raced forwards to pass through before the tank-beast recovered. As we crossed into the valley we had created in the advancing ridge, it regained its grip and lumbered back. The valley’s wall closed in upon us and I willed every last jolt of energy to my legs. The walls slammed shut as we shot from them and skidded upon the deep coating of mucus the tank-beasts left behind. I gained purchase for an instant before Hwygir, out of control, knocked me flying. We slid down the curved wall of the cavern right back into the centre until we finally stuck where the mucus was pooling.

I cut through the groans on the vox, demanding my squad to report. Haltingly, they did so. Slowly, trying not to fall again, I picked myself up from the laden ground and then checked the others. Cassios was rising as well. Hwygir was holding the heavy bolter high in the air, keeping it dry. Narro and Pasan were scraping the fluid off themselves as Vitellios just stood there, a look of horror on his face as he stared down at the mucus dripping off from every part of him.

‘I’ve been slimed,’ he said.

I forwent commenting that such dross reminded me of the grime-swamp where he’d been birthed; I had more pressing concerns.

‘Neophytes, get yourselves up. Check your weapons, check your weapons!’ I chivvied Vitellios. ‘Straighten yourselves and get ready to move.’

I stepped away a little to check my own pistol and could not help but reflect once more on the new depths to which my command had sunk. I saw Cassios stepping around the neophytes, congratulating them individually. It did not matter, as soon as I returned him to *The Heart of Cronus* I would request transfer to the battle company and no one would be able to deny me.

‘What is this place anyway?’ I overheard Vitellios ask the rest.

‘A no good place,’ Hwygir concluded.

Narro was already working on hypotheses. ‘Maybe some kind of alimentary canal, maybe a funnel or blow-hole.’

‘Maybe the barrel of a bio-cannon?’ Pasan queried.

‘One big cannon,’ Vitellios said.

‘Either way, I just hope there’s nothing bigger coming up out the pipe.’

I allowed them their inane chatter this once. I had checked my pistol and by His grace it still functioned. Our weapons last hundreds of years for a reason. I holstered it and then punched the auspex back to life to check the path ahead. I looked at its readings and then punched it again. The readings did not change. My body still moved, taking a few steps forward, but my brain, for this moment, had frozen. There *was* something bigger coming up the pipe. It wasn’t a tank-beast or a carnifex or even a bio-titan. It was the spark of life that Cassios had claimed to sense. Ahead of us, growing, feeding, ready to be born, was a creature far larger than any we had encountered. It was the Kraken’s offspring. It was another hive ship.

‘Brother Tiresias?’ The lieutenant stopped me as I walked the corridors of *The Heart of Cronus*.

‘Brother Hadrios,’ I responded, surprised. ‘I thought you were away with Master Thracian?’

‘We have just returned,’ the lieutenant said flatly, his eyes heavy. ‘He wishes to see you. You will come with me.’

He turned away, expecting me to follow. After a moment’s hesitation, I did. The lieutenant offered no further conversation and so we walked in silence. He led me to the Master’s chambers and left me there. The chambers were still dark, the mosaics along its walls unlit, unprepared for their master’s return, much as the rest of us. This was not how I expected matters to unfold. We imagined we would have forewarning when Thracian reappeared, to gather our strength so that we might confront him together and demonstrate our collective will. Instead, he had stolen back like a thief in the night and taken us off-guard.

A line split down the panelling on one side and the chamber filled with light. Hidden in the light, Master Thracian stood. I imagine that I have already created in your mind’s eye a character for Master Thracian. A careful man, a smaller man; lesser than those who came before him. Desperate, perhaps. Petty. Failing. Let me dispel that character from your mind now. No man can become an Astartes without the potential for greatness, and no Astartes can become the master of a Chapter without a part of that greatness realised. Thracian was no exception and he was to achieve even more over those next few years. He was big, big even for one of our kind, but his face had stayed thin. His long hair was still black where Chapter Master Thorcyra’s had turned grey, and he wore his beard shorter. He was wearing a simple robe in the Chapter’s colours and beneath it a vest of ceremonial scale armour, fastened loosely across his chest. I knew him to be a fierce warrior, a master

tactician, and brave without question, but at that moment I saw him only as the obstacle to our Chapter finding the destiny it deserved.

I bowed; he bid me stand.

‘Brother Tiresias, welcome. I regret that my absence had to be of such great duration,’ he spoke. ‘I understand that Brother-Captain Romonos has kept the battle company busy.’

Busy, yes, with small raids, petty battles and hasty withdrawals.

‘I am told that you brought honour upon the Chapter by your actions during the campaign upon Tan.’

‘My thanks, Master.’ I nodded without emotion, but I relaxed a little. So this was merely to be a little perfunctory commendation. I would humour him and then find Sergeant Angeloi and tell him that our opportunity had come.

‘What did you think of that campaign?’ he asked.

‘It was a great success. A significant victory,’ I spouted what I knew I should say and bit my tongue on the rest.

The Chapter Master regarded me. ‘I have read the reports, Tiresias, I asked what you thought.’

‘Master, I have said already what I think. I do not know what you require from me.’

‘That is an order,’ he said calmly.

Well, if that was what he wished, that is what he would have. ‘The campaign on Tan…’ I snorted. ‘The campaign on Tan was a joke. No, worse, it was a travesty. A few skirmishes, and standing guard throughout an evacuation. Providing support to others instead of leading from the front, where an Astartes should be. It does not even deserve to be called a campaign, let alone a victory.’

I stopped then. I had said too much, far too much. I had breached protocol, discipline, even simple good judgement. I looked at the Master, but his face was without expression.

‘Did we lose any of our brothers?’ he asked quietly.

I knew he knew already, but he wanted me to say it. ‘No, no brothers lost. A few injured. Most minor. One more serious.’

‘Brother Domitios, yes, but he will recover. I know also, Tiresias, that when he fell it was you who went to his defence. It was you who skewered the xenos beast that threatened him. It was you who saved his life.’

I nodded again. It was true, but I did not think it remarkable. Astartes are trained to do nothing less.

‘You acquitted yourself well, brother. Very well,’ the Master continued. ‘You have always done so, even when you have had misgivings about the orders you have been given. That is why I wished you to speak your mind. Why I am talking to you now.’

‘Do not mistake my words, Master.’ I countered. ‘I understand the value of

restraint, of retreat when circumstances dictate. We defended the orbital stations, but we did not even try to save that planet. We did not even step foot upon the surface. Before we even entered the system we were defeated in our hearts.'

I paused. Thracian let the silence hang in the air between us for a long moment. 'You wish for it to be as it was.' he said.

'Yes!' I gasped. 'Kraken is broken, its fleets are scattered. We do not need to sell our lives merely to delay their advance. If we commit ourselves in force we can win a victory, a true victory. As Calgar did on Ichar IV, as we did at Dal'yth Tertius, and Translock. Yes, I wish to fight as we did, with every weapon, every muscle, every sinew at our command. Come victory or death, to fight as an Astartes should.'

I had not expected to burst out with such sentiments now, to anticipate the statement that Sergeant Angeloi was readying to give him. I expected Thracian to roar back at me, but his reply was very quick.

'One day, Tiresias, we shall fight like that again. But for now it cannot be. For now, any action where no brother is lost must be victory enough,' he said simply. 'I know that it is far easier to say than it is to accept in one's heart. That is my challenge, one of them at least, to help us understand what has happened to us. How we must change. So many brothers dead; Sotha gone, mere rubble in space. The noble Scythes of the Emperor, loyal reapers of mankind's foes, cut down ourselves by the great devourer. It is not a fate we deserved.'

He stepped away from me, his robe brushing lightly over the polished floor.

'I understand your frustration, but you must have hope in our future. And that is what I left you to acquire. Here.'

He keyed a sequence into a control and the mosaics along the walls rose smoothly, revealing pict-screens behind. They all displayed images of one of the ship's hangar bays. It had changed greatly. The fighters had gone; the machinery had all been stripped away. In their place, a bizarre maze had been constructed. Plasteel walls covered and painted to resemble the corridors of a tyranid bio-ship. Inside the maze I could see Space Marines advancing in their squads; not Space Marines, no, they were too small. They were neophytes.

As I watched, one of them trod upon a pressure-switch. A trapdoor in the floor opened and he vanished before even catching his breath to shout.

'Traps, creatures, combat servitors programmed with tyranid attack patterns. It is as real as we can make it. We have paid close attention to the data we gathered fighting these monstrosities, after all, it came to us dear.'

'How many?' I asked, my voice a whisper.

'Three hundred in total, and more to come. Young, untested, but keen. All orphans of the Kraken like ourselves. All ready to be baptised with tyranid blood.' Thracian placed his hand upon my shoulder then. 'They only need

leadership, guidance, from brothers like you. Sergeant Angeloi recommended you specifically, Tiresias. Promotion and this, your first command.'

I opened my mouth, but found for once no words were waiting there. Thracian continued:

'You see, Tiresias, one day it shall be as it was. And it shall not take a hundred years, or even fifty. When the next hive fleet comes to plague these sectors we will be ready to answer the Emperor's call.'

I stepped back a little, and Thracian's hand fell from me.

'I will… thank you, Master. I will be sure to thank my sergeant when I–'

And then I saw a look in Thracian's golden eyes.

'I will ensure you will have the chance to send a message after him,' he interrupted. 'Brother-Sergeant Angeloi has already departed to join the xenos hunters of the Inquisition, the fabled Deathwatch. Given our experiences, they requested as many brothers as we could spare to help spread the knowledge of the forms of the tyranid blight and how each may best be destroyed. I granted him, and a few others, the honour of carrying our name and our teachings to the galaxy.'

A few others, Thracian said, but in truth over forty brothers had gone already, reassigned to the Deathwatch. They were nearly a third of our strength and each one of them was one of Angeloi's crusaders. And the chance to compel Thracian to order one last, glorious campaign had gone with them.

'Now rest a moment, brother,' Thracian directed me to sit, 'and allow me to share with you how your new command will aid our Chapter's Salvation.'

I never discovered the truth behind the creation of the neophyte companies. The recruits themselves I knew were, just like Gricole and our retainers, from the worlds of the long retreat. Even before the hive fleet arrived in the Sotha system, even while my squad-brothers prepared the planet's defences, plans were being made so that the Scythes might rise again.

The best of the youngsters of Sotha had already been secretly evacuated. Each place we turned to make our stand, Miral, Graia, and the rest; while my brothers fought and died, the most promising youths were recruited and rescued. Harvested by us, I suppose, while those left behind were harvested by the xenos.

But the gene-seed, that was the question. Three whole companies of neophytes and more to come, Thracian had promised. How was it possible? There were many theories. A few were sensible; that Thorcyra had been forewarned of the attack on Sotha and ordered the gene-seed to be removed in secret, or that the old Chapter Master had struck an agreement with the Inquisition to return our gene-tithe and whether the Deathwatch Marines were the only price he had had to pay. Other theories were darker, that Thracian had found or purchased arcane or alien tech that allowed progenoids to

develop artificially far faster than in a Space Marine, or that most of the neophytes did not receive true gene-seed, they were merely bio-engineered and would never mature into true Astartes. I even heard a whisper that the gene-seed was not ours; that before the Salvation Teams there were squads designated Reaper Teams. I do not credit such thoughts, however; no Astartes would stoop to such measures even if the future of the Chapter depended upon it.

But then, I have had cause to wonder, can you ever be sure what lengths a creature will go in order to ensure the survival of its children?

'A kilometre and a half long, millions of tonnes, and a face only a hormagaunt could love…' Vitellios murmured, watching the muscles of the hive ship's offspring ripple beneath its hull-skin.

'And it's trying to get out,' Pasan said.

This was it then, the source of the 'gaunts we had encountered, the spark of life that Cassios had sworn existed. The bloated biters we had seen were not venturing inwards to wait; they were coming here to feed this offspring on the bio-matter of the corpse of its parent.

'Very well,' I decided. 'As soon as we return to the boat, we will send a despatch to the closest battlegroup, Ultima priority. They will respond to that.'

'No,' Cassios said.

I scoffed. 'I assure you, commander, they will!' But then, through the visor of his faceplate, I saw the expression in his eyes.

'They will still be too late. We are the only ones who are close enough and we are here to kill that creature.'

I had had enough of him. He had challenged my command once already and I was not going to waste my breath diverting him from such vainglorious stupidity.

'As you wish, commander,' I told him and gave the signal for the Scouts to gather and follow. 'I will ensure your final action is recorded with the proper honour.' I had walked several steps before I realised my wards were not with me.

'Ensure it is recorded for all of us,' Vitellios spoke up.

I should have seen it. I should have seen it as soon as I saw them standing with Cassios as he convinced me there were others within the ship that may be saved. They were not looking at me to lead them; they were looking at me to see whether I believed their lie.

'A second beacon?' I did not look at Cassios, but rather at Narro. He knew I would have trusted him to double-check the auspex readings.

'It was not his idea,' Pasan said. 'Nor was it the commander's. It was mine.'

'Yours?' I shot back at my acolyte.

It was Cassios who replied. ‘I would have left you back there. It is clear to me that you have failed as their teacher and you have failed even as their leader. But Brother Pasan wanted you here.’

I looked away from him; there was nothing he could say to me. Two days it had taken him, two days to take the loyalties of the wards I had cared for for two years. I looked back at Pasan. ‘Why did you want me here? So that you may see my face as you disgrace me?’

‘No,’ Pasan said. ‘So that you may have the chance to join us.’

‘Join you?’ I exclaimed. ‘For what purpose would I do that? What do you offer but the futile waste of your lives?’

Pasan replied, but the four of them may as well have spoken as one.

‘To know what it is to fight as an Astartes.’

I could not credit this from such youths. ‘You do not know,’ I told them. ‘You have never seen the full Chapter deployed in battle. Squad after squad standing proud in their armour, bolters raised. Reciting your battle-oaths with one voice and then marching forwards, knowing your brothers are there for you as you are there for them. You draw such strength from them, being not one warrior fighting alone, but one of a thousand fighting together. Ten hundred bodies forming a single weapon. Until you have experienced that… you do not really know what it is to fight as an Astartes.’

The neophytes were silent. I felt my words had reached them at last.

‘You are right, honoured sergeant,’ Pasan said. ‘We do not know. We have never experienced that. But then, when will we?’

‘When you are full battle-brothers,’ I said.

‘Will we? Even if we do as you say. We leave here now, with you; we survive to take a place in the battle company,’ Pasan glanced at his brother-Scouts for support. ‘When will we ever march into battle a full Chapter strong? How long will it take us to recover before we do anything more than nip and pinch at our enemies? A hundred years, two hundred? How much more will be lost to the devourer by then?’

Pasan stood forwards and Vitellios stepped with him.

‘I know you think little of me,’ the hive-trash said. ‘That I don’t take being a high and mighty Astartes seriously. But there’s one thing I am serious about. My life. I joined to scour our galaxy of the alien bastards that slaughtered my world. I didn’t raise myself up from hive-trash, put myself through all the trials to be chosen as a Scythe so I could dig through the dead and grow old training the next generation. I didn’t do all I’ve done just to become an antiquated relic…’

‘As I am, you mean?’ I snapped back. I was beyond anger, I was furious. I raised my hand and Vitellios braced himself for the blow, but Pasan stepped in front of him.

‘Why are you against us?’ he cried. ‘We all know that this is what you truly

want. We've heard you rail to Gricole often enough.'

'Now you are spying upon me as well?' I said, incredulous.

Hwygir grunted in the corner, 'A small craft, our transport.'

'You are not the only one with an Astartes' senses,' Vitellios chipped in, but Pasan cut him off.

'No excuses, honoured sergeant. You wanted us to hear. You wanted us to know how much you resented this mission, resented us for what we took you from. Now here is your chance. There is the enemy. We can reach it. We can kill it. Yes, some of us, all of us may die. But is this not the chance for glory you want?'

All four of them were standing now, united against me, yet united in favour of everything I believed. The anger that had flared inside me vanished.

'Yes, it is,' I agreed with them. 'More than you know. Every sinew and muscle in my body craves to carry the fight to the xenos without caution, without restraint. To serve as an Astartes should serve.'

'Then you are with us!' Pasan shouted.

'But then…' I continued. 'I look deeper than my muscle, I look into my bones. And there, inscribed a thousand times, is the oath I took to the master of this Chapter to obey his orders and the Emperor's word therein. It is an oath that I have never broken, and never will. As for the rest… I give it up.'

I swept my arm up and pointed at them. 'You are my witness! You hear me now! I give up my glory, I give up my revenge, I give up my hope of what I could have been,' I shouted even though they were close, but I knew I was not addressing them. 'I accept it cannot be as it was! A battle where no brother falls is glory enough!'

I saw their faces, they thought me mad, but in truth I was healed. The weight of the loss of my brothers, the weight of my rage that I had survived when they had not was lifted. I took a breath and breathed free for the first time since Sotha.

'No glory,' I finished quietly, 'is greater than the future of our Chapter. We are not greater than it, none of us. Any Astartes who thinks they are… there is a word for those…'

'Renegades,' Cassios said from behind me. 'But which of us is the renegade, brother? You, who defend our Chapter's crippled body or I, who defend its soul?'

'It's starting to move…' Narro reported.

'Then we shall as well,' Cassios gestured to the Scouts, once my wards, now his men, then turned back to me. 'I offer you the chance to fight as a Scythe should, with his hand, his oath on his lips and his brothers by his side. If you do not come, let it be upon you.'

'It shall be upon me,' I stated, 'but I shall come. I take this oath now: you may take these children to their deaths but I shall bring them back again.'

It was to be the final insertion of the 21st Salvation Team. The ship, the offspring, was grinding itself forward down the lifeless channel. We blew a hole through the young, unhardened skin as close to our target as we could manage. If the offspring noticed our pinprick at all its reaction was lost amidst the wild throes of its agonising birth. The chambers inside could not be more different than the dead, dark halls of its parent. Luminescent algae lit our path, the ground was springy beneath our boots, the wall-skin taut, the door valves firm, and the noise… each chamber and tunnel vibrated with the screeching noise as the offspring pulsed and squirmed out into space, but below that you could hear the hum, the pulse, the beat of its life all around you. The life the Scythes were here to take.

We moved quickly. Cassios led the way, allowing his warrior instincts to draw him towards the creature's heart. The Scouts followed a step behind; their excitement, their fear did not dull their skill. They moved easily, not in a single formation, but always shifting from one to another, running, covering. First Vitellios would run, as Pasan protected him, then Narro as Vitellios did the same, then Hwygir would charge up, bursting as ever with pride at being entrusted with the vital heavy weapon. They protected one another. For two years I had tried to find one amongst them suited to be their leader; at that moment I realised that they did not need one. They fought as one: as Hwygir reloaded, Narro shot into the tyranids to keep them from recovering; as Narro was caught by a tendril, Pasan forced his gun down into its maw and blew its brain out; as Pasan forced open a door-valve, Vitellios destroyed the creature lurking above it; as Vitellios ran quickly back from a new rush of 'gaunts, I lent my fire to his to halt them where they stood.

Our foes were not the fearsome monsters of Macragge and Ichar IV. The ship had grown only its most basic defenders: termagants, other 'gaunts and the like; and it itself was focused on its struggle towards freedom. However, its plight, its vulnerable state, triggered a response from the creatures barring our path that was all the more visceral. Cassios did not care, he simply battered them aside. These tyranids, who had overwhelmed countless star systems with force of numbers, now found themselves overwhelmed in turn by Cassios's simple force. Every chamber we encountered he stormed, every 'gaunt in his way fell to the shells of his pistol or the curved edge of his power sword. He gave them no chance to gather, but charged into the thick of them, relying on his speed to spoil their aim and his thick armour to protect his flesh. That it did for him, but it did not for the rest of us and we suffered our first loss.

'Brother!' Hwygir shouted after Narro as he stumbled. One of the shots of bio-acid aimed too quickly at Cassios had flown past the commander and struck Narro. Across the vox, I heard him clamp down on his scream. Hwygir had already raised the heavy bolter and was struggling across to check on

him.

‘Keep us covered!’ I yelled at him and shoved his weapon around to face the closing enemy. I heard his frustrated roar as he fired, but my focus was on the stricken Narro. He was still breathing. I rolled him and saw his arm clutching his side. Without ceremony I pulled the arm away to see the wound and discovered that the arm ended at the wrist. His hand had been eaten away.

His eyes snapped open, he looked down in shock at his stump and breathed in to holler in pain. I punched him sharply in the chest and he gasped instead, winded.

‘Overcome it!’ I shouted into his ear. ‘You shall build yourself a new one.’

He struggled to nod as his Astartes metabolism kicked in and dampened the shock and the pain. I took his weapon and handed him my pistol.

‘Sergeant!’ Hwygir called back as he released the trigger for a moment. ‘How is–’

I looked up as Hwygir turned his head to ask after his brother. I saw the shot hit the back of his helmet and the blood splatter on the inside of his face-plate as the tiny beetles of the bio-weapon bored through his skull and ate the flesh of his face from the inside. The savage fell and, in that instant, I felt the loss of a brother.

I dived towards his body firing wildly to force his killers to scuttle back. I cannot claim any sentimentality – I had fought too long to allow such feelings cloud my reactions – it was solely his weapon I was after. I rose and aimed the heavy bolter. I had not fired one in battle since the long retreat from Sotha. I pulled the trigger, felt the reassuring recoil and watched as its shells blew a line of bloody death across the ’gaunts’ first ranks.

The offspring lurched suddenly to one side and all of us, tyranid and Space Marine alike, were knocked from our feet. Hwygir and the ’gaunt bodies rolled away. I hefted the cumbersome gun and scrambled back where Cassios and the rest of the squad had regrouped.

‘It’s accelerating,’ Cassios said without a glance back towards where Hwygir had fallen. ‘We have to move faster.’

‘Does it matter?’ Vitellios asked. ‘We’re inside it now, it’s not getting away!’

‘Every second we delay gives it time to call in more beasts.’

‘Then what are we waiting for?’ he jumped up, ever the fearless one, and smashed the butt of his shotgun against the next door-valve. The valve shrank back and he led us through. He made it a single step before a set of jaws within the valve snapped shut, razor-sharp teeth puncturing the length of Vitellios’s body from his ankle to his head. I grabbed his arm, wedged the barrel under his shoulder and fired into the darkness, into whatever monster lay beyond. The door-mouth rippled in pain and slid back into the walls. It was too late, though, for Vitellios. His face was fixed in an expression of

surprise, no last witticism to give. The hive-trash fell and I felt the loss of a brother.

It was then that we truly understood that it was not just these ’gaunts: every single piece of flesh around us wished us dead. The wall algae blazed brightly as we came near to draw the beasts, bulbed stalks burst and covered us in spores that sought to burrow into our armour, cysts showered us with bio-acid, even the muscles of the floor rippled as we fired, to disrupt our aim. It would have been enough to stop any human warriors, but we are Astartes. The Angels of Death. And all the offspring’s efforts could not keep us from our quest’s end.

‘We are close,’ Cassios declared, as another ’gaunt lay in pieces at his feet.

‘How close?’ I shouted as I delivered another volley of fire against the creatures pursuing us.

‘Can’t you hear it?’

I could hear nothing over the explosions of the bolt shells and the roar of the offspring’s progress. It must be close to birthing now, but I did not care. Gricole would see it as soon as it emerged, he would know to carry a message back to the fleet. Others would know, they just would not know what had happened to us.

‘I hear it!’ Pasan cried, and then I heard it too: a deep throbbing sound.

‘Brothers!’ Cassios announced. ‘I give you the heart of the beast!’

The single organ, if it was just one, filled the chamber beyond. It was a giant column, surrounded by red bloated chambers. From the top of each chamber split massive leeches that surmounted the top of the pillar and descended into the centre. It looked as though eight great Sothan phantine beasts were drinking from a pool. The entire structure constantly pulsed and shifted as gallons of fluid pumped through it each second. It was the energy cortex, and it was covered by tyranids. Smaller ’gaunts with bio-weapons, larger ones with great scything claws, a few at the top even had wings.

‘It’s a trap,’ Pasan gasped. ‘It let us get this far…’

‘It’s not a trap if we know it’s coming,’ Cassios told him.

No, it’s insanity. I glanced at Cassios again; his eyes were at peace. Perhaps he really had been tainted, perhaps all he had done was in service of some xenos impulse inserted into his brain. Perhaps all the while we had been inside the offspring, the offspring had been inside him.

‘Why don’t they attack?’ Pasan whispered.

‘Maybe… maybe…’ Narro’s mind raced, he was feeling the disorientation worst of all. ‘Maybe they did not wish to risk fighting here, risk damaging the cortex.’

But then the great thundering of the offspring as it climbed out the channel of its parent reached a crescendo and went silent. It was out. It was into space. My faith was with Gricole. He would do what needed to be done. It just

remained for me to do the same, call this assault off, to save the lives I could. But Cassios was already advancing, a brace of mining charges in his hand. I stopped him and held one of the charges up.

'It's set to instant detonation,' I told him.

'Of course,' he replied and we locked gazes for the last time.

'Then we stay here. They deserve the chance, Cassios. Give them that.'

He shrugged, uncaring. This was to be the epic of his death; whether others were with him did not matter. I looked at my last two wards – Narro quickly nodded agreement with me, and so too, slowly, did Pasan.

'Cover him,' I told them, as Cassios raised his power sword high and cried:

'For Sotha! For the Emperor! Death! Death! Death!'

My wards and I fired in unison: heavy bolter, boltgun and pistol together, blowing holes in the ranks of the tyranid. The tyranids responded in kind, releasing a volley of borer-beetles, bio-acid and toxin-spines against Cassios as he charged. Cassios slammed to a halt and flinched, drawing his cloak around him. I saw his mighty frame collapse under the onslaught.

'No!' Pasan shouted and sprinted after him, spraying fire wildly as he went. The hormagaunts had already leapt from the energy cortex and were surging towards the downed commander. I did not call to bring Pasan back, I saved my breath, he would not come. I had lost him long before. Instead I trained the heavy bolter to clear his path. The first of the hormagaunt wave exploded as my shell hit home, the one behind stumbled and was knocked down by those behind it, pushing forwards, the third leapt and my next shell caught its leg and its body cart-wheeled away in pieces. The fourth reached Cassios and took the brunt of Pasan's fire. The next rank sprang, arcing high to clear the bodies before them. Two fell to my shells, one to Narro's, but three fell upon the son of Sotha. One sliced through his gun and then his arm, the second caught his knee and cut deep into his side and the third split his head straight down the middle. The son of Sotha fell and I felt the loss of a part of myself.

Then, in a crackling arc of light, the three 'gaunts were carved apart themselves. Cassios rose, his cloak dissolved, his armour cracked and scarred. Blood streamed from the split in his armour at the neck. He spun to face the approaching horde and threw himself into their midst.

He was beyond our help now. I might have only seconds to fulfil my oath and save who I could. I turned to Narro, the last of my wards, and told him:

'I never thought it would be you. But it is best that it is.'

He looked at me, confused. I shook my head and pointed to our escape. This one at least I would save, I thought, the most brilliant of them. Perhaps, I thought, that would be enough. But I was not to be allowed even that. Above us, I heard a familiar bestial scream, first one, then a second. Without thinking, I brought the heavy bolter up straight into the ravener's face.

The brutal claw carved through the heavy bolter even as I pulled the

trigger. The round rocketing down the barrel suddenly struck bone and exploded. Shrapnel burst through the barrel-cover and flew at me. I stumbled back, dropping the useless heavy weapon and clutching my face. I pulled the ruined helmet off, blinking to catch the ravener's next attack. I looked and saw it collapsed on the ground, its claw blown off, its face a mass of blood and bone. The second still held Narro's body impaled upon its scythe-claws as it twisted towards me. I drew my falx. This was to be the end.

The second ravener leapt, its two scythe-claws high. I dove forwards. The scythes came down but I was inside their reach and they glanced off my shoulders. My falx was already embedded through its chestbone. Its mid-limbs plunged through my armour and unloaded its venom as I twisted and pushed it off my blade. I staggered back, holding my guts inside my body, I was still not dead. Neither was it. It flew at me in one last attack, my falx came up and caught its scythes as they came down and pushed them to one side. As its blades went down mine cut back across its gaping mouth and sliced its head open.

I felt its ichor splatter my face, I tasted it as my mouth opened to roar my defiance. At that moment, somewhere behind me, a dying hand released its grip upon the mining charges and the chamber was filled with the Emperor's wrath.

I woke aboard a dead ship, a ravener my bedside companion. I rolled the corpse away. I dragged myself to my feet and began to search about the dark and lifeless chamber. Whether the tyranids had fled or died on the spot from the psychic shock I did not know. I was searching for something else. I found it. I thought it impossible for any one, any Astartes, to live through that. I was right. The body of Commander Cassios was a shell. But I was not there for sentiment, I did not do that. I was there in the hope that something inside him survived. I grimaced in pain as I felt the bite of the ravener poison. A stronger dose this time, from a young beast, rather than a stale relic. I took the carnifex from my pack and placed it first against Cassios's throat and then against his chest, and took from him the Chapter's due.

My second heart finishes its beat. My recollection concludes, as it always does, with the memory of dragging myself into this hole and, even as the bio-poison burned its way around my body, focusing on my training, slowing my mind, suspending my system and halting the poison's spread. It was too late for me; I know that. I will die when I wake. Pasan, Vitellios, Narro, Hwygir; Cassios had taken them in, but I will carry them out again. I know they are dead, their bodies lost, perhaps more bio-matter for the devourer, but their spirits live on. Two of them in the carnifex in my hand, in the progenoid glands of Commander Cassios from which new gene-seed and two new

Astartes would arise. And two of them my own shell. The glands in my throat and in my chest that would bear two more. Cassios and I are lost, as we should have been long ago. These four are the future of the Scythes now, and I will live and bear the pain of poison until I deliver them back home.

‘Sergeant! Over here!’ the neophyte called.

Sergeant Quintos, commanding the 121st Salvation Team, strode over to his ward. The neophyte gestured down with his torch into a crevice in the floor of the dead bio-ship. Sergeant Quintos activated the light built into his bionic arm. He had lost the original years before when he himself had been a scout in a Salvation Team. Down there, glinting back in the light, shone the shoulder armour of a Space Marine. And upon that armour was inscribed the legend:

TIRESIAS

BLOODLINE

James Swallow

Inside the walls of the sepulchre, time had no meaning.

There were no windows through which to see the passage of night and day across the distant Chalice Mountains and the great red deserts of Baal, no mark of moments from waxen candles, no clock but the beating of Astartes hearts. Light, soft and oily, fell from lume-sconces in the stone walls, eternal and unflickering. It cast hazy shadows over the figures who moved about the chamber, their voices low and intense.

The sepulchre's perfume was one of metal and rust, a smell like wet copper; blood by the gallon had spilled in this place over the millennia, so much so that the scent of it had penetrated into the stone itself. In the middle of the chamber was a marble table, the white rock stained pink with the vitae of all those who had bled upon it. A Blood Angel lay there now, stripped of his wargear and clad only in thin cotton vestments. Black chains of tempered steel and manacle rings held him in place, for so great were his exertions that without them he would have broken his own limbs as he thrashed and tensed in agony; and yet the warrior lay not awake, not aware, but in some dreamless non-state that was neither wakefulness nor coma. It was only the pain he felt, his cries muffled by a gag of leather across his cracked lips.

Beyond the voices of the Sanguinary Priests and the rattle of the chains, the stifled cries of the warrior were echoed far above, down through the spiral corridors of the minaret that rose up overhead. Screams and shouts that would chill the soul reached into the sepulchre, from the pitiful ones held fast in the cells they could never be allowed to leave.

This place was the Tower of the Lost, the Tower of Amareo. Here it was that the Blood Angels brought their afflicted kinsmen when the nightmare

gene-curses of the Black Rage and the Red Thirst became too much for them. The dark bequest of their long-dead Primarch Sanguinius, the Rage and the Thirst lurked in the hearts of every son of Baal – and only in battle, in the final service of the Death Company, could it be given purpose.

But there were some that ventured down the crimson path to such a degree that not even that honourable end would suffice. The tower was their prison, their asylum, their purgatory.

And now another comrade balanced on the verge of joining them.

Corbulo, the highest of the blood priesthood, watched his brethren orbit the body on the marble table, taking readings with auspex devices and supervising the work of the medicae servitors.

Sensing his scrutiny, Brother Salel, one of the Sanguinary Priests, detached from the group and approached him. 'Master.' He gave a shallow bow.

'Lord Dante wishes to know if there has been any change in his condition,' said Corbulo, without preamble.

The priest gave a grim nod. 'Aye, and not for the better. The…' He paused, searching for the right word. 'The *mixture* grows more potent with each passing hour. I confess it is beyond the best of us to retard the process, let alone reverse it.'

'There must be some way…' Corbulo fell silent as he saw the slow shake of Salel's head.

'What he carries within him is like the distillate of a supernova, my lord. It consumes him, burns him from the inside out.' The other man sighed. 'No mortal vessel was ever meant to contain such greatness. This was inevitable.'

'You will turn him over to me, then,' said a new voice, one heavy and resonant, thick with old pain.

Corbulo turned to see an Astartes stalk out of the shadows, a Blood Angel in the night-black robes of a Chaplain. About him he wore steel honour chains bound to a book of catechism, and at his belt hung an ebon rod ending in a winged, golden chalice – the Blood Crozius, instrument of office for the Guardian of the Lost and the Warden of the Death Company. Brother Lemartes stared out at Corbulo from beneath his hood, his drawn, sunken face reminiscent of the death's-head skull that adorned his wargear. Lemartes was one of the few men in the history of the Chapter who had fallen into the embrace of the genecurse and survived it – many said he still lived within the shroud of the Black Rage, but so great was his will that he resisted it day and night. As such, he was amply qualified to lead the Death Company into battle time and again. Salel took a step back, unwilling to stand too close to the Chaplain's fuliginous aura.

Brother Corbulo studied him for a moment, and felt a curious pang of sorrow for Lemartes. *What anguish it must be*, he thought, *to lead your tormented kinsmen into certain death, and each time remain the last man*

standing.

Lemartes held out his hand. ‘Give him to me. He will find a kind of peace in the cells above.’

Corbulo shook his head, snapping back to the matter. ‘No. *No*. Not yet, brother.’

‘Then why bring him to my tower at all?’ Lemartes retorted, showing his fangs. He pushed past the Sanguinary Priests to the marble table. ‘Look at him. Release him, Corbulo! It will be a kindness.’

‘It will be a waste!’ retorted the high priest. ‘You understand what he went through to bring the essence back to us? The battles fought and lives lost?’

Lemartes glared at him and spoke in a low whisper. ‘What I understand is that none of that would have been needed if not for the failures of the Sanguinary Priesthood!’ He leaned in. ‘Brother Caecus was one of yours. His hubris opened our home to the forces of *Chaos*!’ Lemartes spat the last word. ‘*You* are responsible for the Red Grail, Corbulo. *You* allowed our enemies to steal a measure of our Primarch’s holy blood.’ He jabbed a finger at the warrior in chains. ‘*You* brought this upon him!’

Corbulo said nothing. The hateful truth was, there was damning weight to the guardian’s words. The Blood Angel lying before him had been set on a quest to recover a vial of Sanguinius’s precious vitae, kept alive for ten thousand years – and he had done so, wresting it from the grip of the self-styled primogenitor of the eightfold path, the traitor Fabius Bile. But in doing so, the warrior had been forced to find the one safe place in which to protect the holy fluid: he had injected it into his own bloodstream.

And now it was killing him. The powerful essence was too much, even for the enhanced physiology of an Adeptus Astartes. The warrior had barely made it home to the fortress-monastery on Baal before he collapsed in the throes of a crippling fever. The astonishing potency was destroying the Astartes, consuming his own blood and transforming it into something of incredible, lethal power.

‘Rafen.’ Lemartes intoned the warrior’s name. ‘He is strong, but not strong enough. Soon the Rage and the Thirst will consume him, and he will not return. We must let this run its course.’

‘I believe he can survive!’ Corbulo insisted. ‘Each of us, every Blood Angel and successor is a Son of Sanguinius. Each of us carries the smallest measure of our primarch’s blood within us, gifted during our ascension to Astartes–’

‘The smallest measure,’ Lemartes repeated. ‘Aye! A mere drop, and that alone is enough to make a man into an angel of war! But Rafen has taken a dose a million times more potent! He cannot survive that.’

‘So we take it from him,’ said Corbulo, shooting a look at Salel. ‘We purge Rafen of what he fought so hard to recover.’

‘You… mean to employ the sarcophagus?’ said Salel, his expression stiffening. ‘Can such a thing be done?’

Lemartes shook his head. ‘It is foolish to even consider it. If Astorath were here, Rafen would already have found peace at the edge of his axe blade–’

‘But the High Chaplain is *not* here!’ Corbulo insisted. ‘His duties carry him far from Baal, and so the matter is left to us.’

Lemartes folded his arms over his chest. ‘What would Lord Dante say of this?’

‘He will endorse whatever path brings us back to equilibrium.’ Corbulo looked down at Rafen’s straining, tortured features, and tried to imagine the raging pain of the god-fire coursing through his veins. He could not let the warrior perish; Lemartes had cut him to the quick, and the guilt the priest felt was all too real. He had failed to protect the holy blood and allowed Fabius to steal it. He would not let the Chapter pay another cost by losing one more of their kinsmen to this matter. ‘Take Brother Rafen to the Hall of Sarcophagi,’ he commanded. ‘Find *The Touch of Sanguine Dawn*, and place him within it.’

With a frown, Lemartes stepped back from the side of the table and allowed the servitors to gather up the twitching body of the Blood Angel. ‘This will only draw out his suffering and make his death twice the agony. Where is your mercy, priest?’

Corbulo looked the Guardian of the Lost in the eye. ‘There will be no death today, Chaplain. I will not permit it.’

The great chamber was some strange melding of hospice and sculpture garden. Dotted with plinths of stone, each crested with a great orb-like carving of gold and brass, the Hall of Sarcophagi pulsed with a heartbeat like a living thing. Trains of thick cables and fluid-carrying conduits snaked from one orb to another, others gathering in bunches that vanished through gridded iron plates in the floor. Above, life-support nodes extended down from ornate silver racks, threading into openings atop each sphere.

The smell of blood and stone was here as well, but somehow not so coarse as it was in the tower. There, it was the smell of death; here, it signified new life, rebirth.

Many of the golden orbs were occupied, each minded by a sleepless menial constantly at work adjusting the flows of gene-active philtres and the operation of nourishment tubules. Corbulo studied the sarcophagus closest to him; he knew it well. It was *Angel’s White Sun*, one of the oldest in the Chapter’s inventory, forged in the years of the Great Crusade before the Heresy of Horus ten millennia ago. Like each of the orbs around it, *Angel’s White Sun* was a master-crafted piece of machinery, so advanced that even the Techmarines under the command of Brother Incarael could not fully fathom the intricacies of its workings. It was as much a work of art as it was a device

for remaking men. Inside each of the operable spheres lay a Blood Angel aspirant, their flesh drifting in a bath of amnio-fluids mingled with alterants and accelerants that worked at their genetic structure, rewriting their bodies cell by cell. These mechanisms, combined with the powerful implant technologies created for all Adeptus Astartes, could transform a normal human being into the majesty of a Blood Angel. The aspirants who entered the sarcophagi as men would one day emerge as warriors of Sanguinius – at least, those that did not die in the course of the changing.

Some Blood Angels, when not at their duties or called to battle, would come to the Hall of Sarcophagi and slumber inside the very orb where they had been quickened. Many, Corbulo among them, believed that such periodic returns to the womb of their rebirth, spent connected to the blood-sifts, could cleanse the soul and stave off the eventual encroachment of the Rage and the Thirst. The devices had the power to heal a man as well as to change him.

He hoped such a thing might save the life of Brother Rafen.

Corbulo walked the rows of the orbs until he found *The Touch of Sanguine Dawn*, a fine example of the most noble sarcophagus, tooled in white gold and platinum, plated in brass and polished glassaic. Like *Angel's White Sun*, it too dated back to the days before the Heresy, and it had been in service to the Chapter all that time, lovingly cared for by legions of helots and blood-servitors. Legend had it that *The Touch* was one of several sarcophagi carried into the battles of the Great Crusade itself, aboard the ships of the Blood Angel fleet.

Salel was supervising the menials; they had set Rafen inside and were almost complete in their preparations. Exsanguinator channels and vitae-guides had been bound into his flesh, blood pumps primed and ready to begin.

The senior Sanguinary Priest ran his hand down the open leaf of the sphere. Inside, the surface of the sarcophagus was etched with countless lines of tiny script in High Gothic, each one the name of a brother who had been quickened within it. He searched and found Rafen's name there, a way down the roll of honour.

'It is time,' said Salel.

Corbulo nodded and looked up. He found Rafen staring at him, in the first moment of lucidity he had seen from the Blood Angel in days. 'Brother-Sergeant…?'

Rafen's hand gripped his arm. 'I see…' he whispered. 'I see… *him*.'

'And he will guide you,' said the priest, signalling to Salel to seal the sarcophagus. 'To life… Or elsewhere.'

Rafen's eyes glazed over and his hand dropped as the orb folded shut like a closing flower. Corbulo heard the throb of fluids filling the interior, the crackle of metal as pressure within changed sharply.

Salel turned away. 'What now?'

The Touch of Sanguine Dawn shimmered like a jewel. ‘We wait,’ said Corbulo, ‘and let the bloodline do its work.’

They left the chamber, neither of the priests once thinking to glance up at the gallery above; the thought to do such a thing was plucked from their heads and discarded. Unseen by them or any other, a single figure stood up there, half-shrouded in shadow, watching. His preternatural aura made him a ghost, and that was just as he wished it.

Mephiston, Lord of Death, Librarian and master psyker of the Blood Angels Chapter, leaned forward on the balcony and peered *into* Rafen’s sarcophagus, listening to the turmoil of the mind within.

He saw fire and pain and the colours of raw agony. The psyker’s hands tensed into claws around the stone balustrade of the gallery, knuckles whitening. Rafen’s psychic trace danced there before him like a stark flame in a hurricane, always on the verge of being snuffed out, fighting back with every spark of energy. Mephiston pushed his mind deeper into the maze of sensation, feeling for Rafen’s conscious thoughts.

Rafen was captured in the throes of a terrible fever-dream, a maddening flood of pain that manifested as baking heat and cloying dust. Mephiston could sense the warrior’s self, reaching the echo of it. He saw a measure of what Rafen saw; an unreal, nightmarish landscape of horror and destruction. He saw a battlefield piled high with eviscerated corpses, awash in lakes of freshly spilled blood.

The Flaw. It could only be the power of the gene-curse, he realised. The darkness within every Blood Angel given terrible freedom by the power of the primarch’s blood. The force of it staggered the psyker, and memories of his own boiled to the surface, threatening to pollute the clarity of his telepathic connection – memories of Hades Hive and his own journey toward the madness of the Rage.

Grimly, Mephiston detached the invisible feelers of his psychic power from the turbulent mind of the younger warrior. He could do nothing to help him now.

As he severed the last link, the Librarian took with him one final image from Rafen’s churning psyche – that of an aloof, winged figure clad in a magnificent sheath of golden armour, observing from a distance. *Judging him*.

‘Take cover!’

Brother-Sergeant Cassiel heard the cry ring out across the landing bay of the starship Hermia, and threw himself into the lee of a support stanchion just as the crimson-hulled Stormbird fell through the atmosphere shield and collided with the deck. The steel beneath his boots resonated with the impact. He flinched as a howling, rising shriek filled the bay: the Stormbird’s forward

undercarriage had collapsed and it was riding on a pillar of fat yellow sparks, cutting a gouge through the decking. The proud winged teardrop of blood on the prow was scarred and wreathed in metal-smoke.

The craft slowed and finally halted, moments later to be swarmed by dozens of legion serfs bearing tanks of fire retardants. Cassiel swore a Baalite curse under his breath and approached the wounded craft. Beyond it, he could see the main hatch sliding shut like a gigantic iris; a sliver of green planet vanished out of sight. That would be the last he would see of the world called Nartaba Octus, the last any man would see of it as it was. The final few drop-ships were being taken aboard as the Hermia climbed up to a high combat orbit. From there, the ships of Task Force Ignis and the Blood Angels aboard them would conclude their work. The orders were clear, ratified by Sanguinius himself and struck with the signet of the Warmaster Horus Lupercal.

All human survivors from the scientific colony on Octus had been recovered; the xenos infesting the planet – a horde of dark eldar that had defied full extermination on the ground – would be shown the displeasure of Terra with a space-to-surface barrage from the flotilla's laser batteries.

The alien reavers had fought hard, and with great tenacity. Cassiel had faced their kind elsewhere during the Great Crusade and punished them, but it seemed the xenos did not learn the Emperor's lesson. When they were done here, Nartaba Octus would forever bear the scars of this conflict as a warning to those who defied the Master of Mankind and his Sons.

But for the moment, more immediate matters held his attention. Reaching the Stormbird's hatch, he levered it open and extended his hand to help a brother exit the smoke-filled craft. He knew his face. 'Sarga? Are you injured?' he asked.

The warrior shook his head. 'No, Cassiel. But we have a casualty… Then the reaver scum damaged the ship with a drone… We barely made it back in one piece.'

Cassiel beckoned a medicae servitor to bring a grav-litter closer as a second Astartes emerged from the ship, carrying another over his shoulder. The wounded Blood Angel wore the white and red armour of an Apothecary, but the ceramite was marred with splashes of dark arterial crimson, still wet from the spilling.

Cassiel saw the source of the wound and almost recoiled in disgust. Through a rent at the waist of the warrior's power armour a length of something that resembled crystal, or perhaps ice, protruded from his body. Gruesome, sickly light glittered within the fragment, casting baleful colour across the Apothecary's pale face.

'He was tending to a civilian,' Sarga explained, his voice flat with anger. 'One of the sallow-eyed bastards shot him in the back. I killed it, but Meros

had already fallen...'

Cassiel leaned closer. 'Meros? Brother Meros, do you hear me?'

The Blood Angel's eyes fluttered and he muttered something incoherent.

'He fought through a raider squad alone,' Sarga was saying. 'Must have thought he'd dealt with them all.'

'He's not dead yet,' Cassiel insisted, although Meros's corpse-like pallor put the question to those words. The sergeant placed him on the litter and moved with it, out toward the infirmary elsewhere on the same deck. His eyes were drawn to the glassy splinter in the Apothecary's side once more. Cassiel knew it for what it was: a soul-seeker.

The dart was the war-shot from an Eldar splinter gun, the venomous shard poisoned by conventional means, but doubly so by some monstrous form of psionic impregnation. So it was said, the toxin it exuded would not only destroy flesh, but also disintegrate a man's very soul.

Cassiel, like every servant of the Emperor's secular Imperium, paid little heed to such superstitious notions as spiritual ephemera, but he had seen the work of a soul-seeker before, seen it dissemble an Astartes from within… and part of him had been left wondering if the weapon had first killed the man's essence before it murdered his flesh.

Sarga was at his side, his expression bleak. 'He will die,' he said.

Cassiel shook his head. 'No. There's still time to ensure his survival. We will purge this from him.'

'How do you propose to do that?' Sarga demanded. 'Any attempt to dig out the round will shatter it–'

'There may be another way,' said the sergeant.

It seemed strange to see them inside the steel walls of the Hermia*'s hull, in the compartment below the starship's infirmary. The very sight of the great golden sculptures lying here, set upon the deck plates, was somehow wrong, as if the contents of a familiar room had been upset and rearranged.*

The lines on Sarga's worn, leathery face deepened. 'The sarcophagus…'

Cassiel directed a serf to guide the grav-litter to the closest capsule. 'Aboard ship on the orders of Master Raldoron himself,' he said. 'Several have been distributed among the flotillas, to serve as critical care centres for the fatally injured.'

Sarga shot him a look. 'A wound that is fatal to an Astartes is a wound that cannot be survived by any man.'

'We will see.' Cassiel had the serfs place Meros inside the closest of the orbs.

'I cannot let this pass without comment,' Sarga went on. 'The shard in his side… It is tainted with alien sorcery! What if that taint contaminates the sarcophagus? There is no way to know what effect the psionic spoil may

have–’

Cassiel silenced him with a glare. ‘Sorcery*? It is only a strain of poison, virulent indeed, but no more than that. It is not magick. And it will be purged.’ He signalled to the helots to close the petals of the orb. ‘The dark eldar took the lives of our brothers down on that blighted world. They will not take this one after the fact, and I will argue the will of my order with the Warmaster himself, should he see fit to challenge it!’*

Rafen was buried in sand. The particles were made of ground bone and flecks of metal, glittering redly in the punishing light of a bloated, hellish sun. With slow, deliberate motions, he dragged himself out of the clinging mass, the powder sluicing from him, pooling in the crevices of his wargear.

He found a bolt pistol and a sword nearby, both rusted and decrepit. He wondered if the gun would survive a pull of the trigger. The blade was a pitted, cracked thing.

The Blood Angel lurched forward, shaking off the last of the dust, and he stumbled; the power armour was sluggish, and he felt the full weight of the ceramite and steel across his shoulders. Heat in shimmering waves rose up all about him, and pinpricks of sweat blossomed on his brow.

Rafen grimaced; every movement seemed like a colossal effort. He felt uncharacteristically weak, as if his vitality was draining away. The Blood Angel set his jaw and drew himself up.

He began to walk across the desert battlefield, across the lines of the dunes against the harsh winds that bore gusts of stinging sand. He placed one foot in front of another, moving like an automaton. The masses of corpses and litter of blood he left behind, wandering into the dust and heat, searching. When he ventured to look back, there was nothing behind him but sand and more sand.

Through blurred vision, he glimpsed flashes of stark light off gold armour; or was that some kind of mirage?

No. The figure was still there, remaining beyond his reach, taunting him with its silence. Daring him to come closer.

Rafen looked away, trying to take stock of his circumstances. He had no recollection of arriving in this blighted, lifeless place, no concept of where he was or what purpose had brought him here. He came to a halt, for a moment losing sight of the golden figure as curtains of red dust whirled around him. He dug deep, pushing into his own thoughts, trying to dredge up the truth.

What is the last thing I can remember? He worked at the question, his sweat-filmed brow furrowing.

He remembered the journey back from the Dynikas system aboard the starship *Tycho*, the days passing in the wilderness of warp space. He remembered the battle on the planet before that, the dispatch of the enemy and the recovery…

He remembered the vial and the blood. Rafen's hand instinctively reached up and traced the place on his breast where he had stabbed the injector needle home.

He remembered–

–the vial, the holy blood from the Red Grail itself, unfiltered and potent, kept alive for millennia by generations of clerics, coursing through his veins–

–gold and fire, lightning and sun; like nothing he had ever experienced before–

–fear that he would be destroyed by the brilliance–

–what a perfect death–

Rafen gasped and shuddered. The blood of Sanguinius coursed through him, the psychic power within it churning like nuclear flame. It had been too much for his body to contain; it *was* too much for him. He was like the ancient Terran legend of Ikarus, voyaging too close to the sun, burning and burning.

'Is… is this place death?' he shouted, his words ripped from him by the howling winds. 'Am I to be… punished for my… hubris?' Rafen found it hard to breathe.

And in answer to his question, the sand became monsters.

The red dust coalesced into things that bore the shape and colour of Space Marines, but they were hazy, nebulous forms that could not hold fine detail for more than a moment. Still, they were coherent enough that Rafen saw them for what they were supposed to be.

They were Blood Angels, after a fashion, but no stripe of that noble Chapter that had ever walked beneath the Imperium's light. These twisted phantoms were part parody, part monstrosity, hulking and lumbering things that mimicked the majesty of the Sons of Sanguinius through the lens of horror. Inverted, screaming aquilas decorated their armour, blood oozed from joints, and laughing, fanged masks showed eyes of glowing red. Books of blank verse and babbling skulls dangled from the ends of barbed honour chains. The ghost-Astartes were abstracts, sketches made of sand by an insane artist.

They attacked him, laughing in shrill voices.

Rafen fired the old bolter and it croaked, spitting out shells in puffs of flaking rust; but while the tumbling rounds found their mark, they did no damage. The point of each hit became a concave spattering of powder and the phantoms lost solidity, the crumbling mass-reactive bullets passing straight through without detonation.

Snarling, dizzy with pain and the leeching heat, the Blood Angel went to the broken-tipped sword and met the charge of the ghost-Astartes, swinging high-low for a lethal cut that would have opened any foe to the air. The sword

bit, he felt it, but the sand-forms gave along the line of the rusted blade and let it fall harmlessly through them. Rafen might as well have been using a rapier made of smoke.

But, to his dismay, the return of blows was by no means equal. The phantoms shifted their mass, compacting the sands almost to the density of rock, a split-second before landing a swinging punch on Rafen's jaw. As he was knocked back, a second and then a third granite-hard impact landed on his chest and sternum.

He fell back against the rise of the red dunes, light-headed, as they came at him again; and now the phantoms had no helmets to hide their faces. This time, he saw a twisted mirror of his own features snarling back at him, the image shivering and flickering like a poorly-tuned vid-pict.

Rafen threw himself forward and into the mass of one of the ghost-Astartes. It exploded apart in a torrent of grit before he could close his hands around its throat. The sand ripped at the bare skin of his face and neck, clogging his nostrils and mouth, trying to suffocate him. He flailed around, like a man fighting off a swarm of hornets.

Then he heard gunfire, the hard snapping crashes of a bolter, heard the sizzle of shots passing close to him. The dust ebbed away, retreating in a tide, re-forming, as a new figure crested the closest dune and came scrambling down the rise.

Rafen saw another Blood Angel – solid and well defined, caught in the haze of heat but certainly not one of his phantoms.

The new arrival let his weapon swing away on its tether and unlimbered a break-tooth chainaxe. The axe sputtered and choked, but the teeth still spun, and with quick motions he carved into the ghost-Astartes. Where Rafen's blade had passed through them like air, the other warrior's weapon hit firmly and shrieked through the mass of clogged dust and sand.

In moments, the grotesques were dissipating on the constant wind, discorporating until at last there was nothing left of them.

Rafen nodded warily to the other man. 'My… thanks, brother.' He saw more clearly now: the other Blood Angel wore the white and the crimson of an Apothecary, although the company colours and unit symbology were strange – not wrong, but somehow unfamiliar. The warrior's wargear was of an elderly design, the old Mark IV Maximus pattern that few Chapters still deployed. He met the Apothecary's gaze and saw that the other man was measuring him with a similarly questioning stare.

'Are you injured?' he asked, holstering the chainaxe. He walked with a limp, Rafen noted, favouring his side, and for the first time he noted the scarring of a deep wound in the Apothecary's belly. The warrior hid his pain well, though; he had a strong face and eyes that seemed too young for it.

'No…' Rafen began. 'Yes. Perhaps.' He shook his head, and the world

swam around him. ‘The heat…’

‘Aye, the heat,’ agreed the Apothecary, and that was answer enough. He looked around, eyeing the shifting sands suspiciously. ‘Those… things. What were they?’

‘I don’t know,’ Rafen admitted. ‘My weapons were useless against them.’

‘Fortunate that mine were not, then,’ came the reply. The other man managed a wan smile. ‘I’m cheered to find you, brother. When I awoke in this place, for a while I feared I had gone mad.’

‘We may yet, both of us,’ said Rafen grimly. ‘Tell me, how did you come to be here?’

‘I…’ The Apothecary’s face froze as cold understanding gripped him. ‘I… Do not know.’

‘What is the last thing you can recall?’

‘The battle…’ He spoke in hushed, tense tones. ‘The xenos.’ His hand slipped to the wound on his gut. ‘They gave me this…The rest is darkness.’

Before Rafen could speak again, the other warrior caught sight of something over his shoulder and pointed. Even as he turned to see it, Rafen knew it would be the figure in the gold, watching them.

It stood sentinel, seemingly closer without having moved, briefly more defined in the gaps between the veils of dust that flashed past. Gold armour, an unmoving mask, furled silver wings. Watching.

‘Do you see him?’ Rafen asked.

‘Aye. What is it?’ The Apothecary’s words were hushed.

The sands howled and clawed at their faces, forcing them to look away; when the torrent of dust abated, the figure was gone.

Far beyond where it had stood, in the distance a shape rose out of the shimmer. A pinnacle mountain, impossibly tall and wind-carved from stone as red as spilled blood.

‘An omen,’ said Rafen. ‘An objective.’

They walked on together, side by side through the howling cascade of the sandstorm, the distant tower of stone their only guiding marker in the featureless desert. Whatever the nature of this place, Meros’s pragmatism did not waver in the face of it. The mountain was the only landmark in sight, so they would go to it. There was a certainty in that, a logic that the Apothecary could only feel as *right*. But quite how he could know that was something Brother Meros would not have been able to articulate.

It was strange: everything about him seemed unreal, detached from truth – and yet Meros felt the sure slip of the baking sands under each footfall, he felt his occulobe tighten to tune his eyes against the hard radiation of the great red sun overhead, he felt the relentless heat upon his face. These things seemed very real.

If only I still dreamed, Meros thought. *Then perhaps I would know if this was true or some trick of the mind.* But Space Marines did not dream, because they did not slumber – not in any manner that common men would understand. The catalepsean nodes implanted in his brain allowed Meros and his kindred to sleep without sleep, ever waking and watchful even as their minds rested. And so, he had no mark against which to measure his current circumstance.

He glanced at the Blood Angel trudging alongside him. *An omen*, he had said. The words seemed peculiar coming from the mouth of an Astartes, resonant of old idolatry and superstition. And other things were subtly amiss: the other warrior's wargear was ornate and oddly proportioned, chased with much detailing, and tapers of parchment dense with lines of text that Meros could not read. All this, and his face was unknown to the Apothecary.

That in itself was not unusual – the IX Legiones Astartes numbered over one hundred thousand men under arms in service to Great Sanguinius, and Meros could not know every single one of them – but there was something about the dark-haired warrior that rang a wrong note in his mind. It was as if he did not *fit*.

Then again, Meros was just as displaced, stranded in this trackless no-man's-land with no understanding of how he had come to be here. His hand slipped to the place where he had been wounded. The memory of the shard burying itself in his gut was still fresh and he flinched as he recalled it. A sickening throb rang through him and he swallowed a gulp of dry air.

Meros glanced at the other warrior once more, trying to put the echo of the pain aside. 'I… never asked you your name,' he said.

'I am Rafen,' came the reply. 'Of the Fifth Company, under Brother-Captain Sendini.'

'Wh-who?' Meros forced the word out, his legs turning to lead, stumbling to a halt. The name meant nothing to him. And the commander of the fifth… He was…

'Are you all right, brother?' said Rafen, watching him warily.

Meros began to shiver, his skin crawling beneath his armour. 'I… I…' A painful, prickling sensation washed up his arms, burning his skin like the touch of acid. With a trembling hand, the Apothecary pulled at his gauntlet and vambrace, disengaging the armour locks, letting them fall to the sand.

His bare arm was a livid red, veins bulging, flesh twitching. Unable to stop himself, Meros clawed at the exposed flesh and ribbons of epidermis came free, fluttering into the wind. He cried out even as the diseased tissue fell, scattering across the sands. Impossibly, the more he scratched away, the more there was.

The decayed skin-threads danced in the air, and then to his horror, they began to *unfold*. Clever puzzles of discarded flesh split and divided, weaving

into thread-thin lines that knit back into obscene forms; spindly humanoid outlines with elongated limbs and narrow, elfin skulls.

‘The reavers!’ Meros shouted. ‘This is… their poison!’

The meshed threads of skin flitted and danced, and then turned back on the Apothecary, lashing out at him like a torrent of barbed whips.

Rafen recoiled at what he saw, his hand snatching up the rusted bolt pistol from his belt, falling back to gain a span of distance from the motions of the strange flesh-forms. He knew the shape and the dance of them – somehow, these apparitions were dark eldar in origin, flashes of their cruel xenos hate appearing and disappearing in the ghosts of their faces. They looked like animated streamers of cloth, perhaps bandages or garlands, coiling and turning to give the impression of a body beneath when in fact there was nothing there.

Whatever animated these forms, it was abhorrent to the Blood Angel. His erstwhile comrade was right on that matter, at the very least – even through the heavy dust of the air, Rafen could taste the sour tang of poison billowing about the lithe monsters. They were toxic horrors, spinning in a grotesque ballet.

The eldar-things rained down blows on the apothecary, lightning-fast and unrelenting. He tried to fight back with the rust-clogged chainaxe, but each sweep of the buzzing blade-head met only air as the threads parted to let it pass.

Rafen forgot the bolt pistol and drew the broken sword. He did not know the origin of the other warrior, but he could not simply stand by and do nothing.

‘Away, daemon!’ he shouted, wading into the whirling cyclone of whipping threads. ‘Begone from here, or face your end!’

The rusted sword rose and fell, and in each place where the chainaxe’s blunt edge had failed to score a hit, Rafen’s blows cut the skin-matter into shreds. He fancied he heard screaming on the wind, coming from some far distant place.

Angry and vicious in their retreat, the tears of discarded flesh fluttered high into the air, coiling upon one another as if caught in the funnel of a whirlwind, and then vanishing into the unceasing murmur of the sandstorm.

The Apothecary was down on one knee, panting. His face was a maze of shallow scratches, and his bare arm a bloody ruin. He looked up. ‘Rafen,’ he rasped. ‘Thank you, brother.’

‘Brother?’ Now the moment of the attack had passed as swiftly as it had begun, Rafen’s confusion turned to ready distrust. He aimed the damaged tip of the sword at the other warrior’s face. ‘Are you really such a thing, or do you only pretend at it?’ He took a step closer, bearing his teeth. ‘Did you

bring me here?' he demanded. 'I have fought warpspawn before, and won! I will do so again!'

'I do not… understand…' said the white-armoured Blood Angel, holding up his hands. 'You raise a blade to me? Why?'

'What breed of daemon tainted you?' Rafen snapped. 'Answer me!'

The Apothecary shook his head. 'These things you say, you speak in riddles!' He staggered to his feet, glaring at Rafen, his strength returning. 'You accuse me of complicity…' He shook his head. 'Those… those *creatures*… I have never seen the like. They are the avatars of the poison…' The warrior broke off, becoming pale. 'Primarch… It still runs in me.'

Rafen's broken blade was suddenly at his neck. 'Then perhaps I should end you.'

'You would do such a thing?' An expression of utter disgust crossed the other man's face. 'An Astartes, killing an Astartes? Brother against a brother?' He shook his head. 'Perhaps it is *you* that is tainted and false!' The Apothecary drew the chainaxe, his voice rising. 'When I came to your aid against the ghosts in the sand, I did not question your honour! Those phantoms had *your face*, Rafen! But I did not kill you because of it!'

For a long moment, Rafen wavered on the cusp of drawing back the weapon to strike, but then he relaxed his stance and stepped away.

'I do not know what you are,' he said. Rafen turned his back and walked on.

Meros followed him; there was little else he could do.

Once, in the time before he had been raised up to join the Blood Angels, when he had still been a child, still human, Meros had heard a mad old seer speak of darker powers and places beyond the understanding of men. The recall of that moment was so far distant that it was barely even a memory anymore. His past life had been smoothed away by the monumental changes that had made him one of the Emperor's finest warriors, so now all that remained were impressions.

But clear enough to return to him now, enough to remember the fear in the old seer's eyes. *The warp is the sea of souls,* he had said. *In it, all things can be made and unmade. Everything is mutable, blood and time like sand…*

Like sand…

Meros walked behind Rafen, following him up the lee of a steep dune, the constant buzzing dust plucking at him, ripping what moisture there was from his lips and nostrils. Even the nictating membranes over his eyes were gummed with deposits of blown sand, forcing him to blink and brush at his face. His hand came away red with the powdery deposits. Meros lumbered after the other Blood Angel, the only other sound the labouring of the myoma muscle-quads in their power armour.

He reached the top of the ridge and found Rafen standing still. Meros halted and followed the other warrior's gaze, up and up.

They stood at the foot of the pinnacle mountain, the spire of red rock reaching away into the clouds of dust–

But it was not a mountain. It had never been one. From a distance, the eye had been tricked to believe that was so, the scraps of the shape and image parsed to form what one expected to see.

Laying his gaze upon it all, however, was a revelation.

Rafen and Meros stood at the foot of a great statue, a carving taller than the highest Titan, the base buried in the red sand, the top visible against the shadow of the crimson sun.

'My liege,' breathed Rafen, sinking to one knee. Meros did the same, but unlike the other warrior, he did not turn his face away.

Meros looked up. He saw how the rocky crags formed the shape of voluminous robes that ended in a hood, and the carved planes of an infinitely noble face framed there. The patrician, shining majesty of Sanguinius's aspect looked down on them in judgement, his hands clasped before him, his mighty wings gathered in around his shoulders like a cloak.

'How can this be here?' he breathed.

'Where is *here*?' Rafen replied. 'I fear this is the answer. This place is death.'

Then Meros saw a glitter of gold and raised his arm to point at it. 'Who is that?'

Rafen raised his head and saw the warrior in golden armour. He stood upon a ridge along the lower part of the massive statue-mountain, a carved line representing a fold in the robes of the primarch. For the first time, the Blood Angel saw him clearly.

About a beatific face-mask, a broad iron halo described a perfect circle. Intricately tooled armour in gold and brass gave the figure a muscular silhouette that mimicked the finery of a Chapter Master's ornate ceremonial wargear, but where Lord Dante would wear upon his back the engine of a powerful jetpack, this figure grew wings of shining white steel, glittering with the ruddy light of the swollen sun overhead. Great trains of oath-papers hung from his hips, fluttering on the breeze.

'No,' muttered Rafen. He saw it clearly and yet did not wish to believe it. 'You are a myth,' he whispered. 'An *illusion*.'

'Who would pretend at the glory of our primarch?' Rafen heard the Apothecary say the words, disbelief equal in his tone. 'No one has the right to wear the gold…'

'*Sanguinor*.' The word slipped from his mouth. Rafen had heard the tales of the golden guardian many times, the reports of battles so ancient, so far

removed from his experiences that they seemed more like fables, like the folklore of the nomadic Tribes of the Blood on Baal Secundus. He had heard these things, and yet he had never truly *believed* in them.

The galaxy contained many strange sights, many unknowable truths, and Rafen had lived his life in the face of them without credulity. It was how he had been trained by his late mentor, Koris. To see clearly, to challenge everything. The story of the Sanguinor had remained just that – a story. A tale told by the oldest of the veterans in the lulls between battle, a legend meant to steady the will. A metaphor for honour and courage.

And yet it stood before them now. The stories told of this avatar of all that was good and noble in the character of his Chapter, an undying force of pure will that would give its blessing to warriors fighting against the most hopeless of odds. The golden angel of vengeance who would descend from the skies in the moment of greatest need. The eternal and unending warrior.

Rafen had never truly believed, for he had fought at the speartip of wars that shook the pillars of his Chapter's history, and never seen the face of this legend; and to see it now, in this place, brought a sudden fury to the Blood Angel. He stepped forward, filling his lungs to shout. 'What do you want?' he bellowed, his voice rising over the constant winds to echo off the mountainside. 'Is this your judgement? Show your face! I will tolerate these illusions no more! Reveal yourself!' He raised the bolter and took aim. 'Or must I shed your blood to find the truth?'

Meros saw Rafen draw the pistol and he felt the rush of adrenaline flood through him. The figure in gold could only be one thing, one being – for the strictures of the IX Legiones Astartes forbade any but the primarch himself and his personal guard from donning such armour. It could only be the Lord of the Blood, the Great Angel himself; and here before Meros the warrior Rafen was bringing a weapon to bear upon him.

The Apothecary shot forward and grabbed Rafen's arm, pulling it up and away. 'What are you doing?' he snapped. 'Are you insane? You dare draw a firearm in the presence of your primarch?'

'Primarch?' Rafen turned on him, knocking him back with a savage shove. 'Whatever you see up there, it is not Sanguinius, the Emperor's Light find him! It is an echo at best, a shadow of his glory released upon the moment of his death!'

Rafen's words fell like a rain of stones, the force behind them, the certainty, striking Meros with the power of a physical blow. '*What did you say*?' he whispered. In the next second he was at Rafen's throat, shaking him, glaring into his eyes. 'He is not dead! The Primarch *is not dead*, how dare you speak such lies? I saw him stride the battleground at Melchior with my own eyes. I heard his voice call me to arms!' Meros was livid with anger and confusion,

unable to comprehend what would possess the other Blood Angel to voice such folly.

Rafen struggled against him. ‘Then either the Rage has taken you, or you are a liar and a fool! My primarch lies dead, ten thousand years and gone–’

‘*Falsehood*!’ Meros’s towering anger slipped its leash and he struck out at the unspeakable lie as it fell from Rafen’s mouth. His blow hit home, knocking the rusted bolt pistol from the other warrior’s grip. The weapon tumbled away down the incline of the dune and vanished into the sandstorm.

Despite the clinging, parching heat, a sudden chill washed over Meros as he found a moment of new understanding. ‘You…’ He pointed a finger at Rafen’s face. ‘You do not exist. You never did! You are the poison, eating at my brain! You are the soul-seeker’s venom!’ It made a horrific kind of sense; Meros knew full well from his decades in service to the Legion’s medicae corps that the dark eldar were masters of toxins, their cruelty extending to the deliberate, mind-killing methods of their tainted weapons. All this, everything around him – Rafen, the sand-phantoms and the flesh-ghosts, the mountain and the desert and the golden figure – all of it was a hallucination.

He was not here. He was somewhere else, perhaps still on Nartaba Octus, bleeding out his last while his mind lay trapped in a prison of dreams.

But Meros would not meet his end without a fight.

With a roar, the Apothecary came thundering back at him, the decrepit bolter across his back tossed away, the sputtering chainaxe in his grip. Rafen saw the look in the other warrior’s eye and knew the colour of frenzy when he saw it. He met the spinning, broken teeth of the weapon with the cracked edge of the sword. Each of the ruined blades ground against one another, spitting thick sparks, metal howling and crackling as it burned.

They were a match, these two. Blade met blade again and again, each time blunting on the defence of the other, each time scoring no better than nicks and cuts, never to the bone, never deep enough to cripple.

In the endless storm, under the unmoving red sun, they fought for hours, shifting back and forth, gaining and losing ground, their lethal dance without conclusion. Attack and riposte; feint and strike; block and advance. Each form in their battle schema met opposition and reflected back upon the aggressor.

Thick, chemical sweat sluiced from their bio-altered glands, mingling with clotted blood. The howling wind was the chorus to the grunts of their effort, the thud and clang of sword and chainaxe meeting, parting, meeting again. The heat and the pain dragged on both of them, dulling their strength.

‘Why…’ The Apothecary spoke through cracked lips as their weapons locked for the hundredth time. ‘Why will you not leave me? You will not have my death…’

‘Your words,’ Rafen gasped, ‘my thoughts, false one…’

‘You cannot reach me!’ he shouted back. ‘Your words mean nothing! You are the falsehood, *you* are the darkness in my blood! I am Meros, Blood Angel, Son of Sanguinius, and I deny you!’

‘Meros?’ The name cut like a knife across Rafen’s heart.

The break-tip sword dropped from its raised position, and suddenly the warrior’s guard was open, but the Apothecary did not strike. He held the chainaxe high, wary of this new tactic.

‘What perfidy is this?’ Rafen asked, weary and wrathful in equal measure. ‘Is that name plucked from my thoughts? Does my mind turn against me now?’ He turned and shouted toward the golden figure, who had not wavered from his place of observation. The warrior beat his fist against his chest. ‘I know Meros!’ he bellowed. ‘I know him here!’

Rafen pressed the hilt of the broken sword to his sternum, to the very spot where his vital progenoid gland lay deep within the flesh of his torso. The progenoid, a complex knot of genetic material, was the legacy of countless cohorts of Blood Angels, removed at the point of death and implanted anew in the bodies of the next generation. They were the most precious of the Chapter’s bequests, the living sources of the gene-memory passed on from brother to brother, assuring that the Sons of Sanguinius would live on forever.

The progenoid implanted in Rafen’s flesh was such a thing, and he honoured the stewardship of it – just as the warriors who had borne it before him had honoured it until their deaths. Rafen knew the names of every one of them, every Blood Angel down through the passage of ten thousand years and more.

Meros was one of those names. An Apothecary, a warrior of note and record who had fought during the darkest chapter of mankind’s history; the civil war known as the Horus Heresy.

He shook his head. ‘It… is not possible!’ In this place of delusion and dark nightmare, it could not be real. Rafen struggled to understand. The burning blood that even now coursed through him – was this the way it would destroy him, twisting his mind, unravelling everything about him, clawing at the threads of his history?

He turned back toward Meros, his voice rising. ‘You cannot be here…’

The other Blood Angel did not pay him any heed, for his daemons – and Rafen’s – had emerged from the storms to assault them both once more.

They came, and they brought the night with them.

It was as if the crimson sun had never shone upon the red desert; now there was only a sky ink-black and scarred with stars that burned cold, the watcher upon the towering sculpture rendered in shadow and cool, aloof shades of silver.

Meros’s poison attacked, the thread-things weaving about him, ripping into

his skin. His armour… his armour was suddenly gone, and now all he fought in were his duty robes, stained with blood and patches of dark sweat. The heat of the day was gone, replaced by a bone-deep cold that sucked the energy from him.

Meros battled with the chainaxe, his questions to Rafen forgotten for the moment. Each hit missed, each blow went wide; his wraiths, however, scored every strike with perfect accuracy.

The sands were trying to murder him.

Rafen brought up his hands to cover his face as a hurricane exploded out of the dust. Darkness and cold flooded in, as if he had been thrown into an icy lake. Distantly he registered that the dragging weight of his wargear had somehow ceased to pull upon him. All he felt was the scratching agony of the whirling flecks of grit ripping through the robes surrounding him, scoring his flesh.

He did not dwell on the changes that unfolded. In this unreal place, all Rafen could do was to cling to what he knew to be true, and draw that close.

The broken sword in his hand turned and rattled through the air, and did nothing. The sandstorm ejected him with a sound like laughter and breaking stones, mocking him as he stumbled.

The wraiths danced away as they toyed with the Apothecary. Meros lurched from his knees and found Rafen beside him. The Blood Angel extended a hand to him and pulled him up. He met the other man's gaze.

'Will you kill me, then?' he asked. 'Or let them do the deed?'

'I understand now,' Rafen replied, nodding toward the silent watcher in gold. 'Do you not see, Meros? We are here and our daemons are here. Alone, they will kill us.'

Over Rafen's shoulder, the sands twisted into the form of a monstrous armoured Astartes, feral and abhorrent. It came on, clawed hands raised in attack. Behind Meros, the threads of skin reformed into something resembling a dark eldar Incubi, hollow-eyed and leering. Both shapes were becoming solid, real. *Lethal*.

'What is the bloodline?' Rafen asked suddenly. The words had a ritual, rote quality to them.

'The eternal bond of brotherhood,' Meros said, the reply coming to him from nowhere. 'The will to survive beyond death.'

Rafen weighed the old, rusted blade in his hand. 'This is my will, kinsman,' he told him, and gestured to the axe in Meros's grip. 'And that is yours. Do you see?'

A smile formed on Meros's lips. 'I do.'

'To the fight, then,' said the other Blood Angel, 'if it may be the last.' He

rocked off his feet, leading with the broken sword, throwing himself not at his twisted doppelganger, but at the avatar of Meros's pain and anguish.

Meros moved at the same moment, the understanding coming to him. He swung the chainaxe at the phantom that screamed with Rafen's face, turning the blade toward the neck.

Sword and axe found their marks as one, each killing the nemesis of the other; and in silence, the tainted dreams that tormented the Blood Angels were swiftly ended. The ghostly apparitions dissolved into nothing, captured on the winds and blown to the horizon.

'It is done,' said Meros, turning to face Rafen. 'We are freed. *Brother*.' He extended a hand to the warrior and Rafen reached for it–

–and time seemed to become fluid, slow and heavy.

The darkness was closing in, and all around the landscape began to ripple and fade as the certainty that underpinned the unreal place came apart. With no threat to make it whole and give it purpose, the desert was crumbling. The statue-mountain became smoke, dissipating on the never-ending winds.

A great, sudden fear reached into Rafen's chest and clutched tight around his hearts with claws of ice. Meros saw the look in his eyes and his expression begged the question.

'Rafen? What is wrong?'

So much, kinsman. Rafen tried to give voice to the words, but he could not move. He was frozen there, his flesh ignoring every command he gave it. *So much is wrong.* If the Apothecary truly was Meros of the Blood Angels, if he truly was the Astartes who lay as no more than bone and ashes in the halls of the dead on Baal, then in some way Rafen could not fathom, the man lived in another time, another place.

A place before the death of Sanguinius. *Oh, what glory to live in that moment. And what horror yet to come.*

With all his might, with every last moment of his strength, Rafen fought to utter a warning. From his mouth came a single, strangled word. A curse.

'*Horus–*'

Gold shimmered in the darkness. The figure in armour was there, and Meros did not seem to see him. With infinite slowness, a gauntlet of brass and shining amber raised to place a hand over the silent lips of an unmoving mask. The message was without ambiguity, the command unmistakable.

Silence.

Unaware, Meros held out a hand to touch the other warrior's shoulder. 'Rafen? We are victorious… What troubles you?'

But then the moment faded, and the sands became as blood, drowning them both.

The *Touch of Sanguine Dawn* opened and cast crimson liquid across the flagstones of the Hall of Sarcophagi in a steaming tide.

Wet with fluids, Rafen stumbled from the interior of the golden orb and fell to one knee. He coughed and tore the breather tubes from his nostrils, taking ragged gulps of air. 'I… I am alive…'

'Indeed.' The dark voice drew his gaze up. He found himself looking into burning eyes that dared him to break away. The power of Lord Mephiston's will was almost impossible to resist.

Finally, he released Rafen and the warrior looked down at the tracks along his arms where numerous vitae guides had been implanted. 'The… blood…'

'Gone,' Mephiston told him. 'The measure of the Primarch's sacred vitae has been returned to the Red Grail, to its rightful state. Balance, restored at last.'

Rafen slowly climbed to his feet, as blood-servitors swept in to clean and reconsecrate the ancient sarcophagus. 'Then at last my mission is complete. I feared it would destroy me.'

The psyker-lord looked up, to the ornate stained-glass windows set in the walls over their heads. 'You have stood at the edge of death's abyss for weeks, Rafen. Lemartes and many others believed you would perish, and pass unto the Emperor's right hand. But you defy the odds once again.' He turned that baleful gaze back toward the Blood Angel. 'One might wonder if you were blessed. Or cursed.'

Rafen drew himself up. 'Whatever the Emperor wills.'

Mephiston came closer. 'A question, Brother-Sergeant. What did you see in there?'

'Nothing…' The lie came to him before he could stop himself. He thought of red sands, a golden warrior, a kinsman millennia-dead. Now, as he stood here in this place of stone and steel, what he had experienced seemed like the fantasy of a fevered mind. Rafen's hand strayed to his chest, to the place where his progenoid gene-seed implant lay dormant. 'I… dreamed. Nothing more.'

'Perhaps,' said the psyker. 'It is written that the Great Angel was possessed of a powerful psionic talent. Some say that he read the hearts and minds of his warrior sons as if they were open pages of a book. That he saw his own death at the hands of the Arch-traitor. That to him, even the veil of time was a malleable thing.' He nodded. 'The power of Sanguinius resonated through his very blood. Even ten thousand years on, we know this to be true.' Rafen watched as Mephiston crossed to *The Touch of Sanguine Dawn* and stroked it with infinite gentleness. 'These great sarcophagi,' he went on, 'they were built to his design. They are links to his will. And one might wonder if, after so many centuries of use, if they might not have absorbed some measure of his eternal power.' He turned back to face Rafen. 'Do you understand, Brother-

Sergeant?’

When Rafen spoke again, the truth welled up in him. ‘I saw something,’ he admitted.

‘What was it?’

‘A myth,’ Rafen whispered.

‘Open it,’ commanded the warrior in gold. ‘Do it now.’

‘My lord–‘ Brother-Sergeant Cassiel tried to object, but a single sharp look was enough to silence his objections. ‘As you wish.’ He threw a nod to the legion serfs crowded around the flanks of The Touch of Sanguine Dawn, and as one they opened the petals of the sphere.

Dark rivers of crimson flowed from the interior, running away into drain vents. Light from the Hermia’s lumeglobes revealed the figure within, a muscled form pale in flesh, breathing hard. With every passing second, the colour returned to him.

Sarga leaned in. ‘The wound has closed. I see no signs of lingering infection.’

‘What about the shard itself?’ asked Cassiel.

Sarga nodded to himself. ‘Destroyed. The sarcophagus disintegrated it, purged all trace of it from his system. He lives.’

‘Get him out,’ said the gold-armoured warrior.

The serfs did as they were ordered to, and moved to carry the Blood Angel to a grav-litter. He stirred, and pushed them away, standing on his own, blinking in the light.

‘We… are freed…’ He whispered.

Cassiel gave him a fresh robe. ‘Meros. How do you feel, brother?’

He gave a nod. ‘I live. Thanks to you.’

‘It would seem so.’

Meros turned to see who had addressed him, and a flash of shock crossed his face. ‘You–?’ But then in the next moment, he composed himself. ‘Forgive me. The golden armour… I thought you were… Someone else.’

‘You know who I am?’ The warrior was a towering figure, resplendent in the master-crafted wargear of a High Sanguinary Guard – the praetorians of the Primarch himself. Dark, shoulder-length hair fell about his gorget, framing a long, noble aspect.

‘You are Azkaellon,’ said Meros, ‘bearer of the Glaive Encarmine and the banner-master. First among the Sanguinary Guard.’ He met the other man’s gaze. ‘What do you wish of me?’

‘I came to see if you would die,’ Azkaellon replied, his voice cold and steady. ‘I learned of your bravery on Nartaba Octus and wished to see the face of a battle-brother who would meet such odds. With those wounds, I expected to witness your passing… but clearly the strength of the Great Angel

himself runs strong in your heart.'

Meros gave a shallow bow. 'I will not die yet. Sanguinius will tell me when that time is at hand.'

For the first time, Azkaellon showed a flicker of emotion; the briefest of smiles. 'You seem certain,' he went on. 'Tell me, Meros. How do you know that to be so?' He nodded to the sarcophagus. 'Did you… see something while you slumbered?'

Meros recalled visions of red sands, a golden warrior and a kinsman he did not know. His hand strayed to where his progenoid gene-seed implant lay beneath his flesh. 'My own fears made manifest,' he replied, at length. 'Now banished forever.'

'As it should be,' Azkaellon said, with a nod. 'Now rest, Meros.' He looked around at Cassiel and the others. 'All of you, gather your strength and prepare for battle. I have this hour received orders from our primarch. The Hermia and Task Force Ignis are to rendezvous with the rest of our Legion's ships.'

'Which flotilla?' said Sarga.

Azkaellon did not grace him with a glance. 'All of them. The Legion musters in its entirety for battle and new glory.'

Meros's brow furrowed. Such an assemblage of the Sons of Sanguinius was unprecedented. For the primarch to gather them all for war, the deed would be of great import. 'Where are we going?' he asked.

'Our liege-lord's brother, the Warmaster Horus Lupercal, has given us a duty that only the Blood Angels are capable of,' said the Sanguinary Guard. 'We are to bring the light of the Imperium to the worlds of the Signus Cluster.'

SNARES AND DELUSIONS

Matthew Farrer

The town surrounds the obscenity, and the obscenity is eating the town. It has no name, this elegant pattern of buildings spread out beneath the wind on the dusty green hills. It is an oddity on this world, this town of dove-grey walls which seem to flow up out of the ground, their smooth lines and gentle angles forcing the eye to look in vain for any tool-marks or signs of shaping. Simplicity of shape and complexity of detail, like outcrops growing unworked from the soil, but natural rock could never grow in the delicate mandala of streets and paths, flowing across the hillside in a design so subtle that the eye can take it in for hours before it begins to understand how much the pattern delights.

Even the violence with which the obscenity has torn its way into the heart of the town has not eclipsed the art of its building, not yet. Despite the craters blasted into the buildings, the smoke in the streets, the dead scattered upon the ground, despite whatever invisible thing it is that is withering the grass and trees and silencing the song of the insects – the place still holds scraps of its beauty, for now.

The town has never needed a name. The Exodites speak of it as they ride their fierce dragons to and fro over the steppes and prairies, but they bring its uniqueness to mind without the coining of a label to go on a sign. For all that they are a warrior race of beast-riding and beast-hunting tribes, their language is the silky melody of all eldar and they are able to speak of the one little town on their world, its historians and artisans and seers, without its ever needing a name.

The obscenity is different. It drives its way out of the ground like the head of a murderous giant buried too shallow, buttresses bulging out from its walls

like tendons pulled rigid on a neck as the head is thrown back to scream. Black iron gates gape and steel spines give an idiot glint from the parapets and niches. They are not there to defend. The thing leers and swaggers against the landscape in its power, sure that it is above attack. The spikes are there for cruelty, for execution and display. The obscenity is being built not for subjugating but for the pleasure of the subjugation.

It is growing. As small bands of figures grow from dots across the prairie, advance and join up and form into a procession through streets choked with the stink of death, they can see where buildings are being torn down and the earth beneath them ripped up to furnish more rock for the obscenity. There are rough patches, cavities along the side where new chambers and wings will be added, and the procession – the armoured figures gripping the chains, and the slim cloaked shapes staggering beneath the weight of them – passes the crowds of slaves, toiling in the dust, crying and groaning as the obscenity creeps outward and grows ever taller beneath their hands.

The town does not have a name, but the obscenity does. There is no eldar word for this red-black spear of rock, eating the town from within like a cancer, but it bears a name in the hacking, cawing language of the once-human creatures who drive the slaves ever harder to build it. It is called the Cathedral of the Fifth Blessing, and in its sick, buried heart its master is at prayers.

The air in the Deepmost Chapel was torn this way and that by the screams of the thralls, but Chaplain De Haan paid them no mind. The patterns on the warp-carved obelisk seemed to writhe, the lines and angles impossible by any sane geometry, and De Haan's eyes and brain shuddered as he tried to follow them. There had been times when he had relished or loathed the sensation in turn, even times when he had screamed when he looked at the pillar just as their mortal serfs were screaming now. That had been in the early days, when the Word Bearers had taken up the banner of Horus himself and Lorgar had still been crafting the great laws of faith in the Pentadict. Those laws had commanded contemplation of the work of Chaos as part of the Ritual of Turning, and now De Haan was calm as he felt the carvings send ripples though his sanity. *A lesson in self-disgust and abasement*, he had learned in his noviciate. *Realise that your mind is but a breath of mist in the face of the gale that is Chaos Undivided*. It was a useful lesson.

The time for contemplation was at an end, and he rose. The screams from the chapel floor, beneath the gallery where the Word Bearers themselves sat, went on. Although their mortal thralls were being herded out perhaps a dozen remained, those whose minds had not withstood the gaze at the column, who had begun to convulse on the floor and mutilate themselves. The slave-masters began to drag them toward the torturing pens; they would be adequate as sacrifices later. De Haan walked forward to the pulpit, turned to face the

ranks of wine-dark armour and horned helms to begin his first sermon on this new world.

The cycle of worship laid down in the Pentadict decreed that sermon and prayers for that hour were to be about hate. There was a certain expectation in the air that plucked a little chord of pleasure at the base of the Chaplain's spine. Of all Lorgar's virtues hatred was the one De Haan prized most, the sea in which his soul swam, the light with which he saw the world. Some of his most beautiful blasphemies had been done in the name of hate. He knew he was revered as a scholar in the field.

The Sacristans moved to the dais below him and reached into the brocaded satchels they carried. They began to array objects on the dais: a banner of purple-and-gold silk tattered and scorched by gunfire in places; a slender eldar helmet and gauntlet in the same colours were set atop it. At the other end of the dais, a delicate crystal mask and a slender sword seemingly made from feather-light, smoky glass, a single pale gem set into the pommel. And beside them, carefully set exactly between the rest, a fist-sized stone, smooth and hard, that shone like a phoenix egg even in the dimness of the chapel. De Haan looked at them, heard the words in his mind: *All will be at an end.*

An exquisite shudder went through his body. He unclenched his right hand from the pulpit rail, gripped his crozius in his left and opened his mouth to preach. And something happened to the Revered Chaplain De Haan that had never happened to him in his millennia as a Word Bearer: he found himself mute.

High clouds had turned the sky dull and cool as De Haan stood on the jutting rampart outside his war room. His eyes narrowed behind his faceplate as if he were trying to stare through the curve of the planet itself.

'This race has been allowed to *go on*, Meer. It has been allowed to spread itself. They drink their wine on their craftworlds and stand under the sky on worlds like this. They crept out across the galaxy like the glint of mildew.'

Meer, chief among his lieutenants, knew better than to respond. He stood at the door which led out onto the rampart, hands folded respectfully before him. He had heard De Haan talk about the eldar many times.

'Not even the whining Emperor's puppies are like this. Nor the mangy orks. Tyranids, feh, beneath our dignity. But these things, these are an *affront*. To be assailed by them – ah! It gnaws at my pride.' His hand squeezed the haft of his crozius and the weapon's daemon-head hissed and cursed and spat its displeasure. Only during the rituals would the thing keep quiet. De Haan twisted it around and held it at a more dignified angle. It was a symbol of his office, a chaplaincy in the only Traitor Legion to remember and revere the importance of Chaplains. It did not do to show it disrespect.

De Haan wondered why he had not been able to speak like this in the

chapel, why he had stood grasping for words, trying to force thoughts to his lips. A sermon on hate, no less, and yet he had stumbled over the words, choked on maddening distractions, images, snatches of voices, the swirl of memories he was normally able to leave behind at prayer.

'The eyes of our Dark Master see far, Meer, and who am I to set myself up beside them?' Meer remained silent, but De Haan was speaking half to himself. 'The words fled me. My throat was dry and empty. I am wondering, Meer, was it an omen? Do they prey on my mind because they are so near? There was a… a feel to this world, something in the words of our prisoners and spies. Perhaps the Great Conspirator planned from the start that it would end here. To end here, Meer, to bring the sacrament into full flower! Imagine that.'

'I know you believe your enemy is here, revered,' came Meer's careful voice from behind him, 'but my counsel, and Traika's, is still that the time was not ripe for you to join us here.'

De Haan's fist tightened around the crozius again, and the head – now a fanged mouth and eye-stalk; it was always different each time he looked at it – yapped and spat again.

'The fortifications are still not complete, revered, and only threescore of our own brethren are in this citadel. The battle tanks and Dreadnoughts are still being readied, and the dissonance in this world's aura has made auguries hard. We still cannot scry far beyond what our own eyes could see. Our bridgehead is not secure, revered. Do you believe this is worth the risk? The reports we had of eldar here seem only to mean these savages, or perhaps mere pirates. We cannot be sure Varantha has passed near this system. We have seen no craftworld eldar here, or–'

De Haan spun around. 'And I told you, Meer, that it is not suspicions and rumours which have drawn us here this time. I could feel the slippery eldar filth singing to me when I first heard the reports. I saw their faces dancing in the clouds when I looked from the bridge of our ship. What could this psychic "dissonance" you complain of be, but the cowards trying to fog our minds and cover their tracks?'

'These eldar savages keep a thing called a world-spirit, revered. They–'

'I *know* what is a world-spirit – and what is the stink of a farseer!' De Haan's voice did not quite go all the way to a roar, but it did not have to. There was a jitter in his vision and a rustle far off in his hearing as the systems in his armour, long since come to a Chaotic life of their own, tried to recoil from his anger. 'You were not given the sacrament, Meer! You do not carry the Fifth Blessing! I do, and I command you with it. I tell you that Varantha is here, and this is our doorway to it! I have known it in my soul since we broke from the warp!'

Meer bowed, accepting the rebuke, and De Haan slowly, deliberately

turned his back. High in his vision he could see a point of light, visible even while the sun was up: their orbiting battle-barge. A space hulk full of Chaos Marines and their slaves and thralls, cultists doped with Frenzon with their explosive suicide collars clamped to their necks, mutants and beastfolk from the Eye of Terror and traitors of every stripe. Seeing it focused his thoughts again.

'We shall bring down our brethren soon enough. The engines and Dreadnoughts too. For now, fetch Nessun. And have the latest prisoner train brought before me.'

There was a scrape of ceramite on stone as Meer bowed again and turned to go, and by the time Meer had reached the bottom of the stairs De Haan was sinking back into reverie.

He was thinking of the cramped, fetid tunnels within the walls of the giant canal-cities of Sahch-V, where he and Meer and Alaema and barely a half-dozen Word Bearer squads had lived like rats in burrows for nearly two years, as around them their covert missionaries moved out through the cities and along the canals which brought life to the basalt plains, beginning their quiet preaching, their mission schools with their drugs and brainwashing rooms. He remembered the small chamber beneath the thermic pumps outside Vana City where the three of them had listened to their agents' reports and pored over their ever-spreading web of traitors and catspaws.

He remembered cries in the tunnels, in particular the voice of Belg, the scrawny cleft-chinned cult emissary loud in the coffin-like burrows as he shouted down the passages: 'We are lost! The missions are dying. Our rebellion is clipped before it begins!' Someone had shot Belg down in a fury before De Haan had had a chance to hear more, but he remembered the word that had gone flying through the base as the reports began to come in.

Eldar!

And the second, the three syllables that had not yet – he could barely remember the feeling – become sweet poison in his brain, not yet become the black-burning obsession hanging in front of his eyes, the name they had not heard until the Warp Spiders had begun to hunt them through their chambers and drove them out to where the rest of the eldar lay waiting with shuriken and plasma-shot, fusion-beam and wraithcannon. Alaema had gone down with a lightning-wrapped witchblade through his gut, and De Haan had barely managed to drag himself and Meer away to the teleport point.

Varantha.

Oh, he remembered. Twenty-one centuries of remembering.

He remembered the sick anger that had seized him when he first spoke to the Imperial scholar they had captured as the wretch thrashed on the torture rack. Varantha meant 'Crown of our Steadfast Hopes'. Human traders spoke

in awe of the gems it crafted, the rare flowers it bred, the beautiful metals its artisans worked. Varantha that passed through the western galactic margins, scraping the borders of the Halo where not even the Traitor Legions went, Varantha that was supposed to have passed through Hydraphur itself, the home of the Imperial Battlefleet Pacificus, coasting through the system's intricate double-ecliptic and away again before the whey-faced Imperials had even a suspicion it had been there.

Varantha that hated Chaos with a white heat. Varantha that had held off Karlsen of the Night Lords in his raids on the Clavian Belt until the Ultramarines had arrived, Varantha whose farseers had tricked and feinted to lure the orks of Waaagh-Chobog into falling on the Iron Hands' fortresses on Taira-Shodan instead of the Imperial and Exodite worlds around them, Varantha whose warriors had driven Arhendros the Silken Whisper off the three worlds he had claimed for Slaanesh.

And Varantha that had balked the Word Bearers on Sahch-V, had unravelled their plans and made sure the great citadels and halls they would have built could never be. A Varantha witch blade had cut down De Haan's mentor, Varantha wraithships had driven their battle-barges and strikers out of the system. And when they had broken free of the warp outside the Cadian Gate, ready for their final jump back to the Eye of Terror and sanctuary, it had been Varantha craft which had led the fleets of Ulthwe and Cadia, driving into the Chaos fleet like a bullet tearing into flesh.

Fighting Varantha, stalking the craftworld through a quarter of the galaxy, De Haan had discovered a capacity for hate he had never realised that even a Traitor Marine could possess. Every battle against the craftworld had been like a stroke of the bellows, fanning it ever hotter. The orbital refineries at Rhea, where the eldar had lured De Haan and his warband in – then disappeared, leaving the Word Bearers in the abandoned, genestealer-infested satellite compounds. The island chains of Herano's World where their Doomblaster had smashed the eldar psykers into the ocean at the campaign's opening, and De Haan had led a joyous hunt through the jungles, mopping up the scattered and leaderless Guardians.

And at the last, the farseer, staggering beneath the red-black clouds of Iante as artillery flashed and boomed across the distant horizon, watching De Haan as he circled it, stepping over its dead bodyguard. The calm resignation in its stance and the cold precision of its voice.

'So tell me then. What do you see for us, little insect?' De Haan had taunted.

'Why, you will set your eyes on the heart of Varantha, and all will come to an end,' it had replied, before a howling stroke of De Haan's crozius had torn it in half. He had felt the spirit stone shudder and pulse as he tore it free of the thing's breastplate with a sound like cracking bone, and he wondered every so

often if the creature's soul was aware of who owned its stone now. He hoped it was.

It had not been long after that that he had been called to receive his sacrament, the Sacrament of the Fifth Blessing. The highest priests of his Chapter had recognised the depth of his spite and had praised him for it: the Fifth Blessing was hate, and the sacrament had appointed De Haan a holy vessel, freed him from his duties in order to lead a crusade that he might express that hate to the utmost, a great hymn to Lorgar carved across the galaxy in Varantha's wake. He could never think back on his sacrament without the hot red flames of pride flaring deep in what he thought was his soul.

He walked to the edge of his rampart and watched the slaves toiling at the walls far below. His arms convulsed, as though he could already feel eldar souls pulsing and struggling in his fingers, and the wave of malice which surged up his spine made him almost giddy.

'Revered?'

De Haan started at the voice and spun around. His crozius head, now some kind of grotesque insect, chittered something that sounded almost like words. He ignored it and found his concentration again.

'What have the threads of Fate brought us, Nessun?'

The other Marine hesitated. Nessun was no full-fledged sorcerer as the adepts of the Thousand Sons were, but by Lorgar's grace he had developed a spirit sight that could scry almost as well as the eldar warlocks they hunted. The mutation that had given him his warp eye had pushed it far out and up onto his brow, making an ungainly lump of his head. The ceramite of his armour had turned glass-clear over it, but De Haan and the others had long ago become used to the way the great milky eyeball pulsed and rolled between the horns of Nessun's helm.

'In the way of eldar, revered, there is little I can say for definite. I see shadows at the corners of my vision and echoes that I must interpret. You know that nothing is certain with these creatures.'

'Describe these shadows and echoes, Nessun. I am patient.'

'I have kept my gaze on the tribes here in the days since our first landing, revered, and watched as they fought our thralls and Brother Traika's vanguard force. There is a… texture to them that I have taught myself to recognise, by Lorgar's grace. But I have caught ripples, something dancing out of sight. I am not sure how I can explain it, revered. Imagine a figure standing just beyond the reach of light from a fire, so that sometimes its shape is touched by the firelight…'

'I think I understand.' De Haan wasn't aware that he had tensed until he felt his armour, alive like his helmet systems, shiver and creak as it tried to find a comfortable position.

‘Revered, I am abased and humble before the foul glory of Chaos, but I must venture the guess that craftworld eldar may be here. Here on this world. I have dimly seen the patterns that the minds of farseers form when they assemble, and I have felt… gaps in my vision that I believe are warp gates, webway gates here and in orbit beyond the planet from our own ship, that have opened and closed and that they have not been able to hide…’ He stopped short as De Haan drove gauntlet into fist, hissing with triumph, sending his armour shivering and flexing from the blow.

‘An omen! My voice was bound in the chapel as an omen!’ And he was about to speak again when Meer called from the war room.

‘Most revered lord, the prisoners await you.’

There was something in Meer’s voice that made De Haan almost run for the doorway.

Two eldar stood in the great hall, heads bowed as De Haan strode to his throne and sat down, crozius across his knees. The arm of one hung brokenly; blood matted the other’s hair. Both were dressed in rough cloth and hide tunics, and their lasers, the power chambers smashed, had been hung around their necks. Traika, the commander of their vanguard and Raptors, bowed to De Haan and made the sign of the Eightfold Arrow with the hand that had fused to his chainsword. Traika’s legs had warped and lengthened too, now bending backward like an insect’s, the armour over them lumpy and stretched. It had made him fleet of foot but gave him an odd, tilted way of standing.

‘We found these in the south-west quarter where the hills steepen. We thought we had cleansed the area, revered, but these were part of an ambush on one of our scouring forces. The fight was fierce but we carried the day.’

‘Praise Lorgar’s dark light and the great will of Chaos,’ De Haan intoned, and the two were led away into the cathedral’s cells. Traika gestured and a third alien was dragged up the steps, limping and tripping. The thrall holding its chains tossed a dead power-lance and a tall bone helm onto the floor. The prisoner did not react, standing slumped with its hair in its face, its long cloak of golden-scaled hide hanging limply around it.

‘The last survivor of a group of Dragon Knights we believe were scouting the northern border of our controlled zone. I will attend the tormenting of this one personally, revered. I had felt sure that our deep raids had gutted the last of the Exodite resistance on the prairies. We must find out how this new raid was organised so soon.’ The thrall began to drag the knight out, and Meer walked over to stand beside the throne.

‘Revered, this is the final prisoner. It was badly wounded, and did not survive the journey back to be brought before you, but we believed you would want to see it. The Raptors brought it down in the river-valley to the south and our bikers brought it here with all haste.’

With a scraping groan of wheels the thralls pushed forward an iron frame with a figure stretched in it, a figure whose rich purple and gold armour caught the sunlight coming through the still-unglazed windows and gave off a burnished glow. Behind it four more – strong beastfolk these, whose muscles rippled and corded with their burden – dragged something into view and dropped it crashing to the floor, stirring the rock-dust that still coated the hall from its building. A jet-bike, its canopy cracked open by bolt shells, the drive smashed and burnt from its crash, but the pennons hanging from its vanes perfectly clear: the stylised crown-and-starburst of Varantha.

For a long moment, De Haan was silent. Then he threw his arms wide as though he were about to embrace the corpse, and gave a bellow that echoed through the length of the hall.

'All will come to an end! Horus's eye, but the filthy little creature spoke the truth. The craftworld's heart! It is here! The sacrament ends here, my brethren! I will end it here!'

'Revered!' De Haan did not look back. His stride had lengthened as his pace had picked up, and he was practically jogging through the halls to the Deepmost Chapel, Meer and Nessun shouldering one another aside to keep up. The air in the fortress shivered as the great gongs they had hung over the barracks rang out again and again. Under the sound De Haan left a trail of angry murmurs in the air, curses and threats and dark prayers. Every so often he would slash his crozius viciously around him as if to knock the air itself out of his path.

He knew what Meer would be saying. More weak-spirited yapping, more about caution and rashness and the trickery of the eldar. But the warp gate was close. Varantha was close. The time when the heads of Varantha's farseers were set on spikes atop his Land Raider was a breath away.

Why, you will set your eyes on the heart of Varantha, and all will come to an end.

The heart of the craftworld, the very heart of Varantha! He wondered how it would feel, walking from the webway gate into Varantha itself. The domes where the most ancient of their farseers sat, their flesh crystallised and gleaming like diamond, waiting for the blow of an armoured fist that would send their souls screaming into the warp. The Grove of New Songs, that was what they called the forest-hall deep in Varantha where the few eldar children were born and weaned. De Haan had spent a hundred weeks agonising over whether he would kill the children or take them as slaves after he had poisoned and burned the trees. The infinity circuit, the wraithbone core which held the spirits of a billion dead eldar, had shone through his dreams like a galaxy aflame. Oh, to crack its lattice with his crozius and watch the warp tides pour in! It would need a special ceremony, the culmination of his

crusade and sacrament, something he would have to plan.

And was Varantha possessed of engines, a world that could control its drift and sweep through space? He had never been able to discover that, but he began turning the idea over feverishly as he strode down the hallway to the chapel. To take command of Varantha, hollow out its core of eldar souls and fill them with sacrifices and the cries of daemons, to sail the fallen craftworld to the Eye of Terror itself! His head swam with the audacity: a world that would put their daemon-world fortresses and the asteroid seminaries at Milarro to shame. A corrupted world that would carry them through the galaxy, a great blight that would stand as a testament to their faith, their hate, their spite, their unholiness.

The rest of the Traitor Marines began to file in and take their places, and the slave-choir in their cells beneath the chapel floor raised a hymn of howls and cries as the choir-masters puffed drugs into their faces and yanked on the needles in their flesh. De Haan closed his eyes and could see the conquered Varantha still, a great twisted flower of black and crimson, sprawled against the stars. The shapes of the spires and walls, great plazas where the zealous would come to plead for the favour of Chaos, the cells and scriptoria where Lorgar's holy Pentadict would be copied and studied, the fighting pits where generations of new Word Bearers would be initiated. There would be pillars and statues greater than those they had raised after driving the White Scars from the island chains of Morag's World. There would be chamber after chamber of altars more richly decorated than those they had seized when they had sacked the treasury of Kintarre. There would be the slaughtering pens for the worship of Khorne, great libraries and chambers for meditating upon the lore of Tzeentch. There would be palaces of incense and music dedicated to Slaanesh, and cess-pits for the rituals of self-defilement dedicated to Nurgle. And all just parts, even as the Chaos Gods were just facets, all parts of the great treacherous hymn, an obscene prayer in wraithbone and carved ceramite. The Sacred City of Chaos Undivided.

De Haan cradled his vision lovingly in his mind, and saw that it was good.

'Lorgar is with us, Chaos is within us, damnation clothes us and none can stand against us.' Voices around the chapel echoed the blessing as De Haan held his rosarius aloft and made the sign of the Eightfold Arrow. For the second time that day he looked out over ranks of helms, leaned forward to look down at the bright eyes of the cultists and beastfolk crowded below him. But this time, his thoughts and his words were clear.

'Be it known to you, most devout of my comrades in Lorgar's footsteps, that we are gathered here once again in the observance of the Fifth Blessing of Lorgar, the blessing of hate. Bring your thoughts to the sacrament granted to me by the most high of our order, that I might light a dark beacon of spite

for all the cosmos to see.' He paused, looked down again. The eldar artefacts had gone from the dais, locked away again by the Sacristans. It was not important – he did not need them now.

'Hatred earned me the great and honoured sacrament. Hatred has pleased the beautiful abomination of Chaos Undivided, and shone a light through the warp to Varantha. My beautiful hatred has brought us to their scent. After more than two millennia, the fulfilment of our sacred charter is near.' The memory of the Varantha Guardian, the knowledge of what they had found here, surged through him afresh: his head spun, his joints felt weak with exhilaration. His crozius head as he raised it was now a contorted nightmare-face, grimacing as if in ecstasy, mirroring his feelings.

'Soon we will be joined by our brothers, our fellow warriors and bearers of Lorgar's words. Even now the order goes out to land our machines of war, our bound Dreadnoughts. Within the week, my congregation, this world will have felt the full fury of our crusade and when the Exodites are scoured from it we shall march through the warp gate into the craftworld itself! Hone yourselves, my acolytes, hone your spite and fan your hate to the hottest, most bitter flame. None shall pass us in our devotion, none are as steeped in poisoned thoughts as we!' His voice hammered out and boomed against the walls of the chapel, intoxicating even with the power of its echoes. De Haan fought back an urge to laugh – this felt so right.

'In the beginning, even in the days before my pursuit earned me the sacrament, I had spoken to one of the degenerate farseers the eldar claim to revere. At its death the maggot spoke a prophecy that the blessed oracles of our high temples have sworn to be true. Brethren, as I lead you to battle I will set my eyes on the heart of Varantha and then all will come to an end. I will cut down their last farseer, I will break open the seals of their infinity circuit, I will shatter the heart and eye of their home!' His voice had risen to a roar. 'All will come to an end! Our crusade, our sacrament fulfilled! The eldar themselves have sworn it will be so. What honours, what glories we will build!'

Above him the gong rang again, and De Haan opened his eyes and leaned forward.

'Look to your weapons, brothers. I will lead you now in the Martio Imprimis. I tell you this: by the end of even this day we will be at war!'

The chant of the Martio Imprimis was an old song and a good one, crafted by Lorgar himself in the days before the Emperor had turned on his Word Bearers and when even De Haan had been only a youngblood initiate. The words were strange and their meanings almost lost, but they filled him with a beautiful, electric energy. It rang in De Haan's blood even now. The service in the Deepmost Chapel had been over for an hour but the Word Bearers had

caught something of their chaplain's mood and as the teleport beam sent thundercracks and sickly shimmers of light through the citadel's hangar, the Marines chanted still as they selected weapons and directed the thralls in moving the crates and engines away.

'Duxhai!' The crusade's chief artisan, still swaying a little from his teleport, turned as De Haan called him. He stepped back into a deep kneeling bow as De Haan strode across the hangar floor and left the moving of the icon-encrusted Razorback tanks to his seconds.

'Is it true, revered lord? I was told you have received omens and that Varantha itself is in our grip. They are singing hymns in all the halls and chambers of our fortress. Look!' The old Marine pointed to the nearest tank's turret, where splashes of blood glistened. 'They have already made sacrifices over our wargear.'

'It is true, Duxhai, and it is fitting that our brethren in orbit are making their thanks and obeisances. Lorgar has exalted us. I have been shown the way.'

Duxhai had worked on his armour himself over the centuries, making it a glorious construction of red and gold. Chaos had worked on it too: the studs and rivets on its carapace had all turned to eyes, yellow slit-pupilled eyes, which stared at De Haan now but rolled forward to watch Meer walk into the hangar. De Haan pointed to the Razorbacks.

'Give praise, Meer! See how Brother Duxhai's skills have transformed these? Captured barely a year ago, and already adorned and consecrated for service! These will carry Traika's vanguard squads into the teeth of the Varantha lines!'

'Our revered chaplain's own Land Raider will be brought down next,' put in Duxhai, 'and the transports are being readied to bring down the Dreadnoughts and Rhinos. We will be ready to move soon.'

'A dark blessing on you, brother, and thanks to the great foulness of Chaos. Revered, I must make a report.'

'Well?' De Haan was becoming nettled by Meer's manner, his shifty-eyed caution. He could see in the corner of his eyes that Duxhai had registered the offhand greeting also.

'Revered, we have lost contact with our patrols at the furthest sweep of the contested zone. I had our adepts move the communicators onto the outer balconies but there is still no way to raise them. The Raptors who went out to counterstrike at the areas where our own forces were ambushed cannot be reached either, and the bike squadron was due two hours ago but cannot be seen. The psychic haze has thickened, and Nessun's warp eye is almost blind. He reports a presence like a light through fog, but he cannot pinpoint it.'

'I will come to the war room, Meer. Wait for me there.' His lieutenant backed away, bowed and departed. 'Something in the air on this world turns my warriors to water, Duxhai. They whimper to me of "caution" and

“fortification”. Meer is a good warrior, but I should have made you my lieutenant for this world. I need your ferocity by me here.’

Duxhai bowed. ‘I am honoured, revered. Lieutenant or no, I will gladly fight by your side. Allow me to prepare my weapons and I will meet you in the war room.’

De Haan nodded and waited a moment more, allowing the chanting of the Traitor Marines to soothe his ruffled nerves, before he strode away.

Nessun was standing quietly in the war room when De Haan entered, head bowed, warp eye clouded. Meer and Traika were pacing, almost circling each other, clearly at odds. De Haan ordered them to report.

‘Something is coming, revered!’ Meer began. ‘The slaves are restless, there have been revolts on the building crews! The eldar know something! We must prepare for assault!’

‘We must make the assault!’ Traika’s rasping voice. ‘We are Word Bearers, not Iron Warriors! We do not skulk behind walls. We take Lorgar’s blessing to our enemies, His blessings of hate and fire and blood and agony!’ The obscenely long fingers of Traika’s left hand flexed and clenched, as if to claw the tension out of the air.

Listening to them, De Haan hesitated. For the first time he felt a tug, a tilt at the back of his mind that he could not identify. He could not see with Nessun’s precision, no seer he, but ten thousand years in the Eye of Terror had tuned him to the coarser ebbs and flows as it had them all. Something was near. He raised his crozius for silence – its crown a snarling hound’s head now – and looked to Nessun.

‘Speak, Nessun! Stare through these walls. Tell me what you see!’

‘Revered, I… am not sure. There are patterns, something moving… a ring, a wall… closing or opening, I cannot say… a mind… shapes, silent… rushing air…’ His voice was becoming ragged, and De Haan cut him off.

‘It’s clear enough. Meer, Traika: you are both right. The eldar know of us.’ He fought back a chuckle. ‘And they fear us. Catch us off-guard, would they? A quick strike at the head, was it? Drive me off their trail?’ And now he did laugh, feeling the tension lifting from his back.

‘Time for our sortie, my brothers! Have the Razorbacks lowered to the ramp. Traika, assemble your veteran squads! Meer, have our space command ready a bombardment for when we–’

That was when the first plasma blast hit the side of the cathedral with a sound like the sky being torn apart. The thunderous roar died away amid vast dust clouds, the groan of masonry, frenzied shouts from up and down the halls. De Haan stared straight ahead for one speechless moment, then hurled himself to the balcony, the others behind him. And then they could only stand and watch.

The world had filled with enemies. Sleek eldar jet-bikes arrowed down from the sky to whip past the walls of the cathedral, and high above De Haan could hear the rumble of sonic booms as squadrons of larger alien assault craft criss-crossed over their heads. With sickening speed each distant blur in the air would grow and resolve into a raptor-sleek grav-tank, arcing in silently to spill a knot of infantry into the town before they rose and banked away again. In what seemed like a matter of heartbeats the fortress was ringed by a sea of advancing Guardians, their ranks dotted with gliding gun-platforms and dancing war-walkers, and the air swarmed with the eldar craft.

The aliens' assault started to be answered. Thumps and cracks came from the walls as the Word Bearers brought heavy weapons to bear and threads of tracer fire began reaching out to the purple-and-gold shapes that danced past on the wind. De Haan pushed to the edge of the balcony, heedless of the shapes above him and greedy for the sight of fireballs and smoke-trails, but he had time for no more than a glance before Meer and Traika pulled him away from the edge.

'Revered! With us! You must lead us. We cannot stay!' He cursed and almost raised his crozius to Meer, but the first laser beams had begun sweeping the balcony, carving at the rock and sending molten dribbles down the walls behind them. He nodded grimly and led them inside.

In the debris-swathed halls all was din and confusion. The slave-masters bellowed and flailed with their barbed whips, but their charges would not be ordered. De Haan realised someone had set off the Frenzon too early. Their thralls ran to and fro, shrieking and swinging their clubs, pistols spitting and making the stone chambers a hell of sparks and ricochets. Bullets spanged off De Haan's armour as he shouldered his way through the crowd of naked, bleeding berserkers.

'To me! They are upon us, we will cut them down here! To me!' and De Haan began the chant of the Martio Secundus. All around him Word Bearers turned and began to fall in behind him, dark red helms bearing down on him above the sea of bobbing cultist heads. Roars and growls began to mix with the cries of the mortals; the beastfolk were following too. De Haan gave a snarling grin behind his faceplate. *In Lorgar's name, we will make a fight of this yet.*

Reaching the great stair, they found that a whole part of the wall had gone, simply vanished leaving smooth stone edges where a piece had been erased. A distort-cannon crater – and the ceiling above it was already beginning to groan and send down streams of dust. He ignored the danger, sent his chant ringing out again and charged through the crater to the hall beyond; the hangar and teleport dais were close.

Then, swooping and darting though the breaches their cannon had made, came the eldar, Aspect Warriors all in blue, thrumming wings spreading from

their shoulders. Lasers stabbed down into the throng underneath them and grenades fell from their hands like petals.

‘Fight!’ De Haan bellowed, and now that he was in battle he roared the Martio Tertius and sent a fan of bolt shells screaming through the squadron, smashing two Hawks backwards into the wall in clouds of smoke. His crozius, twisted into the head of a one-eyed bull, was belching streams of red plasma that hung in the air when he moved it; it had not boasted the blue power-field of the Imperial croziae for eight thousand years.

The remaining Hawks tumbled gracefully in the air and glided towards the ruined wall, now with other shots chasing them, but then the braying of the beastfolk changed note. De Haan whirled to see three of them, firing wildly, looking about them in panic, caught in a silvery mist. All three seemed to twitch and heave and fall oddly out of shape before they collapsed into piles of filth on the stone floor. Beyond them, the two Warp Spider warriors sucked the filament clouds back into the muzzles of their weapons. While shells from De Haan and Meer took one apart, the other stepped back. With a gesture, the air flowed around it like water and it was gone.

Down the hall and up the broad stairs, running hard, Duxhai came pounding out of the smoke, plasma gun clutched in his hands. The hangar was filled with smoke and flashes of light.

‘The hangar is gone, lord, taken. We opened the gates to take the tanks down the ramp to the ground, but they drove us back with their strange weapons, and their heavy tanks are bombarding us. The teleport platform is destroyed. I have said the Martio Quartus for our fallen, and my brothers have dug in to hold them at bay. But we cannot stay here.’

De Haan almost groaned aloud. ‘I will not be driven like an animal! This is my fortress, I will stand to defend it!’ But his soldier’s instincts had taken charge and were giving the lie to his words: he was already moving back down the stairs to meet the last of the Marines and a gaggle of thralls struggling up to meet him. He looked at them for a moment, and did not flinch as a Fire Prism fired through the hangar doors, opened a dazzling sphere of yellow-white fire over their heads.

‘The Deepmost Chapel, then, and the Great Hall. We will cut them down as they enter, until our brothers can land. When the transports land the rest of our crusade the battle will turn soon enough.’

They hammered down the stairs. Beside them a glare came through the window-slits and then the rock wall flashed red-hot and crumbled as the Marines next to it hurled themselves away. The sleek alien tank which had opened the breach rose out of sight and the jet-bikes behind it – no Guardian craft these but the smoky grey-green and bright silver of the Shining Spears – threw a delicate cat’s cradle of lasers through the opening. Thralls yowled and fell, while the beastfolk sent bullets and shot blasting out of the opening as the

jet-bikes peeled off and rose out of sight.

Then the Word Bearers were in the chapel, the shadowy space and echoes calming De Haan, the familiar shape of the warp obelisk giving him strength. They fanned out into the chamber, around the upper gallery and the floor itself, needing no orders: within seconds the doors were covered. The pack of thralls and beastfolk huddled and muttered in the centre of the chamber, clutching weapons.

'Revered, we… we are beset on every side.' Nessun's voice was flat and hoarse with anger. 'I feel them at the gates, fighting our brothers and slaves. But they are above us too, they are breaching the upper walls and stepping onto the balconies from their grav-sleds. And, and… most revered lord…'

Suddenly Nessun's voice was drenched with misery, and even the heads of the warriors around him were turning. 'Our battle-barge. Our fortress. I see it reeling in space, revered… it is ringed by the enemy… their ships dance away from our guns… our brothers were preparing their landing, the shields had been lowered for the teleport to work. The eldar are tearing at it… my vision is dimming…'

There was silence in the chapel for a moment after Nessun's voice died away. De Haan thought of trying to reach the sensoria array in the spires above them, then pushed the useless thought away. The upper levels would be full of eldar scum by now, and by the time they could fight their way there his ship would indeed have been blasted from the sky.

He looked around. 'Alone, then. Alone with our hatred. I will hear no talk of flight. They will break against us as a wave against a cliff.'

'Lorgar is with us, Chaos is within us, damnation clothes us and none can stand against us.'

As they all said the blessing De Haan's eyes moved from one to the next. Meer cradling his bolter, seemingly deep in thought, Duxhai standing haughtily with plasma-gun held at arms, Traika glaring about him for any sign of weakness in the others, chainsword starting to flex and rev. De Haan raised his crozius and strode from the chapel, the others following, and as if on a signal they heard the bombardment outside begin again.

It was only fitting that De Haan and his retinue marched into the north end of the ruined Great Hall at the same time that the eldar filled its south. They had blown in the walls and shot the bronze doors apart and were fanning out through the ruins. De Haan leapt down the steps into the hall, letting the dust and smoke blur his outline as shots clipped the columns around him and his men returned fire from the archway. A plasma grenade exploded nearby, an instant of scorching whiteness that betrayed the eldar: in the instant that it blinded them the Word Bearers had launched their own advance, scrambling and vaulting over the rubble. There were insect-quick movements ahead and

De Haan fired by reflex, plucking the Guardians out of their positions before he had consciously registered their location. The soft thrum of shuriken guns was drowned out by the hammer-and-yowl of the Word Bearers' bolt shells.

A stream of white energy flashed by De Haan's shoulder as Duxhai felled two more eldar, but there were Dire Avengers in the eldar positions now, with quicker reflexes and a hawk-eye aim to catch Duxhai before he could move again. The shuriken were monomolecular, too fast and thin to properly see, but the air around Duxhai seemed to shimmer and flash. Blood and ceramite gouted from his back as his torso flew apart, the eyes on his armour glazing over. He staggered back and De Haan jinked around him, launching himself into battle.

A grenade went off somewhere to his left and shrapnel clipped his armour. The Word Bearer felt the moist embrace of the plates around his body jump and twitch with the pain. He brought his crozius up and over, its wolf's head yowling with both joy and pain and belching thick red plasma. It caught the Avenger square on its jutting helmet and the creature twitched for a moment only before the glowing crimson mist ate it down to the bone. His bolt pistol hammered in his hand and two more eldar crashed backward, twitching and tumbling. Just beyond them, Traika cleared a fallen column in a great leap and landed among yellow-armoured Striking Scorpions whose chainswords sang and sparked against his own. In the rubble, Meer led the others in laying down a crossfire that strewed alien corpses across a third of the hall.

De Haan sang the Martio Tertius in a clear, strong voice and shot the nearest Scorpion in the back. Traika screamed laughter and swung at another, but as it back-pedalled another Scorpion, in the heavy intricate armour of an exarch, glided forward and whirled a many-chained crystalline flail in an intricate figure that smashed both Traika's shoulders and left him standing, astonished and motionless, for a blow that stove in his helm and sent ceramite splinters flying. De Haan bellowed a battle-curse and his crozius head became a snake that lashed and hissed. Two short steps forward and he lunged, feinted and struck the flail out of the creature's hand. It reeled back into Meer's sights, the plasma eating at it even as shells riddled it, but in the time it took for De Haan to strike down the last Scorpion the hall was alive with eldar again, and Meer and Nessun were forced back and away from him by a shower of grenades and sighing filament webs as the blast from a distort-cannon scraped the roof off the hall and let in the raging sky.

Even as De Haan charged, fired and struck again and again, some distant part of him groaned. Faint, maddening alien thoughts brushed his own like spider-silk in the dark, and shadows danced at the upper edge of his vision as jet-bikes and Vypers circled. The air around him was alive with shuriken fire and energy bolts. The eldar melted away as he struck this way and that. Ancient stone burst into hot shards as he swung his crozius, but rage had

taken his discipline and, like a man trying to snatch smoke in his fingers, he found himself standing and roaring wordlessly as the hall emptied once more and the shots died away.

There were no voices, no cries from his companions. De Haan did not have to turn to look to know that this last assault had taken them all. Meer and Nessun were dead, and behind him he could hear the boom of masonry as his citadel began to crumble. The Prayer of Sacrifice and the Martio Quartus would not come to his numb lips, and he nodded to himself. Why should not his rites unravel along with everything else? The Chaos star set in his rosarius was dead, lacklustre. He looked at it dully, and that was when he began to feel something tugging at his mind.

It was like an electrical tingle, or the distant sound of crickets; the way the air feels before a storm, or the thrum of distant war-machines. De Haan's warp-tuned mind rang with the nearby song of power. He remembered Nessun speaking of the pattern that farseers' minds made when they assembled.

You will set your eyes…

Suddenly he was running again. No screams now, just a low moan in his throat, a tangle of savage emotions he could not have put a name to if he had tried. Blood trickled from his lips and his crozius thrummed and crackled. The gates of the cathedral hung like broken wings. He ducked between them to stand on the broad black steps of his dying fortress.

…on the heart of Varantha…

His crozius's head had fallen silent, and he looked at it in puzzlement. It had formed itself into a human face, mouth gaping, eyes wide. A face that De Haan recognised as his own, from back in the days before his helm had sealed itself to him.

Turn, De Haan. Turn And Face Me.

The voice did not come through his ears, but seemed to resonate out of the air and throughout his bones and brain. It was measured, almost sombre, but its simple force almost shook him to his knees. Slowly, he raised his head.

…and all will come to an end.

More than twice De Haan's height, the immense figure stood with its spear at rest. It took a step forward out of the smoke that had wreathed it, to the centre of the plaza. De Haan watched the blood drip from its hand and stain the grey stones on the ground. It stood and regarded him, and there was none of the expected madness or fury in the white-hot pits of its baleful eyes, only a brooding patience that was far more terrifying.

He took a step forward. All the fury had gone like the snuffing of a candle: now there was just wrenching despair which drove everything else from his mind. He wondered how long ago Varantha's farseers had realised he was

hunting them, how long ago they had begun cultivating his hate, how long ago they had begun to set this trap for him. He wondered if the farseer whose prophecy he had thought to fulfil was laughing at him from within its spirit stone.

He stood alone on the steps, and the air was silent but for the hiss of heat from incandescent iron skin and the faint keening from the weapon in one giant hand.

Then the lines from the Pentadict danced through his mind, the lines with which Lorgar had closed his testament as his own death came upon him.

Pride and defiant hate, spite and harsh oblivion. Let the great jewelled knot of the cosmos unravel in the dust.

He looked up again, his mind suddenly clear and calm. He raised his crozius, but the salute was not returned. No matter. He took a pace forward and down the steps, that volcanic gaze on him all the time. He walked faster, now jogging. He worked the action on his pistol with the heel of his hand. Running, its eyes on him.

Charging now, feet hammering, voice found at last in a wail of defiance, Chaplain De Haan ran like a daemon across his last battlefield to where the Avatar of Kaela-Mensha-Khaine stood, its smoking, shrieking spear in its vast hands, waiting for him.

THE CURIOSITY

Dan Abnett

He was, it is fair to say, already weary of Gershom when the curiosity came to light. Seven years is a long time in any man's career, seven years living and working in grubby tenements, backwater hostels and frontier habs all over the planet. Long enough to feel like a native, and certainly to look like one, although he had been born forty-two years and many million AU distant. The patched worsted suit with shiny, calloused elbows, the slate grey weathercoat, fingerless leather gloves, wire-framed spectacles, the skin of his face etiolated from too many short, wintry days, his thin hair unnaturally black from a biweekly chemical treatment that he purchased and applied himself.

This insipid and forlorn figure stared at his own reflection from the smoked glass screen of the demograph booth.

'Present papers. State name and occupation,' the indistinct form behind the screen said. As he spoke, the words appeared in glowing, block-capital holos on the glass.

He put his crumpled documents into the bare metal drawer below the screen and it gobbled them away with an un-oiled clatter. Hunching low, he aimed his mouth helpfully at the vox grille, and said, 'Valentin Drusher, magos biologis.'

'Purpose of travel?' the voice said, subtitled as before.

'I am a magos biologis, as I said. You'll see I have a permit for travel to Outer Udar stamped by the office of the Lord Governor. He is my patron.'

The shape behind the tinted glass panel paused and then the legend 'please wait' appeared on the screen. Doing as he was told, Drusher stood back, rubbing his hands together briskly to chafe warmth into them. It was a miserably early morning in the last few days of autumn and the terminal was

vacant. Outside, it was not yet light; the sky was a patchy blue, the colour of a Tarkoni tarkonil's winter plumage, and the orange glare of sodium lamps reflected in the puddles on the rain-slicked concourse. Drusher studied the reflections and they reminded him of the fluorescent banding on the abdomen of the southern latitude glowmoth, Lumenis gershomi.

The air held the bitter foretaste of another hard Gershom winter closing in. He consoled himself with the thought that he would be long gone before winter came. Just a few more days to tidy up this annoying loose end and then he would be done at last.

The drawer slot clacked open again, his refolded papers laid inside.

'Proceed,' said the voice.

Drusher retrieved his papers, gathered up his bags and equipment cases, and walked down into the boarding yard to find himself a seat on the interprovince coach.

It wasn't hard. The vehicle, a converted military gref-carrier from the Peninsula, was all but empty. An old woman in a purple shawl sat alone, fingering rosary beads as she read from a dog-eared devotional chapbook. A young mother, hard-faced and tired, occupied another bench seat, her two small children gathered up in her skirts. A rough-faced agri-worker in leather overalls nodded, half-asleep, one arm protectively around the baskets of live, clucking poultry he shared his seat with. His hound, lean and grinning, prowled the aisle. Two young men, identical twins, sat side by side, motionlessly intent. Drusher set himself down near the front of the cabin, far away from anyone else. He shooed the dog away when it came sniffing at his bags.

A hooter sounded, waking the agri-worker briefly. The coach's big, caged props began to turn and beat, and the patched rubber skirts of the bulky ground-effect vehicle began to swell out. Drusher felt them drunkenly rise up. One of the little children laughed out in glee at the bobbing motion as the vehicle picked up speed.

Then they were out of the city terminal and roaring up to the state highway, fuming spray into the gloomy dawn.

Outer Udar, the most western and – many said – the most heathen of Gershom's provinces, lay far beyond the Tartred Mountains, forty hours away.

For the first hour or two, he worked on his notes, refining technical descriptions on his data-slate. Such polish was simply cosmetic. He'd been over it a hundred times and the taxonomy would have been published as complete by now. Complete but for the curiosity.

He put his slate aside and took the crumpled voxgram from his pocket, hoping yet again that it was a mistake.

Seven years! Seven damn years of rigorous work. To miss a sub-form of tick-fly, a variant weevil, even a divergent rodentae, well that would just be

the way of things. Even, he considered, some class of grazer, if it was localised and sufficiently shy in its habits.

But an apex predator? Surely, surely not. Any systematic taxonomy identified all apex predators in the initial phase of preparation by dint of the fact they were the most obvious of any world's creatures.

No, it was a mistake. The curiosity in Outer Udar was an error. He'd stake his reputation on that.

The rolling motion of the gref-coach began to lull him. He fell asleep, dreaming of the characterising mouthparts of filter snakes, the distinguishing feather-palps of lowland locustae, and the bold, striated beaks of peninsula huskpeckers.

He woke to the sound of infant laughter. The coach was stationary, and sleet was dashing against the grey windows. Blinking, he sat up, and repositioned his dislodged spectacles on his nose. At his feet, the two children had his sketchbooks laid open and were giggling as they surveyed the hand-painted images of beasts and fowls.

'Please,' he said, 'please be careful with those.'

The children looked up at him.

'Zoo books,' said one.

'Yes,' he replied, taking the sketchbooks away from their grubby hands and closing them.

'Why have you got zoo books?'

'I make zoo books,' he said.

They thought about this. Their simple grasp of professional careers did not reach so far. One nudged the other. 'Are you going to put the beast in your zoo books?' the nudged one asked.

'The beast?' he asked. 'Which beast?'

'The hill beast. It has teeth.'

'Great large teeth.'

'It eats men up.'

'And swine.'

'And swine. With its great large teeth. It has no eyes.'

'Come away!' their mother called, and the two children scurried back to her down the aisle.

Drusher looked around the cabin. It was just as he had last seen it. The agri-worker continued to snooze; the old woman was still reading. The only change was the twins, who now sat facing one another, like a mirror.

The cabin door thumped open and flakes of sleet billowed in around several newcomers. A black-robed demograph servitor, its face a cluster of slack tubes beneath augmetic compound eyes. A short-haired woman in a leather body-glove and fur coat, carrying a brown paper parcel. Another agri-

worker, his face chilblained, fighting to keep his long-haired terrier from snapping at the roaming hound. A matronly progenium school teacher in a long grey dress. The short-haired woman helped the matron with her luggage.

‘Leofrik! This is Leofrik!’ the servitor called as he walked the cabin. ‘Present your papers!’

Each voyager offered up his or her documents for the servitor to scan. Gershom was very particular about its indigents, the side effect of being so close to a war zone. The Departmento demographicae maintained a vigilant watch on the planet’s human traffic.

The servitor, waste spittle drooling from its mouth tubes, took a long time studying Drusher’s papers.

‘Magos biologis?’

‘Yes.’

‘Reason for travel?’

‘I went through all this at the terminal this morning.’

‘Reason for travel?’

Drusher sighed. ‘Seven years ago, I was commissioned by the Lord Governor of Gershom to draw up a comprehensive taxonomy of the planet’s fauna. It is all but complete. However, a curiosity has appeared in Outer Udar and I am travelling there to examine it.’

Drusher wanted to go on. To talk about the extended deadlines he had been forced to request, the increasingly reluctant project funding that had obliged him to take the overland coach instead of a chartered flier, the preposterous idea that he might have missed an apex predator.

But the demograph servitor wasn’t interested. It handed the papers back to Drusher and stalked away.

In the meantime, the short-haired woman had taken the seat opposite him. She smiled at Drusher. Her face was lean and sturdy, with a tiny scar zagging up from the left hand corner of her lip. Her eyes were dazzling amber, like photoluminescent cells.

Drusher looked away.

‘Magos biologis?’ she said.

‘Yes.’

‘I couldn’t help overhearing.’

‘Apparently.’

The servitor had dismounted. With a lurch like sea-swell, the gref-carrier rose and got underway again.

‘I was told you were coming,’ she said.

‘What?’

The woman reached into her fur coat – highland fox, if he wasn’t mistaken – and produced a wallet which she flipped open to reveal the golden badge inside.

‘Germaine Macks, province arbites.’

‘You were expecting me, officer?’

‘A squirt from the governor’s office. An expert on his way. I’m thrilled, of course. It’s about time. So, what’s the plan?’

‘Plan?’

‘Your m.o.?’

Drusher shrugged. ‘I suppose I’ll examine habitat, look for spores, collate cases and get a decent pict or two if I can.’ His voice trailed off. In seven years, no official had ever taken such interest in his work.

‘And how do you plan to kill it?’ she asked.

‘Kill it?’ he echoed.

‘Yes,’ she said, chuckling, as if party to some joke. ‘That being the point.’

‘I don’t intend to kill it. I don’t take samples. Just descriptive records, for the taxonomy.’ He patted his sketchbooks.

‘But you have to kill it,’ she said, earnestly. ‘I mean, if you don’t, who the hell will?’

By the firelight of the great hearth, Baron Karne went on expansively for several minutes.

‘The Lord Governor is a personal friend, a childhood friend, and when he makes it known that a scholar such as yourself is coming to my part of the world, I take pains to make that scholar welcome. Ask, and it will be given, magos. Any service, any requirement. I am happy to provide.’

‘Th–thank you, baron,’ Drusher said uneasily. He looked about the room. Trophy heads, crested with vast antlers and grimacing their fangs, haunted the shadowy walls. A winter storm battered at the leaded windows. Outer Udar was colder than he had dared imagine.

‘I wonder if there might have been a mistake,’ Drusher ventured.

‘How is that?’

‘Sir, I am a taxonomist. A scholar. My expertise is in the cataloguing of fauna-forms. The Lord Governor – your childhood friend, as you say – commissioned me to compile a concordance of Gershom’s animal life. I’ve come here because... well, there seems to be a curiosity out here I may have missed. A predator. I’m here to identify it for the taxonomy. Not kill it. I’m no hunter.’

‘You’re not?’

‘Not at all, sir. I sketch and examine and catalogue.’

The baron bowed his head. ‘Dear me... really?’

‘I’m truly sorry, sir.’

He looked over at the door into the dining room. It was ajar and light slanted through.

‘What will I tell them?’ the baron said.

Drusher felt desperately out of his depth. ‘If you have guests – I mean, to save face – I could play along, I suppose.’

Around the long candlelit table were nineteen local lairds and their ladies, the rotund Bishop of Udar and his secretary, and a square-jawed man with sandy-white hair and piercing eyes. His name was Skoh. Drusher wasn’t entirely sure who Skoh was. In fact, he wasn’t entirely sure of anything any more. The baron introduced him as ‘that expert from the city I’ve been promising’.

‘You are a famous hunter, then?’ the bishop asked Drusher.

‘Not famous, your holiness. I have some expertise in the line of animals.’

‘Good, good. So claims Skoh here, but in three months, what?’

‘It is a difficult beast, your honour,’ Skoh said softly. ‘I’d welcome some expert advice. What weapon do you favour, magos? Hollowpoint or shot? Do you bait? Do you use blinds?’

‘I… um… favour multiple means, sir. Whatever suits.’

‘Aren’t you terribly afraid?’ asked one of the ladies.

‘One must never underestimate the quarry, lady,’ Drusher said, hoping it conveyed an appropriate sense of duty and caution.

‘They say it has no eyes. How does it find its prey?’ asked the bishop.

‘By scent,’ Drusher replied emphatically.

‘Not so,’ snapped Skoh. ‘My hunters have been using sealed body sleeves. Not one sniff of pheromone escapes those suits. And still it finds them.’

‘It is,’ said Drusher, ‘a difficult beast. When was it last seen?’

‘The thirteenth,’ said the baron, ‘Up in the ridgeway, having taken a parlour maid from the yard at Laird Connok’s manse. My men scoured the woods for it, to no avail. Before that, the swineherd killed at Karla. The waterman at Sont’s Crossroads. The two boys out late by Laer’s Mere.’

‘You forget,’ said one of the lairds, ‘my potman, just before the killings at the Mere.’

The baron nodded. ‘My apologies.’

‘The beast is a blight on our land,’ said the bishop. ‘I say to you all, a speck of Chaos. We must rally round the holy aquila and renounce the dark. This thing has come to test our faith.’

Assenting murmurs grumbled around the table.

‘Are you a religious man, magos?’ the bishop asked.

‘Most certainly, your holiness.’

‘You must come to worship at my temple tomorrow. I would like to bless you before you begin your bloody work.’

‘Thank you, your holiness,’ Drusher said.

The outer door burst open, scudding all the candle flames, and a servant hurried in to whisper in the baron’s ear. Baron Karne nodded, and the servant hurried out again. A moment later, Arbites Officer Macks was standing in the

doorway, dripping wet, a riot-gun over one arm. Her badge was now pinned to the lapel of her leather body suit.

She looked around the room, pausing as she met Drusher's eyes.

'Deputy,' said the baron, rising from his seat. 'To what do we owe this interruption?'

'Another death, lord,' she said. 'Out by the stoops.'

The acreage to the north of Baron Karne's draughty keep was a low swathe of marshy ground given over to poultry farming. Through the sleeting rain, thanks to the light of the bobbing lamps, Drusher could make out row upon row of stoop-sheds constructed from maritime ply and wire. There was a strong smell of mud and bird lime.

Drusher followed the baron and Officer Macks down boarded paths fringed by gorse hedges. With them came three of the baron's huscarls, lanterns swinging from the tines of their billhooks. The weather was dreadful. Icy rain stung Drusher's cheeks numb and, as he pulled his old weathercoat tighter around him, he longed for a hat and a warm fox-fur jacket like the one Macks wore.

There was an odd wobbling noise just audible over the drumming of the rain. Drusher realised it was the agitated clucking of thousands of poultry birds.

They reached the stoops, and trudged up a metal-mesh walkway between the first two shed rows. The bird-dung stink was stronger now, musty and stale despite the rain. Teased clumps of white feathers clogged the cage wire. Macks said something to the baron and pointed. A flashlight beam moved around up ahead. It was one of Macks's junior arbites, a young man by the name of Lussin, according to his quilted jacket's nametag. He looked agitated, and extremely glad to see company at last.

The frame door to one of the stoop sheds was open; Macks shone her light inside. Drusher caught a glimpse of feathers and some kind of metal cylinder lying on the floor.

He followed Macks and the baron into the stoop.

Drusher had never seen a dead body before, except for that of his Uncle Rudiger, who had died when Drusher was a boy. The family had visited his body in the chapel of rest to pay their respects and Uncle Rudiger had looked normal. Asleep. Drusher, with a child's naiveté, had quite expected his uncle to jump up and laugh in their faces. Uncle Rudiger had been a great one for practical jokes.

The body in the poultry stoop wasn't about to jump up or do anything. It was face down, thankfully, its limbs draped in a contorted, awkward way that wasn't a practical joke. This was one of the baron's farm staff, apparently, a yeoman called Kalken. He'd been doing the night feed, and the metal cylinder

Drusher had seen was Kalken's grain-hopper, lying where he'd dropped it in a pile of spilt maize.

Macks knelt down by the body. She looked up at Drusher and made a little jerk with her head that indicated he might want to go outside again. Drusher stuck his hands in his coat pockets resolutely and stayed put. With a shrug, Macks turned the body over.

'Are you all right?' Macks said.

'What?'

'Are you all right?'

Drusher opened his eyes. He couldn't remember leaving the stoop, but he was outside in the rain again, leaning against the barn opposite, his hands clenched in the wire mesh so tight he'd drawn blood.

'Magos?'

'Y-yes,' he stammered. 'I'm fine.' He thought it likely that he'd never forget what he'd just seen. The awful flop of the rolling body. The way a good deal of it had remained behind on the muddy floor.

'Take a few deep breaths,' she said.

'I really am fine.'

'You look pale.'

'I'm always pale.'

She shrugged. 'You might as well stay here,' she added, though Drusher felt she'd said it less out of concern for his nerves and more because she knew he wasn't particularly useful. 'I'm going to make some notes in situ.'

'There were bites,' he said.

'Yes,' Macks replied. 'At least, I think so.'

'Measure them. And examine the bite radius for foreign matter. Tooth fragments that might have lodged in the bone. That sort of thing.'

'Right,' she said and turned away.

'Where did it get in?' he called after her.

'What?'

'Where did it get in? Was the cage door open?'

'No. He'd fastened it behind him when we found him.'

'Can I borrow a flashlight?'

Macks got a lamp-pack from Lussin and gave it to Drusher. Then she went back into the stoop with the baron to begin her grisly inspection properly.

Drusher began to walk away down the length of the stoop run, shining his torch in through the cages on either side.

'Don't roam too far, sir!' one of the huscarls called out after him.

Drusher didn't answer. He wanted to roam as far as he could. The thought of being anywhere near that bloody, dismembered mess made him shiver. He was sweating despite the winter gale.

Ten metres down, near the end of the row, he found the wire cage roof of one of the stoops had been torn wide open. Drusher played the torch around. He was near the end fence of the poultry compound, a three-metre timber pale topped with a barbed and electrified string of wires. He could see no hole in the fence or damage to the deterrent wires. Had the beast cleared the wall itself? Quite a leap. There was no sign of spore in the thick mud at his feet. The rain was washing it into soup.

He let himself into the ruptured stoop and examined the torn wire roof. With the rain splashing off his face, he reached up and yanked part of it down, studying the broken ends with his lamp closely.

It wasn't torn. It was cut, cleanly, the tough wire strands simply severed. What could do that? Certainly not teeth, not even teeth that could take the front off a man's face and body. A power blade, perhaps, but that would leave signs of oxidation and heat-fatigue.

As far as he knew – and there was no man on Gershom better qualified – there wasn't an animal on the planet that could leap a three-metre security fence and slice open reinforced agricultural mesh.

Drusher took out the compact digital picter he always carried and took a few snaps of the wire for reference. It came through this cage roof, he thought. Probably landed on it, in point of fact, coming over the fence, cut its way in... and then what?

He looked around. The covered timber coop-end of the shed was dark and unforthcoming.

It suddenly occurred to him that whatever it was might still be there.

He felt terror and stupidity in roughly equal measures. He'd been so anxious to get away from that terrible corpse and prove he was good for something, the blindingly obvious had passed him by.

It was still here. It was still right here in the shadows of the coop-box. Once the idea had entered his brain it became unshakable fact. It really was there, just out of sight in the gloom, breathing low, gazing at him without eyes, coiling to pounce.

He backed towards the cage door, fumbling for the latch. He could hear it moving now, the rustle of straw, the crunch of dried lime on the box's wooden floor.

Dear God-Emperor, he was going to–

'Drusher? Golden Throne! I nearly blasted you!' Macks emerged from the coop-box, straw sticking to her wet hair. She lowered her riot-gun.

'What are you doing here?' she asked

'I was... looking for... traces...' he said, trying to slow his thrashing pulse. He gestured up at the torn cage roof.

'You'll love this then,' she said, and led him into the stinking darkness of the coop-box. The floor was littered with dead poultry, feathers glued to the

wallboards with blood. The smell of offal was overpowering and made him gag.

Macks shone her flashlight at the end wall, and showed him the splintered hole in the timbers.

‘It came in and went right down through the row of stoops, smashing through each dividing wall until it found Kalken,’ she said. She’d come back along that route to find Drusher. The holes were easily big enough for her to get through.

‘Killed everything in its path,’ she said. ‘Hundreds of roosting birds.’

‘But it didn’t eat anything,’ he observed, struggling to overcome his nausea. ‘It slashed or bit its way through, but there’s no sign of feeding.’

‘That’s important why?’ she asked.

He shrugged. He took shots of the splintered holes with his picter, and then got her to hold the light steady while he measured the dimensions of each hole with his las-surveyor.

‘Have you told anyone?’ he asked her.

‘Told anyone what?’

‘The truth about me? About what I am?’

She shook her head. ‘I didn’t see any point.’

‘The baron knows,’ he told her.

‘Right.’

There was movement outside, and he followed her out of the stoop. Skoh was coming down the walkway through the rain. He’d changed into a foul-weather suit, and was hefting what looked like an autolaser, though Drusher was no expert on weapons. It had a big, chrome drum-barrel, and was so heavy it was supported by a gyro harness strapped around his torso. An auspex target-lens covered his right eye like a patch.

‘You’ve seen the body?’ she asked him.

‘Yes. My men are sweeping the wood behind the fence.’

‘It came right through here,’ she said, indicating the run of stoops.

Skoh nodded and looked at Drusher, as if expecting some expert insight from him. When none came, Skoh left them without a word and continued on down the path.

‘Who is he?’ Drusher asked.

‘Fernal Skoh? He’s a freelance hunter. Game specialist. The community hired him and his men when it became clear I wasn’t up to the job.’ There was rich contempt in her voice.

‘The bishop doesn’t think much of him,’ Drusher said.

Macks grinned. ‘The bishop doesn’t think much of anyone. Skoh’s not had much success so far, despite his flashy rep. Besides, the bishop has his own man on the job.’

‘His own man?’

‘Gundax. You’ll meet him before long. He’s the bishop’s bodyguard. Tough piece of work.’

‘Doesn’t the bishop think Skoh can get the job done?’

‘I don’t think anybody does any more. The baron’s threatening to withhold Skoh’s fee. Anyway, Skoh’s not the bishop’s sort.’

‘What?’

‘Skoh’s ungodly, according to his holiness. His background is in bloodsports. The Imperial Pits on Thustathrax.’

Drusher’s repose was fractured by lurid dreams of bodies that left steaming parts behind when they rolled over. In the small hours, he gave up on rest, and got out of bed.

He’d been given a room on an upper floor of the keep. It was terribly cold, and the wind and rain rattled the poorly-fitted shutters. Drusher got dressed, activated a glow-globe, and stoked some life into the portable heater. By the light of the globe, he spread out his equipment and note books on the table and distracted himself with study.

There wasn’t a land predator in Gershom that even approximately fitted the evidence. Prairie wolves from the western continent, Lupus cygnadae gershomi, were rapacious enough, but their pack mentality meant they were unlikely to be lone killers. The great mottled felid of the peninsula taiga, sadly almost extinct, had the bulk and power, and could well have cleared the fence, but neither it nor a prairie wolf would could have cut wire like that. And either would have fed.

Besides, Macks had given him her scribbled findings. There was no foreign matter in the poor yeoman’s wounds, but she’d made an estimation of the bite radius. Fifty-three centimetres. Fifty-three!

No wolf came close. The biggest radius Drusher had measured for a felid was thirty-seven, and that had been from a skull in the Peninsula Museum. All the biggest cats were long dead now.

The only thing that came close was Gnathocorda maximus, the vast, deep ocean fish. But this was Outer Udar. There were no wolves here, no forest cats, and certainly no sharks on the loose.

He looked at the picts he’d made of the holes in the stoop walls. It was hard to define from the splinter damage, but it looked like each gap had been ripped open by a double blow, each point descending diagonally from the upper corners. Like a man slicing an X with two swords.

And what was all this talk about it having no eyes?

Lyam Gundax’s eyes were dark and close together. He was a tall, massively muscled man with a forked beard and braided black hair. Drusher could smell his body-sweat, a scent like that of an animal.

‘Who are you and what do you want?’

It was early in the day. The rains had slowed to a drizzle, and the land was dark under a grey sky. Outer Udar was a wide skirt of rocky uplands and black forests around the dismal horizon.

Drusher had come to the cathedral only to find his way into the nave blocked by the big, fur-clad Gundax. The bishop’s man was decorated with bead necklaces and wrist-straps, heavy with polished stones, charms, Imperial symbols and animal teeth.

‘Gundax! Come away!’ the bishop called out, as if calling off a dog. He wobbled into view as Gundax stepped back.

‘Drusher, my dear child,’ the bishop greeted him. ‘Pay no attention to my rogue here. This is the magos biologis I told you about,’ he told Gundax.

Gundax nodded curtly, his leather smock creaking. His charm beads clattered against each other.

‘Walk with me,’ the bishop told Drusher.

They plodded side by side down the nave. Drusher made a few admiring remarks about the temple’s towering architecture and glorious stained glass work.

‘This is a hard parish,’ said the bishop. ‘Hard and hardy on the edge of beyond. Of course, I’m not complaining. I serve the God-Emperor in whatever capacity he calls on me to perform. And here is as good as any.’

‘The Emperor protects,’ Drusher said.

‘He doesn’t seem to be doing that so much here these days,’ said the bishop. ‘It weakens the faith. I have a tough enough time instilling virtue and belief into the weather-beaten folk of this blasted land, and this beast... it saps every ounce of fibre.’

‘It must be difficult, your holiness.’

‘Life is difficult. We rise to our tests. But, my dear magos, I fear for the spiritual life of this community almost as much as I fear for its flesh and blood. This thing... this beast... it is not an animal. It is a test of faith. An emissary of Chaos. For it to roam here, unchecked also shows that disbelief may roam here likewise. In every sermon I preach, I declaim as much. The beast is a sign that we have fallen away and allowed taint into our souls. To kill it, to cast it out, we must first reaffirm our faith in the Golden Throne.’

‘You make it sound simple, your holiness.’

‘It is not, of course! But this beast may be a blessing in disguise. Ultimately, I mean. If it makes us renew our belief and our trust in the absolute sanctity of the aquila, then I will offer thanks for it in time. Only in true adversity may a congregation find its focus.’

‘I commend your zeal, bishop.’

‘So... do you have any leads? Any expert insight?’

‘Not yet, your holiness.’

‘Ah well, early days. Come, let me bless you and your work.’

‘Your holiness? One thing?’

‘Yes, magos?’ said the bishop brightly, halting in his tracks.

‘You said the beast has no eyes. In fact, that seems to be the popular conviction.’ Drusher paused, remembering the words of the child on the coach.

‘No eyes, indeed! No eyes, that’s what they say.’

‘Who, your holiness?’

The bishop paused. ‘Why, the folk of Outer Udar. It is what they know of it.’

‘I was of the understanding that no one had actually seen this thing. Seen it and survived, I mean.’

The bishop shrugged. ‘Really?’

‘I know of no eye-witness. No one can offer any sort of description. No one knows the form or size of this thing. Of course, we can make guesses. We know it has teeth from the wounds it delivers, and from that I can estimate the size of the mouth. We know it is small enough to pass through a man-sized hole. And, I fancy, it has shearing claws or talons of some considerable size. But other than that, there is no certainty of its form or nature. And yet... everyone seems certain it has no eyes. Why is that, do you think?’

‘Tattle,’ smiled the bishop. ‘Tavern talk, fireside yap. You know how people invent things, especially if they know nothing and they’re afraid. I’m sure it has eyes.’

‘I see,’ said Drusher.

‘Now, come and receive my blessing.’

Drusher endured the short blessing ritual. He didn’t feel any better for it.

‘I would appreciate your collaboration, magos,’ said Fernal Skoh. Drusher raised his eyebrows and hesitated, then let the hunter into his chambers. It was late afternoon, and an ice-wind was rising in the north.

Skoh, dressed in a leather body-glove reinforced with mail links and segments of plasteel armour plate, entered Drusher’s quarters in the keep and looked around.

Drusher closed the door after him.

‘A drink?’ he offered.

‘Thank you, yes.’

Drusher poured two glasses of amasec from the flask in his luggage. Skoh was wandering the room. He paused at the table, and looked down at Drusher’s spread-out mass of notebooks, data-slates and jottings. Skoh carefully leafed through one of the sketch books, studying each water colour illustration.

Drusher brought him his drink.

‘This is fine work,’ said Skoh, making an admiring gesture towards the sketches. ‘Truly you have a good hand and a great eye. That grazer there. Just so.’

‘Thank you.’

‘You’re no hunter though, are you, Drusher?’

The question took Drusher aback.

‘No,’ he admitted.

‘That’s fine,’ said Skoh, sipping his drink. ‘I didn’t think so. You’re just one more fool caught up in this mess.’

‘I hear you worked the Imperial Pits.’

Skoh looked at Drusher cautiously. ‘Who’s been talking?’

‘Deputy Macks.’

Skoh nodded. ‘Well, it’s true. Twenty-five years I worked for the arena on Thustathrax as a procurer.’

‘What’s that?’

‘I was paid to travel the wilder worlds of the Imperium trapping and collecting animal specimens to fight in the arena. The odder, the more savage, the better. It brought the crowds in if we had something... unusual.’

‘Something like this beast?’

Skoh didn’t reply.

‘It must have been interesting work. Dangerous work. That’s why the bishop doesn’t like you, isn’t it?’

Skoh managed a small smile. ‘The arenas of the Imperial Pits are ungodly, according to his holiness. I was employed by a secular entertainment industry that revelled in bloodletting and carnage. I am, to him, the lowest of the low. And an outsider to boot.’

‘What did you want, Skoh?’ Drusher asked.

‘The baron tells me my fee will be forfeit if I fail to make a kill soon. I have wages to pay, overheads to consider. This job has dragged on. I can kill this beast, Drusher, but I can’t find it. I think you can. Help me, and I’ll pay you a dividend of my earnings.’

‘I’m not interested in money,’ said Drusher, sipping his amasec.

‘You’re not?’

‘I’m interested in two things. An end to this slaughter and a personal closure. I was hired to produce a complete taxonomy of this planet’s fauna. Now, at the eleventh hour, I seem to have a new apex predator on my hands. If that’s so, it will throw my entire work into disarray. Seven years’ work, you understand?’

‘You think this is an apex predator that you’ve missed?’

‘No,’ said Drusher. ‘Not even slightly. There’d be records, previous incidents. This is either a known predator gone rogue and acting abnormally or... ‘

‘Or?’

‘It’s an exotic.’

Skoh nodded. ‘You’ve been here a day and you’re that certain?’

‘Yes, sir.’

‘Do you have supporting evidence?’

‘It doesn’t match anything I’ve turned up in seven years. And it doesn’t feed. There is no sign of appetite or predation. It simply kills and kills and kills again. That’s the behaviour of a rogue animal, a carnivore that’s no longer killing due to hunger. And it’s the behaviour of a creature alien to this world. May I ask you a couple of questions?’

Skoh set his empty glass down on the table. ‘By all means.’

‘Why do they say it has no eyes? Where did that rumour come from?’

‘All I know about that is that the lack of eyes is a regular feature of the bishop’s hellfire sermons. I presumed it was hyperbolic invention on his part, which has fallen into common rumour.’

‘My other question is this: you know what it is, don’t you?’

Skoh looked at him. His eyes pierced right through Drusher.

‘No,’ he said.

By dawn the next day, there had been another death. A swine herder out beyond the crossroads had been killed in the night, and twenty of his saddlebacks along with him. Drusher went out into the sparse woodland with Skoh, Macks, Lussin and two of Skoh’s huntsmen.

The air was cold and ice-fog wrapped the hillside. It was ten below. At the swine farm, the bodies of hogs and hogherd alike had frozen into the mud of the pens, their copious blood making ruby-like crystals.

In the steep thorn scrub above the swine farm, Drusher stopped the group and handed out the cartridges he’d prepared the night before.

‘Load them into your shotguns,’ he said. ‘They won’t have much range, I’m afraid.’

Macks and Lussin had arbites-issue riot-guns. Skoh had made sure his men had brought short action pump-shots along with their heavy ordnance. Both huntsmen, like Skoh, were weighed down with torso rigs supporting massive autolasers.

‘What are these?’ Lussin asked.

Drusher broke a cartridge open to show them. Little chrome pellets were packed inside in a sticky fluid suspension.

‘Trackers,’ he said. ‘Miniature tracker units. They have a two thousand kilometre range. I usually use them for ringing birds. In fact I plotted the migration patterns of the lesser beakspot and the frigate gull Tachybaptus maritimus over a three-year period using just these very–’

‘I’m sure you did a great job,’ snapped Macks. ‘But can we get on?’

Drusher nodded. ‘I’ve packed them in contact adhesive. If you see anything – anything – then you mark it.’

They made their way up the thorny scarp and entered a stretch of black-birch woodland. Thanks to the fog, the world had become a shrunken, myopic place. Unaided visibility was twenty metres. Stark and twisted black trees hemmed them in, gradually receding into the white vapour. The earth was hard, and groundcover leaves were brittle with frost. The obscured sun backlit the fog, turning the sky into a glowing white haze. Skoh spread the group into a wide line, but still close enough for every person to be visible at least to his immediate neighbour. Drusher stayed with Macks. There was an uncanny stillness, broken only by the sounds of their breathing and movement.

Drusher was bone-cold. Macks, wearing a quilted arbites jacket, had lent him her fox-fur jacket, which he wore over his own weathercoat. His breath clouded the air.

‘Do you have a weapon?’ she asked.

He shook his head.

She slid a short-pattern autopistol out of an underarm rig, checked the load, and handed it to him grip first.

He looked at it uncertainly, as if it was some new specimen for collation. It had a brushed-matt finish and a black, rubberised grip.

‘The safety’s here, beside the trigger guard. If you have to fire it, hold it with both hands and aim low because the kick lifts it.’

‘I don’t think so,’ he said. ‘I’ve never been a great one for guns.’

‘I’d feel better if you had something.’

‘You wouldn’t feel better if I shot you by accident, which is likely if you let me loose with something like that.’

She shrugged and put it away again.

‘Your funeral,’ she said.

‘I do hope not.’

They walked on another kilometre or two. Skoh and his hired hands had auspex units taped to their forearms, scanning for movement.

‘What was the time of death, do you reckon?’ Drusher asked.

Macks pursed her lips. ‘Four, four-thirty? The bodies had a residual core temperature.’

‘So three or four hours ago?’

The chance of anything still being around seemed very slim to Drusher. Given the Beast’s hit-and-run habits, it would be long gone by now. But the cold offered possibilities. It had set the soil hard and solid. Tracks might remain. Drusher kept his eyes on the ground.

They went across open fields, thick with rime, and along the basin of a wooded dell where the fallen leaves had frozen into a slippery mat. The fog was actually beginning to disperse, but down in the hollow it was as thick as

smoke. Butcher birds, jet black and armed with shiny hook-beaks, cawed, clacked and circled in the treetops.

Drusher suddenly heard an extraordinary noise. It sounded like an industrial riveter or a steam-powered loom. A puffing, pneumatic sputter interlaced with high pitch squeals.

Macks started to run. Her vox-link crackled into life.

'What is it?' Drusher called, hurrying after her.

He heard the noise again and made more sense of it. One of Skoh's men had opened fire with his autolaser.

He scrambled through the frosty ground-brush, trying to keep up with Macks's jogging back as it slipped in and out of sight between the tree trunks. Twice he went over on the frozen rug of leaves, scraping his palms.

'Macks! What's going on?'

More shooting now. A second weapon joining the first. Stacatto *puff-zwip-puff-zwip*.

Then the dreadful, plangent boom of a shotgun.

Drusher almost ran into Macks. She had stopped in her tracks.

Ahead of them, in a narrow clearing between leafless tindletrees, Skoh lay on his back. It looked like his chest and groin was on fire, but Drusher realised it wasn't smoke. It was steam, wafting up from wretched wounds that had all but eviscerated him. His heavy weapon and part of its gimbal-rig had been torn off and were lying on the other side of the clearing. Huge clouts of fused earth had been torn out of the ground and two small trees severed completely from the fury of his shooting.

'Throne of Terra...' Macks stammered.

Drusher felt oddly dislocated, as if it wasn't actually happening. They walked together, slowly, towards the body of the hunter. He still had his pump-shot clamped in his hand. The end of the barrel was missing.

Macks suddenly swung left, her riot-gun aimed. One of Skoh's men stood on the other side of the clearing, half-hidden by a tree and only now visible to them. He wasn't actually standing. His body was lodged upright by the tree itself. His head was bowed onto his chest, the angle of the tilt far, far greater than any spine should allow. Macks approached him tentatively, and reached out a hand. When she touched him, he sagged sideways and his head flopped further. Drusher saw that only the merest shred of skin kept it attached to the rest of the body.

Drusher was overcome with heaving retches and he wobbled over to the thickets to throw up. Lussin and the other huntsman stumbled into the clearing while he was emptying his stomach.

'Did you see anything?' Macks barked at the other men.

'I just heard the shooting,' Lussin moaned. He couldn't take his eyes from Skoh's awfully exposed entrails.

‘That’s it, then,’ said the hunter. He leaned back against a tree trunk, and clutched his head in his hands. ‘Damn, that’s it then.’

‘It’s got to be close! Come on!’ Macks snapped.

‘And do what?’ the hunter asked. ‘Two of them, with turbo-lasers, and they didn’t kill it.’ He nodded to Skoh’s body. ‘That’s my paycheck gone. All my dividends.’

‘Is that all you care about?’ Lussin asked.

‘No,’ said the hunter, ‘I care about living too.’ He took out a lho-stick, lit it and sucked hard. ‘I told Skoh we’d wasted our time here. Stayed too long. He wouldn’t admit it. He said he couldn’t afford to cut our losses and leave. Screw it. Screw him.’

The hunter straightened up and dragged on his smoke-stick again. ‘Good luck,’ he said and began to walk away.

‘Where the hell are you going?’ Macks demanded.

‘Where we should have gone weeks ago. As far away as possible.’

‘Come back!’ cried Lussin.

The hunter shook his head and wandered away into the fog. Drusher never saw him again.

‘What do we do?’ Lussin asked Macks. She was prowling up and down, fists clenched. She growled something.

‘One of them got a round off, with a shotgun,’ Drusher said. His voice was hoarse from vomiting and his mouth tasted foul.

‘You sure?’ Macks snapped.

‘I heard a shotgun,’ Drusher said.

‘I didn’t,’ said Macks.

‘I think I did... maybe...‘ Lussin murmured softly, rubbing his eyes.

‘Get an auspex!’ Macks ordered. Drusher wasn’t sure who she was speaking to, but Lussin didn’t move. Reluctantly, Drusher approached Skoh’s body, trying not to look directly at it. He crouched down and started to peel away the tape that secured the compact scanner to Skoh’s left gauntlet.

Skoh opened his eyes and exhaled steam. Drusher screamed, and would have leapt back if the hunter’s left hand hadn’t grabbed his wrist.

‘Drusher...‘

‘Oh no... oh no... ‘

The hand pulled him closer. He could smell the hot, metallic stink of blood.

‘Saw it...‘

‘What?’

‘I... saw... it...‘ Thin, watery blood leaked from Skoh’s mouth and his breathing was ragged. His eyes were dull and filmy.

‘What did you see?’ asked Drusher.

‘You... were... right, Drusher... I... I did... know what... it was... suspected...

didn’t want... didn’t want to say... cause a panic... and anyway... couldn’t be true... not here... couldn’t be here...‘

‘What did you see?’ Drusher repeated.

‘All the things... I’ve tracked... tracked and caught in... in my life... for the Pits... you know I worked for the Pits...?’

‘Yes.’

‘Never seen one... before... but been told... about them... you don’t mess with... don’t mess with them... don’t care what the... the Pits would pay for one.’

‘What was it, Skoh?’

‘The Great... Great Devourer...’

‘Skoh?’

The hunter tried to turn his head to look at Drusher. A torrent of black blood gushed from his mouth and nostrils, and his eyes went blank.

Drusher tore the auspex from the dead man’s forearm and got to his feet.

‘What did he say?’ Macks asked.

‘He was raving,’ said Drusher. ‘The pain had taken his senses away.’

He swept the auspex around and tried to adjust its depth of field. He was getting a lot of nearby bounce from the trackers that had gone wide and pelted the ferns and tree boles.

Two contacts showed at a greater range. Two of the glue-dipped teleplugs anchored to the hide of something moving north-west, just a kilometre and a half away.

‘Got anything?’

‘Yes. Come on.’

Macks was clearly considering taking one of the heavy turbo-las weapons from the corpses, but that would mean touching them.

‘Right,’ she said. ‘Lead on.’

‘Macks?’

‘Yes?’

‘Maybe I should borrow that handgun after all,’ Drusher said.

They hurried through the frozen woodland, following the steady returns of the auspex. The fog was burning off now, and the heavy red sun was glowering down, casting a rosy tint across the iced wilderness.

When they paused for a moment to catch their breaths, Macks looked at the magos.

‘What?’ she asked.

‘I was just thinking...‘

‘Thinking what?’

‘Skoh was looking for this thing for months. State of the art track-ware, qualified help. Not a sign. And then, today...’

‘He got unlucky. Damn, we all got unlucky.’

‘No,’ said Drusher. ‘If you were the beast... wouldn’t today be a good day to turn and take him out? It was his last serious try. He’s coming out with a magos biologis at his side, changing tactics. Using taggers.’

‘What are you saying, Drusher?’

Drusher shrugged. ‘I don’t know. It’s... convenient, I suppose. This thing is quick and sly enough to do its evil work and stay right out of harm’s way. By the time a killing is discovered, it’s long gone. Today, we had the best chance yet of catching it. And what does it do? It changes its habits entirely and turns on us.’

‘So?’ asked Lussin.

‘Almost like it knew. Almost like it was concerned that a magos biologis and an experienced tracker might have enough skill between them to pose a realistic threat.’

‘It’s just an animal. What did you call it? An apex predator.’

‘Maybe. But it’s what a man would do. A fugitive who’s evaded capture this long, but hears that the search for him has stepped up. He might decide the time was right to turn and fight.’

‘You talk like you know what this thing is, Drusher,’ said Macks.

‘I don’t. It doesn’t fit into any taxonomy I’ve studied. It doesn’t fit into any Imperial taxonomy either. Except maybe classified ones.’

‘What?’

‘Come on. ‘ Drusher stood up and hurried on through the copse.

The air-mill had been derelict for fifty years. Its weather boards had fallen away and the sails of its wind-rotor were flaking. The district had processed its flour here, before the cheaper mass-production plant had opened in Udar Town half a century ago.

Drusher, Macks and Lussin edged down through the chokes of weed brush towards the rear of the ruin. The tracker tags had been stationary for half an hour.

Macks pushed the lap-frame door open with the snout of her riot-gun. They slid inside. The interior space was a dingy cone of timber and beamed floors. The mill-gear ran down through the tower’s spine like the gears of a gigantic clock.

It smelled of mildew and rotting flour-dust. Drusher took out the pistol. He pointed upwards. Lussin, riot-gun gripped tightly, edged up the open-framed steps to the second level.

Drusher heard something. A slither. A scurry.

He hung back against the wall. There was something up with the auspex. An interference pattern that was making the screen jump. As if an outside signal was chopping the scanner’s returns.

Macks circled wide, gun raised to aim at the roof. Lussin reached the head of the stairs and switched around, sweeping with his gun. Drusher tried to get the auspex to clear.

Lussin screamed, and his gun went off. There was a heavy, splintering sound as he fell backwards down the steps, his weapon discharging a second time.

He was dead. The front of his skull was peeled off and blood squirted into the air.

Macks howled, and fired her riot-gun into the ceiling, pumping the grip and blasting the rotten floorboards in a blizzard of wood splinters with each successive shot. Every muzzle-flash lit the mill room for a millisecond

Exploding wood away before it, the Beast smashed through the deck and came down at them.

It was a blur. Just a blur, moving faster than anything had a right to. Macks's riot-gun boomed again. The creature moved like smoke in a draft. Drusher had a fleeting glimpse of deep purple body plates, a snapping tail of gristly bone, forearm claws like harvest scythes. Macks screamed.

Drusher dropped the auspex and fired his pistol.

The recoil almost broke his wrist. He yelped in pain and frustration, stung hard by the kick. Use both hands, she'd told him.

It turned from Macks, chittering, and bounded across the floor right at him.

It was beautiful. Perfect. An organic engine designed for one sole task: murder. The muscular power of the body, the counter-weight tail; the scythe limbs, like a pair of swords. The inhuman hate.

It had no eyes, at least none that he could see.

Hold the gun with both hands and aim low. That's what she'd said. Because of the kick.

Drusher fired. The recoil slammed up his arms. If he'd hit anything, it wasn't obvious. He fired again.

The Beast opened its mouth. Fifty-three centimetres of bite radius, teeth like thorns. The blade-limbs jerking back to kill him.

He fired again. And again. He saw at least one round flick away, deflected by the Beast's bio-armour.

It was right on him.

And then it was thrown sideways against the wall.

It dropped, writhed, and rose again.

Drusher shot it in the head.

It lunged at him. A riot-gun roared and blew it back. Bleeding from the forehead, Macks stepped up and fired blast after blast. She fired until the gun was empty, then took the pistol out of Drusher's hands and emptied that into it too.

Ichor covered the walls. Frothy goo dribbled out of the Beast's fractured

bone armour.

‘What is it?’ Macks asked.

‘I believe,’ Drusher replied, ‘it’s called a hormagaunt.’

But Macks had passed out.

It took the better part of an hour for the relief team of arbites to reach them from Udar Town. Drusher had made Macks comfortable by them, and dressed her wounds.

Pistol in hand, he’d carefully examined the beast. The goad-control was easy to find, implanted into the back of the eyeless head.

When Macks came round again, he showed her.

‘You need to deal with this.’

‘What does it mean?’

‘It means this abomination was brought here deliberately. It means that someone was controlling it, directing it in a rudimentary fashion.’

‘Really? Like who?’

‘I’d start by asking the bishop some questions, and his pet heavy, Gundax. I could be wrong, of course, because it’s not my field, but I think the bishop has a lot to gain from something that puts the fear of the God-Emperor into his flock. It steels the faith of a congregation to have something real to rally against.’

‘He did this on purpose?’

‘It’s just a theory. Someone did.’

Macks was quiet for a while. He could guess what she was thinking. There would be an investigation and an inquest. The Inquisition may have to be involved. Every aspect of life in the province would be scrutinised and pulled apart. It could take months. Drusher knew it meant he wouldn’t be leaving Outer Udar any time soon. As a chief witness, he’d be required to stay.

Outside, it had begun to sleet again.

‘You must be happy at least,’ murmured Macks. ‘That work of yours, your great taxonomy. It’s all done. You’ve finished.’

‘It was done before I even got here,’ said Drusher dryly. He nodded at the body of the beast. He’d covered it with a piece of sacking so he didn’t have to look at it any more. ‘That wasn’t part of my job. Just a curiosity.’

‘Oh well,’ she replied with a sigh.

He went to the mill door, and gazed out into the sleeting wilds. Ice pricked at his face. Gershom would be keeping him in its chilly grip a while longer yet.

‘Could I keep this jacket a little longer?’ he asked Macks, indicating the fur coat she’d lent him. ‘It’s going to be a cold winter.’

THE SKULL HARVEST

Graham McNeill

Dead, glassy eyes stared up at the bar patrons from the floor as the rolling head finally came to a halt. It had been a swift blow, the edge of the killer's palm like a blade, and the snarling warrior's head was ripped from his neck before the last words of his challenge were out of his mouth.

The body still stood, its murderer grasping the edge of its crimson-stained breastplate in one gnarled grey fist. Blood pooled beneath the head and squirted upwards from the stump of neck. The body's legs began to twitch, as though it sought to escape its fate even in death. The killer released his grip and turned away as the body crashed to the dirty, ash- and dust-streaked floor in a clatter of steel and dead meat.

The excitement over, the patrons of the darkened bar returned to their drinks and plotting, for no one came to a place like this without schemes of revenge, murder, pillage and destruction in mind.

Honsou of the Iron Warriors was no exception, and his champion's bloody display of lethal prowess was just the first step in his own grand design.

The air was thick with intrigue, grease and smoke, the latter curling around heavy rafters that looked as though they had once been part of a spaceship. Irregular clay bricks supported a roof formed from sheets of corrugated iron, and thin slats of harsh light, like the burning white sky of Medrengard, shone through bullet holes and gaps in the construction.

The killer of the now headless body licked the blood from the edge of its hand, and Honsou grinned as he saw the urge to continue killing in his champion's all too familiar grey eyes and taut posture. It called itself the Newborn, and was clad in tarnished power armour the colour of wrought iron. Its shoulder guards were edged in yellow and black, and a rough cloak of

ochre was draped around its wide shoulders. It was every inch an Iron Warrior but for its face; a slack fleshmask of stolen skin that was the image of a man Honsou would one day kill. Stitched together from the skins of dead prisoners, the Newborn's face was that of the killer in the dark, the terror of the night and the lurker in the shadows that haunts the dreams of the fearful.

It turned towards Honsou and he felt a delicious shiver of vicarious excitement as he glanced at the dead body on the floor.

'Nicely done,' said Honsou. 'Poor bastard didn't even get to finish insulting me.'

The Newborn shrugged as it sat across the table from him. 'He was nothing, just a slave warrior.'

'True, but he died just as bloodily as the next man.'

'Killing this one might make you the "next man" to his master,' said the Newborn.

'Better he dies now than we end up recruiting him and he fails in battle,' said Cadaras Grendel from across the table as he finished a tin mug of harsh liquor. 'Don't want any damn wasters next to me if we have to fight anything tough in the next few days.'

Grendel was a brute, an armoured killer who delighted in slaughter and the misery of others. Once, he had fought for a rival Warsmith on Medrengard, though in defeat he had transferred his allegiance to Honsou. Despite that switch, Honsou knew Grendel's continued service was bought with the promise of carnage and that his loyalty was that of a starving wolf on a short leash. The warrior's face was a scarred and pitted nightmare of battered flesh, his cruel features topped with a close-cropped mohican.

'Trust me,' said the warrior next to Grendel, 'the Skull Harvest weeds out the chaff early on. Only the strongest and most vicious will survive to the end.'

Honsou nodded and said, 'You should know, Vaanes. You've been here before.'

Clad in the midnight-black armour of the Raven Guard, Ardaric Vaanes was the polar opposite of Cadaras Grendel; lithe, elegant and handsome. His long dark hair was bound in a tight scalp-lock and his hooded eyes were set in a face that was aquiline and which bore ritual scars on each cheek.

The former Raven Guard had changed since Honsou had first recruited him to train the Newborn. Honsou had never fully believed that a warrior once loyal to the False Emperor could completely throw off the shackles of his former master, but from what Cadaras Grendel had told him of Vaanes's actions on the orbital battery above Tarsis Ultra, it seemed such concerns were groundless.

'Indeed,' agreed Vaanes. 'And I can't say I'm happy to be back. This isn't a place to come to unless you're prepared for the worst. Especially during the

Skull Harvest.'

'We're prepared for the worst,' said Honsou, leaning over and lifting the severed head from the floor and depositing it on their table. The dead man's expression was frozen in surprise, and Honsou wondered if he'd lived long enough to see the bar spinning around as his head rolled across the floor. The skin was waxy and moist, the iconic mark of a red skull branded into its forehead over a tattoo of an eight-pointed star. 'After all, that's why we're here and why I had the Newborn kill this one.'

Like his warriors, Honsou had changed a great deal since his rise to prominence had begun on Hydra Cordatus. His unique silver arm was new and a bolt-round had pulverised the left side of his face, leaving it a burned and bloody ruin and making a glutinous, fused mess of his eye. That eye had been replaced with an augmetic implant and as much as he had changed physically, Honsou knew that it was nothing compared to the changes wrought within him.

Vaanes reached over and lifted the head, turning it over and allowing the blood to drip down his gauntlets. Honsou saw Vaanes's eyes widen as he touched the head, his nostrils flaring as he took in the scents of the dead man, while running his fingers over the cold flesh.

'This was one of Pashtoq Uluvent's fighters,' said Vaanes.

'Who?'

'A follower of the Blood God,' said Vaanes, turning the head around and tapping the sigil branded on its forehead. 'That's his mark.'

'Is he powerful?' asked Grendel.

'Very powerful,' said Vaanes. 'He has come to the Skull Harvest many times to recruit fighters for his warband.'

'And he's won?'

'Champions that don't win the Skull Harvest end up dead,' said Vaanes.

'Killing one of his men ought to get his attention,' said Honsou.

'I think it just did,' said Grendel, nodding towards the bar's door with a wide grin of anticipation.

A towering warrior in armour that had once been black and yellow, but which was now so stained with blood that it resembled a deep, rusted burgundy, marched towards their table.

Grendel reached for his weapon, but Honsou shook his head.

The warrior's helm was horned and two long tusks sprouted from beneath the visor of his helmet. Honsou couldn't tell whether they were part of his armour or his flesh. The same symbol branded into the head was cut into the warrior's breastplate, and his breath was a rasping growl, like that of a ravenous beast. He carried an axe with a bronze blade that dripped blood and shone with the dull fire of a smouldering forge.

The warrior planted his axe, blade down, on the floor and banged his fist

against his breastplate. ‘I am Vosok Dall, servant of the Skull Throne, and I have come to take your life.’

Honsou took the measure of the warrior in a heartbeat.

Vosok Dall was former Astartes, Scythes of the Emperor by the crossed-scythe heraldry on his shoulder guard, but a warrior who now killed in the name of a blood-drenched god that revelled in murder and battle. He would be strong and capable, with a hunger for glory and martial honour unmatched even by those who still fought for the Imperium.

‘I thought your Chapter was dead,’ said Honsou, pushing himself to his feet. ‘Didn’t the swarm fleets turn your world into an airless rock?’

‘You speak of events that do not concern you, maggot,’ barked Dall. ‘I am here to kill you, so ready your weapon.’

‘You see,’ said Honsou, shaking his head. ‘That’s what you followers of the Blood God always get wrong. You always talk too much.’

‘No more talk then,’ said Dall. ‘Fight.’

Honsou didn’t answer, simply sweeping his axe from beside the table. The blade of the weapon was glossy and black, its sheened surface featureless and seeming to swallow any light unfortunate enough to touch it.

Honsou was fast, but Dall was faster and brought his own axe up to block the strike. The warrior spun the axe and slashed it around in a bifurcating sweep. Honsou ducked and rammed the haft of his weapon into Dall’s gut, spinning away from his opponent’s reverse stroke. The blade passed millimetres from his head and he felt the angry heat that burned within the warp-forged weapon.

He took a double-handed grip on his axe and widened his stance as Dall came at him. The warrior of the Blood God was fast and his roar of hatred shook the very walls, but Honsou had faced down more terrifying foes than Vosok Dall and lived.

Honsou stepped to meet the attack, throwing his arm up to block the blow. The axe slashed down and bit deeply, the blade stuck fast into Honsou’s forearm. Like the Newborn and Cadaras Grendel, Honsou wore the naked metal colours of the Iron Warriors, but the arm struck by Vosok Dall’s axe appeared to be incongruously fashioned from the purest, gleaming silver.

Dall grunted in shock, and Honsou knew this warrior would expect anything he hit with his axe to go down and stay down.

That shock cost him his life.

The warrior tugged at his weapon, but the blade was stuck fast and Honsou swung his axe in a mighty downward arc, hammering the glossy black blade through the top of his foe’s skull. The axe smashed through Dall’s helmet, skull and neck before finally lodging in the centre of his sternum.

Vosok Dall dropped to his knees and toppled onto his side, his dead weight dragging Honsou with him. Dall’s entire body convulsed as the malevolent

warp beast bound to Honsou's axe ripped his soul apart for sport.

Blood fanned from the cloven skull in a flood of crimson, and even as Dall's soul was devoured, his grip remained strong on his weapon.

A bright orange line, like that of a welder's acetylene torch hissed around the edge of where Dall's axe was buried in Honsou's arm and the weapon fell free with a crescent-shaped bite taken from it. Even as Honsou watched, the fiery lustre of the blade faded as its power passed into Honsou's weapon.

Where Dall's blade had penetrated Honsou's arm was unblemished and smooth, as though it had come straight from the silversmith's workbench. Honsou neither knew nor cared about the source of the arm's power to heal itself, it was enough that it had saved him once again.

He rose to his full height, standing triumphant over the dead body of Vosok Dall as the patrons of the bar stared in amazement at him.

'I am Honsou of the Iron Warriors!' he bellowed, lifting his axe high over his head. 'I am here for the Skull Harvest and I am afraid of no man. Any warrior who thinks he is worthy of joining me should make himself known at my camp. Look for the banner of the Iron Skull on the northern promontory.'

A man in a battered flak vest with a long rifle slung over his shoulder and a battered Guardsman's helmet jammed onto his rugged features stood up as Honsou made his way to the door.

'Every warlord that comes in here thinks he's got a big plan,' said the man. 'What's so special about yours? Most of them never come back, so why should I fight for you?'

'What's your name?'

'Pettar. Hain Pettar.'

'Because I'm going to win, Hain Pettar.'

'They all say that,' said Pettar.

Honsou shouldered his axe and said, 'The difference is I mean it.'

'So, who you planning to fight if you live through the Skull Harvest?'

Honsou grinned. 'The worlds of Ultramar are going to burn in the fires of my crusade.'

'Ultramar?' said Pettar. 'Now I know you're crazy; that fight's suicide.'

'Maybe,' said Honsou. 'But maybe not, and if it's not a fight worth making, then this galaxy has run out of things to live for.'

The mountain city simmered with tension and threat. Warriors of all size and description thronged the paths, squares and narrow alleys that twisted between the city's ramshackle structures of brick and junk. This close to the Skull Harvest, the city's inhabitants were on edge, hands hovering near the contoured handles of pistols and skin-wrapped sword grips. Honsou could read the currents of threat as clearly as the transformed magos, Adept Cycerin, could read the currents of the empyrean and knew violence was

ready to erupt at any second.

Which was just as it should be.

The sky was the colour of a smeared borealis, swirling with unnatural hues known only to the insane. Lightning flashed in aerial whirlpools and Honsou tore his gaze from the pleasing spectacle. Only the unwary dared stare into the abyss of such skies and he grinned as he remembered his flesh playing host to one of the creatures that dwelled beyond the lurid colours.

The streets were sloping thoroughfares of hard-packed earth, and Honsou scanned the crowds around them for an old enemy, a new rival or simply a warrior looking to make a name for himself by killing someone like him.

Hawkers and charlatans lined the streets, filling the air with strange aromas, chants and promises, each offering pleasures and wares that could only be found in a place this deep in the Maelstrom; nightmare-flects, blades of daemon-forged steel, carnal delights with warp-altered courtesans, opiates concocted from the immaterial substance of void-creatures and promises of eternal youth.

In addition to the swaggering pirate bands, mercenary kin-broods and random outcasts, lone warriors stood at street corners, boasting of their prowess while demonstrating their skills. A grey-skinned loxatl climbed the brickwork of a dark tower, its armature weapons flexing and aiming without apparent need for hands. A robed Scythian distilled venom before a gathered audience, while a band of men and women in heavy armour demonstrated sword and axe skills. Others spun firearms, took shots at hurled targets and displayed yet more impressive feats of exceptional marksmanship.

‘Any of them taking your fancy?’ asked Cadaras Grendel, nodding towards the martial displays.

Honsou shook his head. ‘No, these are the chaff. The real warriors of skill won’t show their hand so early.’

‘Like we just did?’ said Vaanes.

‘We’re new here,’ explained Honsou. ‘I needed to get my name into circulation, but I’ll let Pashtoq Uluvent build it for me when he comes against us.’

‘You had me kill that man to provoke an attack on us?’ queried the Newborn.

‘Absolutely,’ said Honsou. ‘I need the warriors gathered here to know me and respect me, but I can’t go around like these fools telling people how powerful I am. I’ll get others to do that for me.’

‘Assuming we survive Uluvent’s retaliation.’

‘There’s always that,’ agreed Honsou. ‘But I never said this venture wouldn’t be without some risk.’

They made their way through the streets of the city, following a path that took

them through areas of bleak night, searing sunlight and voids of deadened sound where every step seemed to take a lifetime. Coming from Medrengard, a world deep in the Eye of Terror, Honsou was no stranger to the chaotic flux of worlds touched by the warp, but the capricious nature of the environment around the mountain was unsettling.

He looked towards the mountain's summit, where the mighty citadel of this world's ruler squatted like a vast crown of black stone. Hewn from the rock of the mountain, the entire peak had been hollowed out and reshaped into a colossal fortress from which its master plotted his sector-wide carnage.

Curved redoubts and precisely angled bastions cut into the rock dominated the upper reaches of the mountain and coils of razor wire, like an endless field of thorns, carpeted every approach to its great, iron-spiked barbican.

Honsou's Iron Warrior soul swelled with pleasure at the sight of so formidable a fortress.

Mighty defensive turrets protected the fortress, armed with guns capable of bringing down the heaviest spaceship and smashing any armada that dared come against this place.

Even in its prime, Khalan-Ghol could not have boasted so fearsome an array of weapons.

Ardaric Vaanes leaned in close and pointed to a nearby gun emplacement aimed at the heavens. 'Big guns never tire, isn't that what he always says?'

'So it's said,' agreed Honsou, 'but if what happened on Medrengard taught me anything, it's that fortresses are static and it's only a matter of time until someone attacks you. This place is impressive, right enough, but my days of fortress building are over.'

'I never thought I'd hear an Iron Warrior say he was tired of fortresses.'

'I'm not tired of fortresses, Vaanes,' said Honsou with a grin. 'I'm just directing my energies in bringing them to ruin.'

Honsou had based his warriors on a northern promontory of the mountain, a site that offered natural protection in the form of sheer cliffs on three sides that dropped thousands of metres to the valley floor. Under normal circumstances, it would have been a poor site for a fortress, as it could easily be blockaded, but Honsou had no intention of staying for any length of time and his warband had cleared the promontory of its former occupants in a brutal firefight that had seen them hurling their captives to their doom as an offering to the gods.

The Iron Skull flew over Honsou's temporary fortress, a graceless collection of gabions fashioned from linked sections of thick wire mesh lined with heavy-duty fabric and filled with sand, earth, rocks and gravel. A line of these blocky gabions stretched across the width of the promontory, and yet more had been stacked to form towers where heavy weapons could be

mounted.

In truth, it was more of a defensive wall than a fortress and wasn't a patch on even the lowliest Warsmith's citadel on Medrengard, but it was as strong as he could make it and should suffice for the length of the Skull Harvest.

An adamantine gate swung outwards as Honsou and the others approached, the guns mounted on the blocky towers either side of it tracking them until they passed inside. Two dozen Iron Warriors manned the walls, their armour dusty and scored by the planet's harshly unpredictable climate. The remainder of Honsou's force was spread throughout the camp or aboard the *Warbreed*, the venerable ship that had brought them here and which now moored uneasily among the fleets in orbit around this world.

Honsou marched directly to an iron-sheeted pavilion at the centre of his camp, itself protected by more of the blocky, earth-filled gabions. His banner snapped and fluttered in the wind, the Iron Skull seeming to grin with a mocking sneer, as though daring the world to attack. Grendel, Vaanes and the Newborn followed him past the two hulking warriors in Terminator armour guarding the entrance to the pavilion. Each of the giant praetorians was armed with a long, hook-bladed pike and looked like graven metal statues, their bodies as inflexible as their hearts.

Inside the pavilion, the walls were hung with maps depicting arcs of the galaxy, planetary orbits, system diagrams and a variety of mystical sigils scrawled on pale sheets of skin, both human and alien. An iron-framed bed sat in the centre of the space, surrounded by bare metal footlockers filled with books and scrolls. A trio of smoking braziers filled the pavilion with the heady scent of burning oils said to draw the eyes of the gods.

Honsou set his axe upon a rack of weapons and poured himself a goblet of water from a copper ewer. He didn't offer any to his champions and took a long draught before turning to face them.

'So,' he began, 'What do you make of our first foray?'

Grendel helped himself to a goblet of water and said, 'Not bad, though I didn't get to kill anything. If this Pashtoq Uluvent is as mad as all the other followers of the Blood God I've met, then we shouldn't have to wait too long for his response.'

'Vaanes? What do you think? You've fought in one of these before, what happens next?'

'First you'll be summoned to the citadel to pay homage,' said Vaanes, idly lifting a book from the footlocker nearest the bed. 'Then there will be a day of sacrifices before the contests begin.'

'Homage,' spat Honsou. 'I detest the word. I give homage to no man.'

'That's as may be,' said Vaanes. 'But you're not so powerful you can break the rules.'

Honsou nodded, though it sat ill with him to bow and scrape before

another, even one as infamous as the master of this world. He snatched the book Vaanes held and set it down on the bed.

‘And after all this homage and sacrifice, what happens after that?’

‘Then the killings begin,’ said Vaanes, looking in puzzlement at him. ‘The leaders of the various warbands challenge one another for the right to take their warriors. Mostly their champions answer these challenges, for only when the stakes are highest do the leaders enter the fray.’

‘These challenges, are they straight up fights?’ asked Honsou.

‘Sometimes,’ said Vaanes. ‘The last one usually is, but they can take any form before that. You almost never know until you set foot in the arena what you’ll be up against. I’ve seen clashes of tanks, bare-knuckle fighting to the death, battles with xenos monsters and psychic duels. You never know.’

‘That mean I’ll maybe get to kill something?’ said Grendel with undisguised relish.

‘I can as good as guarantee it,’ replied Vaanes.

‘Then we need to know what we’re up against,’ said Honsou. ‘If we’re going to get ourselves an army, we need to know who we’re taking it from.’

‘How do you propose we do that?’ said Grendel.

‘Go through the city. Explore it and find out who’s here. Learn their strengths and weaknesses. Make no secret of where your allegiance lies and if you need to crack some heads open, then that’s fine too. Grendel, you know what to do?’

‘Aye,’ agreed Grendel, with a gleam of anticipation in his eye. ‘I do indeed.’

Honsou caught the look that passed between the Newborn and Ardaric Vaanes, relishing their confusion. It never did to have your underlings *too* familiar with your plans.

‘Now get out, I have research to do,’ said Honsou, lifting the book he had taken off Vaanes from the bed. ‘Amuse yourselves as you see fit until morning.’

‘Sounds like a plan to me,’ said Grendel, drawing a long-bladed knife.

Honsou was about to turn away from his subordinates when he saw the Newborn cock its head to one side and the inner light that lurked just beneath its borrowed skin pulse with a shimmering heartbeat. In the months they had fought together, Honsou recognised the warning.

‘Enemies are approaching,’ said the Newborn, answering Honsou’s unasked question.

‘What? How do you know?’ demanded Grendel.

‘I can smell the blood,’ said the Newborn.

The ground before Honsou’s defensive wall was littered with bodies. Gunfire flashed from the towers and ramparts, a brutal curtain of fire that sawed

through the ranks of flak-armoured warriors who hurled themselves without fear at the gates. Sudden darkness had fallen, as though a shroud of night had been cast over the promontory, and stuttering tongues of flame lit the night as the two forces tore at one another.

The Newborn's warning had come not a second too soon and Honsou had massed his warriors on the crude walls in time to see a host of screaming men emerge from the darkness towards them. They were an unlikely storming force, a ragged mix of human renegades of all shapes and sizes. Most wore iron masks or skull-faced helmets and their uniforms – such as they were – were little more than bloodstained rags stitched together like the Newborn's skin.

They came on in a howling mass, firing a bizarre mix of weapons at the defenders. Las-bolts and solid rounds smacked into the walls or from the ceramite plates of the Iron Warriors. What the attackers lacked in skill and tactical acumen, they made up for in sheer, visceral ferocity.

It wasn't nearly enough.

Disciplined volleys barked again and again from the Iron Warriors and line after line of attackers was cut down. Their primitive armour was no match for the mass-reactive bolts of the defenders, each a miniature rocket that exploded within the chest cavity of its target.

Heavy weapons on the towers carved bloody gouges in the attacking horde, but the carnage only seemed to spur them to new heights of fanaticism, as though the bloodshed were an end in itself.

'Don't these fools realise they'll never get in?' said Ardaric Vaanes as he calmly snapped off a shot that detonated within the bronze mask of a flag-waving maniac as he ran at the gate without even a weapon unsheathed.

'They don't seem to care,' said Honsou, reloading his bolter. 'This isn't about getting in, it's about letting us know that we're being challenged.'

'You reckon these are Uluvent's men?' said Grendel, clearly enjoying this one-sided slaughter. Grendel had allowed the enemy to reach his section of the walls before ordering his men to open fire, and Honsou saw the relish he took in such close-range killing.

'Without a doubt,' said Honsou.

'He must have known they'd all get killed,' pointed out Vaanes.

'He didn't care,' said the Newborn, standing just behind Honsou's right shoulder. Its unnatural flesh was still glowing and there was a hungry light in its eyes. 'His god cares not from where the blood flows and neither does he. By throwing away the lives of these men, Pashtoq Uluvent is showing us how powerful he is. That he can afford to lose so many men and not care.'

'Getting clever in your old age,' said Grendel with a grin and slapped the arm of the Newborn. His champion flinched at Grendel's touch and Honsou knew it detested the mohicaned warrior. Something to bear in mind if Grendel

became a problem.

The slaughter – it could not be called a battle – continued for another hour before the last shots faded. The attackers had not retreated and had fought to the last, their bodies spread like a carpet of ruptured flesh and blood before the Iron Warriors compound.

The strange darkness that had come with the attack now lifted like the dawn and Honsou saw a lone figure threading his way through the field of corpses towards the fortress.

Cadaras Grendel raised his bolter, but Vaanes reached out and lowered the weapon's barrel.

'What the hell do you think you're doing, Vaanes?' snarled Grendel.

'That's not one of Uluvent's men,' said Vaanes. 'You don't want to kill this one.'

'Shows what *you* know,' said the scarred warrior, turning to Honsou for acknowledgement. Honsou gave a brief nod and turned to watch as the newcomer approached the gate without apparent fear of the many guns aimed at him.

'Who is he?' said Honsou. 'Do you recognise him?'

'No, but I know who he represents,' said Vaanes, gesturing to the looming citadel that dominated the skyline.

'Open the gates,' ordered Honsou. 'Let's hear what he has to say.'

Despite his earlier confidence, Honsou couldn't help but feel apprehensive as he climbed the twisting, corkscrew stairs carved into the sheer sides of the rock face that led towards the mountainous citadel. The emissary led them, his sandaled feet seeking out the steps as surely as if he had trod them daily for a thousand years. For all Honsou knew, perhaps he had.

Honsou had met the emissary, a nameless peon in the robes of a scribe, at the gate of his makeshift fortress where he was handed a scroll case of ebony inlaid with golden thorns. He removed the scroll, a single sheet of cartridge paper instead of the more melodramatic human skin he'd expected, and read the tight, mechanical-looking script written upon it before passing the scroll to Ardaric Vaanes.

'Well?' he'd said when Vaanes had read its contents.

'We go,' said Vaanes instantly. 'When this world's master summons you, it is death to refuse.'

His message delivered, the emissary turned and led them through the squalid streets of the city towards the tallest peak, climbing steep stairs cut into the rocky flanks of the mountain. Honsou had brought Vaanes and the Newborn with him, leaving Grendel to finish the execution of the wounded attackers and keep the compound safe against further assaults.

The climb was arduous, even to one whose muscles were enhanced with

power armour, and many times Honsou thought he was set to plummet to his death until the Newborn helped steady him. Their route took them across treacherous chain bridges, along narrow ledges and though snaking tunnels that wound a labyrinthine passage through the depths of the mountain and avoided the fields of razor wire. Though he tried to memorise the route, Honsou soon found himself confounded by occluded passageways, switchbacks and the strange angles within the bowels of the fortress.

On the few occasions they emerged onto the side of the mountain, Honsou saw how high they had climbed. Below them, the city shone like a bruised diamond, torches and cookfires dotting the mountainside like sunlight on quartz as the skies darkened to a sickly purple. Thousands upon thousands of warriors were gathered in makeshift camps throughout the city and Honsou knew that if he made the right moves, they could be his.

Any army gathered from this place would be a patchwork force of differing fighting styles, races and temperaments, but it would be large and, above all, it would be powerful enough to achieve its objective. And if the books he had taken from the chained libraries of Khalan-Ghol gave up their secrets, he would have something of even greater value than mere warriors to drown the worlds of Ultramar in blood.

The higher they climbed, the more Honsou felt his appreciation for the design of this fortress shift from grudging admiration to awe. It was constructed with all the cunning of the most devious military architect, yet eschewed the brutal functionality common to the Iron Warriors for a malicious spite in some of the more deadly traps.

At last, they emerged within an enclosed esplanade lined with pillars and crowned with what could only be the outer hull plates of a spaceship. The metal was buckled and scored from multiple impacts, the sheeting blackened and curved where the intense heat of laser batteries had pounded the armour to destruction.

A great, thorn-patterned gate stood open at the end of the esplanade and a hundred warriors in power armour lined the route they must take through it. Each of the warriors was armoured differently, a multitude of colours and designs, some so old they were the image of that worn by Honsou. Only one thing unified these warriors, a jagged red cross painted through the Chapter insignia worn on their left shoulder guard.

The emissary led them down this gauntlet of warriors, and Honsou saw Salamanders, Night Lords, Space Wolves, Dark Angels, Flesh Tearers, Iron Hands and a dozen other Chapters. He noted with grim amusement that no Ultramarines made up these warriors' numbers and doubted that any of Macragge's finest would be found in this garrison.

Beyond the gateway, the fortress became a gaudy palace, a golden wonder of fabulous, soaring design that was completely at odds with the external

solemnity of its design. Honsou found the interior garish and vulgar, its ostentation the antithesis of his tastes, such as they were. This was not the palace of a warlord; it was the domain of a decadent egotist. Then again, he should not have been surprised, after all, wasn't it his monstrous ego and megalomania that had brought the citadel's builder low in the first place?

At last they came to a set of gilded doors, taller than a warlord titan, which swung open in a smooth arc to reveal a grand throne room of milky white marble and gold. The sounds of voices and armoured bodies came from beyond and, as Honsou and his retinue followed the emissary through, they saw the towering form of a daemonic Battle Titan serving as the backdrop to a tall throne that sat on a raised dais at the far end of the chamber.

A hundred captured battle flags hung from the vaulted ceiling and the chamber was thick with warriors of all sizes and descriptions.

'I thought this summons was just for us,' said Honsou.

'What made you think that?' replied Vaanes. 'Did you think you were a special case?'

Honsou ignored the venomous relish in Vaanes's words and didn't reply. He *had* thought the summons was for him and him alone, but saw how foolish that belief had been. This was the Skull Harvest and every warrior gathered here would be thinking that he alone would be the victor.

He saw a profusion of horns, crimson helms, glittering axes and swords, alien creatures in segmented armour and a riotous profusion of standards, many depicting one of the glorious sigils of the Dark Gods.

'Should we have brought a standard?' hissed Honsou, leaning close to Ardaric Vaanes.

'We could have, but it wouldn't have impressed him.'

'There is fear in this room,' said the Newborn. 'I can sense it flowing through this place like the currents of the warp.'

Honsou nodded. Even he could sense the lurking undercurrent of unease that permeated the throne room. The throne itself was empty, a carved block of thorn-wrapped onyx that would surely dwarf any man who sat upon it, even a Space Marine.

He turned as his instincts for danger warned him of threat and his hand snatched to his sword hilt as a looming shadow enveloped him.

'You are Honsou?' said a booming voice like the sound of tombstones colliding.

'I am,' he said, looking up into the furnace eyes of a warrior clad in vivid red battle plate that was scarred and burned with the fires of battle and which resembled the lined texture of exposed muscle. His shoulder guards were formed from an agglomerated mass of bones, upon which was carved the icon of a planet being devoured between a set of fanged jaws.

Upon a heavily scored breastplate of fused ribs, Honsou saw a red skull

branded over the insignia of an eight-pointed star and knew who stood before him. The warrior's blazing eyes were set deep within a helmet fashioned from a skull surely taken from the largest greenskin imaginable, and they were fixed on Honsou in an expression of controlled rage.

'Pashtoq Uluvent, I presume,' said Honsou.

'I am the Butcher of Formund, the bloodstorm of the night that takes the skulls of the blessed ones for the Master of the Brazen Throne,' said the giant and Honsou smelled the odour of spoiled blood upon Uluvent's armour.

'What do you want?' said Honsou. 'Didn't you lose enough men attacking my compound?'

'Simple blood sacrifices,' said Uluvent. 'A statement of challenge.'

'You let your men die just to issue a challenge?' said Honsou, impressed despite himself.

'They were nothing, fodder to show my displeasure. But Vosok Dall was a chosen warrior of my warband and his death must be avenged with yours.'

'Many have tried to kill me,' said Honsou, squaring his shoulders before the champion of the Blood God, 'but none have succeeded, and they were a lot tougher than you.'

Uluvent chuckled, the mirthless noise sounding as though it issued from a benighted cavern at the end of the world, and reached up to tap Honsou's forehead. 'When the Harvest begins, you and I shall meet on the field of battle and your mongrel skull will be mounted on my armour.'

Before Honsou could reply, Pashtoq Uluvent turned and marched away. Honsou felt his anger threaten to get the better of him, and only quelled the urge to shoot Uluvent in the back with conscious effort.

'It'll be a cold day in the warp before *that* happens,' he hissed as the Battle Titan's warhorn let out a discordant bray of noise; part fanfare, part roar of belligerence. The harsh wall of noise echoed around the chamber, reverberating from the pillars and reaching into every warrior's bones with its static-laced scrapcode.

Honsou blinked as he saw that the throne at the foot of the Battle Titan was now occupied. Had it been occupied a moment ago? He would have sworn that it had been empty, but sat like a great king of old upon the onyx throne was a towering warrior in crimson armour edged in gold. A halo of blades wreathed his pallid, ashen face and his right arm was a monstrous claw with unsheathed blades that shimmered with dark energies.

A great axe was clasped in this mighty king's other hand and his merciless eyes swept the warriors assembled before him with a searching gaze that left no secret unknown to him. At his shoulder squatted a chittering, reptilian beast that wrapped its slimy flesh around the vents of the warrior's backpack.

The howl of the titan's warhorn ceased abruptly and all eyes turned to the warrior king upon the onyx throne. Every champion in the room dropped to

one knee at the sight of so mighty a warlord.

Huron Blackheart.

The Tyrant of Badab.

At length the Tyrant spoke, his voice booming and powerful. A voice used to command. A voice that had convinced three Chapters of the Adeptus Astartes to side with him against their brothers. A voice belonging to a warrior who had survived the death of half his body and not only lived, but returned stronger and more deadly than ever.

Though he tried not to be, Honsou couldn't help but be impressed.

'I see many hungry faces before me,' said the Tyrant. 'I see warlords and corsairs, mercenaries and outcasts, renegades and traitors. What you were before you came here does not interest me, all that matters in the Skull Harvest is who is the strongest.'

Huron Blackheart rose to his feet and stepped from the dais to move amongst those who came before him. The loathsome creature at his shoulder hissed and spat, the pigments of its mottled hide running from spotted to scaled and back again in a heartbeat. Its eyes were black gems, devoid of expression, yet Honsou sensed malignant intelligence behind them.

A warrior in the armour of the Astral Claws, the Tyrant's former Chapter, followed behind Huron Blackheart and Honsou sensed a darkly radiant power within him, as though what lurked beneath the ceramite plates was something no longer wholly human.

Accompanying this warrior was a tall woman of startling appearance, with features so thin as to be emaciated. Her dark hair was pulled severely back from her face and cascaded to her ankles. Golden flecks danced in her eyes and her emerald robes hung from her thin frame as though intended for someone more generously proportioned. She carried a heavy ebony staff topped with a horned skull. Honsou recognised a sorceress when he saw one.

As Huron Blackheart made his way through the crowds of warriors, Honsou saw that the size of the man's throne was not simply an exercise in vanity; he dwarfed even the mightiest of his supplicants.

No wonder the piratical fleets that raided the shipping lanes around New Badab were the terror of the Imperium's shipmasters. Blackheart's reavers plagued the worlds of the Corpse-Emperor from the Tyrant's bases scattered around the Maelstrom, bringing him plunder, slaves, weapons and, most importantly, ships.

The Tyrant and his bodyguards moved through his throne room and the warriors gathered before him bowed and scraped. Honsou felt his lip curl in distaste.

'They worship him like he was a god,' he said.

'On New Badab he might as well be,' said Vaanes. 'He has the power of

life and death over everyone here.'

'Not me, he doesn't.'

'Even you,' promised Vaanes.

'Then I'll be sure to keep my thoughts to myself.'

Vaanes chuckled. 'That'll be a first, but it doesn't matter. That creature on his shoulder, the Hamadrya, is said to be able to see into the hearts of men and whisper their darkest thoughts in the Tyrant's ear. Imperial assassins have tried to slay Blackheart for decades, but none have ever come close, the Hamadrya senses their thoughts long before they get near.'

Honsou nodded at Vaanes's words, watching the unseemly displays of fealty and obeisance made by the various warlords and corsair chieftains. He looked across the throne room and saw that Pashtoq Uluvent also kept himself aloof from such toadying, and his respect for the warrior went up a notch.

Then the Tyrant turned his gaze on Honsou and he felt the blood drain from his face and a chill touch of fear run the length of his spine. It was a sensation new to Honsou and he liked it not at all. The Tyrant of Badab's thin, lipless mouth smiled, exposing teeth sharpened to razor points, and Honsou found himself helpless before the warrior's gimlet gaze.

The warriors parted before the Tyrant as he strode towards Honsou, the claws of his huge gauntlet alive with baleful energies and the Hamadrya hissing in animal rage.

Huron Blackheart was a giant of a warrior, his already formidable physique boosted by cybernetic augmentation and the blessings of the Dark Gods. Honsou's head came to the centre of the Tyrant's chest plate and though it galled him to do so, he was forced to look up to the lord of New Badab.

He felt as though he were a morsel held helpless before some enormous predator or a particularly rare specimen about to be pinned to the board of a collector. The Tyrant stared at him until Honsou felt he could stand no more, then transferred his gaze to the Newborn and Ardaric Vaanes.

'This one is touched by the raw power of the warp,' said the Tyrant, lifting the Newborn's head with the tips of his claws. 'Powerful and unpredictable, but very dangerous. And you…'

This last comment was addressed to Ardaric Vaanes and with the Newborn forgotten, the Tyrant turned Vaanes's shoulder guard with the blade of his axe, nodding as he saw the red cross of the Red Corsairs.

'I know you,' said the Tyrant. 'Vaanes. Late of the Raven Guard. You fight for another now?'

'I do, my lord,' said Vaanes, bowing before his former master.

'This half-breed?'

'The last person who called me that ended up dead,' snarled Honsou.

Without seeming to move, the Tyrant's claw shot out and punched into Honsou's breastplate, lifting him from his feet. Honsou could feel the cold,

dark metal of the claws digging at the flesh of his chest, the force of the Tyrant's blow precisely measured.

'And the last person who failed to show me respect in my own throne room suffers now at the hands of my most skilled daemonic torturers. They tear his soul apart each day then reclaim its soiled fragments from the warp and the process begins anew. He has suffered this agony for eight decades and I have no inclination to end his torments. You wish a similar fate?'

Honsou's life hung by a thread, yet he still managed defiance in his tone. 'No, my lord, I do not, but I am no longer the half-breed. I am a Warsmith of the Iron Warriors.'

'I know who you are, warrior,' said the Tyrant. 'The immaterium gibbers with your slaughters and the corruption you have wrought. I know why you are here and have seen the path of your fate. You will wreak havoc in the realm of the Corpse-Emperor's worshippers, but those you have wronged will shake the heavens to see you dead. Yet for all your arrogance and bitterness, you have something most others lack.'

'And what's that?' spat Honsou.

'You have a grand vision of revenge and the chance that you might succeed is all that stays my hand.'

Huron Blackheart then turned his attention back to Vaanes and said, 'You wear my marking upon your armour, Ardaric Vaanes, but I sense that you serve a power greater than this half-breed. Just remember that the Dark Prince is a jealous lord and suffers no other masters but he.'

Blackheart sheathed his blades and Honsou dropped to the floor of the throne room, breathless and chilled to the bone from the touch of the Tyrant's claws. The breath heaved in his chest and he felt the nearness of death as a cold shroud upon his heart. He looked up, but the Tyrant had already moved away.

As Honsou picked himself up, he saw the Tyrant's sorceress stare with naked interest at the Newborn, her eyes lingering long over the stitched nightmare of its dead fleshmask. Blackheart climbed the dais to his throne and turned to address the gathered champions with his axe and claw raised above his head.

'Any warrior who dares to bare his neck in the Skull Harvest should present his blade upon the Arena of Thorns when the Great Eye opens. Blood will be spilled, the weak will die and the victor shall benefit greatly from my patronage.'

The Tyrant lowered his voice, yet its power was still palpable and Honsou felt as though the words were spoken just for him. 'But know this: the gods are watching and they will rend the souls of the unworthy for all eternity.'

In days that followed, Honsou's warriors explored the city on the flanks of the

Tyrant’s mountain, learning all they could in preparation for the violence to come. Warbands were identified and their warriors observed, for each warlord was keen to display the prowess of his fighters and champions.

Ardaric Vaanes watched the sensual slaughters of Notha Etassay’s blade dancers, a troupe of decadent warrior priests to whom no sensation of the blade was unknown and whose every kill was performed with the utmost grace and enjoyment. Notha Etassay, an androgynous beauty of uncertain sex, bade Vaanes spar with them and, upon tasting his blood, immediately offered him a place within the troupe.

With every battle he fought, Vaanes felt the vicarious thrill of the kill as every sensation of the graceful ballet of blades was channelled through every warrior priest. It was only with great regret that Vaanes declined Etassay’s offer of a bond ritual with the troupe.

Unimpressed with the delicate bladework of Notha Etassay, Cadaras Grendel left Vaanes and the Newborn to their sport and spent his days watching the blood games of Pashtoq Uluvent’s warriors as they hacked their way through naked slave gangs. Their victims were armed with little more than knives and raw terror, and such brutal murders were more to Grendel’s liking. Soon he found himself wetting his blades with blood in Uluvent’s arena. Such was his bloodlust that within the hour he was granted an audience upon the killing floor by Pashtoq Uluvent himself.

Those battle machines of Votheer Tark that could be brought up the mountain roared and rampaged, their engines howling like trapped souls as they crushed prisoners beneath their tracks or tore them limb from limb with clawed pincer arms. Kaarja Salombar’s corsairs staged flamboyant displays of marksmanship and sword mastery, but Vaanes was unimpressed, having seen the exquisite bladework of Notha Etassay’s devotees.

Honsou himself ventured little from behind his walls, his every waking moment spent in contemplation of the ancient tomes he had brought from Khalan-Ghol. What he sought within their damned pages he would not reveal, but as the days passed, his obsession with the secrets contained in the mad ravings committed to the page grew ever deeper.

The Newborn stayed close to Ardaric Vaanes, watching the killings and displays of martial ability with a dispassionate eye. It was stronger and more skilful than the majority of the warriors here, yet only recently had it begun to take pleasure in the infliction of pain and death. Differing angels warred within its mind; the teachings of its creator and the buried instincts and memories of the gene-heritage bequeathed to it by Uriel Ventris.

Of all the warrior bands gathered for the Skull Harvest, the Newborn was most fascinated by the loxatl, a band of alien mercenaries that laired in burrows hollowed from the sides of the mountain. Vaanes and the Newborn watched the fighting drills of the loxatl on a patch of open ground before

these caves.

The leader of this brood-group was a kin leader who went by the name of Xaneant. Whether this was the creature's true name or one foisted upon it by human tongues was unclear, but the Newborn was impressed by the alien mercenaries, liking their fluid, sinuous movements and utter devotion to the members of their brood.

Something in that kin-bond was achingly familiar and the Newborn wondered where the sense of belonging it felt came from. Was it responding to a memory buried deep within its altered brain or was this a fragment of the psyche the Daemonculaba had stamped upon it?

'They are all related,' said the Newborn, watching as the loxatl spun like fireflies through a series of lightning fast manoeuvres designed to showcase their speed and agility. 'Would that not hinder them in battle?'

'In what way?' asked Vaanes.

'Would there not be grief or horror if a kin-member died?'

'I don't think the loxatl think that way,' said Vaanes. 'It sounds obvious, but they're not like humans. It's a good observation though. I remember reading that in ancient wars, kings would sometimes raise regiments formed by men and women from the same towns, thinking it would create a bond of loyalty that would make them stronger.'

'And did it?'

'Before the killing started, yes, but when battle was joined and people began to die, the sight of friends and loved ones torn up by shellfire or cut to pieces by swords and axes destroyed any fighting spirit they might have had.'

'So why do the loxatl do it?' asked the Newborn. 'If such groupings are so brittle, why do it? Surely it is better to fight alone or alongside those you do not care about.'

'Yes and no,' said Vaanes, slipping back into the role of mentor and instructor. 'What keeps many fighting units together is the warrior next to him and the desire not to let your battle-brothers down. Shared camaraderie gives a fighting unit cohesion, but that needs to be alloyed to an unbreakable fighting spirit in order to avoid being broken when the killing starts.'

'Like the Adeptus Astartes?'

'Not all of them,' said Vaanes bitterly.

'The Ultramarines?'

'Yes, the Ultramarines,' sighed Vaanes. 'You get that from Ventris?'

'I think so,' said the Newborn. 'I have a desire for brotherhood with those I fight alongside, but I don't feel it.'

Vaanes laughed. 'No, you won't in Honsou's warband. It's said the Iron Warriors were never ones for easy camaraderie, even before they followed Horus into rebellion.'

'Is that a weakness?'

‘I don’t know yet. Time will tell, I suppose,’ said Vaanes. ‘Some warbands fight for money, some for revenge, some for honour and some for the slaughter, but it all ends up the same way.’

‘What way is that?’

‘In death,’ said a voice behind them and both the Newborn and Vaanes turned to see Huron Blackheart’s emaciated sorceress. The woman’s gaunt features were even more skeletal in the daylight, the brightness of the sky imparting an unhealthy translucence to her skin and reflecting from the gold in her eyes. Her robes shimmered and her hair whipped and twisted like a dark snake with the motion of her head.

‘Yes,’ said Vaanes. ‘In death.’

The sorceress smiled, exposing stumps of yellowed teeth, and Vaanes grimaced. The woman appeared young, yet the price she had paid for her powers was rotting her away from the inside out. ‘The Lost Child and the Blind Warrior, fitting I should find you observing the displays of an alien species whose thought processes are utterly inimical to humanity.’

Vaanes felt his skin crawl at the nearness of the sorceress. Within the seething cauldron of the Maelstrom, the terrifying power of the immaterium was a constant, gnawing presence on the edge of perception, but her proximity seemed to act as a locus for warp entities gathering like vultures around a corpse. Vaanes could feel their astral claws scratching at the lid of his mind.

He glanced over at the Newborn, seeing it twitch and flinch as though there was an invisible host of buzzing, stinging insects swarming around its face, but which it was trying to ignore.

‘What do you want?’ said Vaanes, gripping the Newborn’s arm and dragging it away from her loathsome presence. ‘I detest your kind and wish to hear nothing you have to say.’

‘Do not be so quick to dismiss what I have to offer, warrior of Corax,’ hissed the sorceress, reaching out and placing a hand on the Newborn’s chest.

‘Never speak that name again,’ snarled Vaanes. ‘It means nothing to me now.’

‘Not now, but one day it will again,’ promised the sorceress.

‘You see the future?’ asked the Newborn. ‘You know what is to happen? All of it?’

‘Not all of it,’ admitted the sorceress, ‘but those whose lives stir the currents of the warp are bright lights in the darkness. A measure of their path is illuminated for those with the sight to see it.’

‘Do you see mine?’ said the Newborn eagerly.

The sorceress laughed, a shrill bite on the air that caused the loxatl to halt their martial display and screech in rage. Shimmering patterns danced over their glistening hides and they vanished in a blur of motion, slithering and

skittering across the mountainside to boltholes carved in the rocks.

‘The destiny of the Lost Child cleaves into the future like a fiery speartip,’ said the sorceress. ‘His destiny is woven into the tapestry of a great hero’s death, the fall of a star and the rise of an evil thought long dead.’

‘You speak in meaningless riddles,’ said Vaanes, dragging the Newborn away.

‘Wait!’ cried the Newborn. ‘I want more.’

‘Trust me, you don’t,’ warned Vaanes, seeing Cadaras Grendel marching towards them, his armour splashed with blood. ‘Nothing good can come of it.’

‘The Lost Child wishes to hear what I have to say,’ screeched the sorceress, barring their way with her skull-topped staff.

Vaanes unsheathed the caged lightning of his gauntlet-mounted claws and rammed the foot-long blades up into the sorceress’s chest, tearing up through her heart and lungs. She died without a sound, the breath ghosting from her lips in a sparkling, iridescent cloud and the golden light fading from her eyes. Vaanes sucked in her dying breath, revelling in the sensations of fear, horror and pain it contained. His entire body shook with the deliciousness of her soul and all thought of consequence fled from his thoughts at the ecstasy of the kill.

Vaanes lowered his arm and let her skeletal frame slide from the blades of his gauntlet. Her corpse flopped to the ground and he set off towards Cadaras Grendel with the Newborn in tow.

‘What was that about?’ said Grendel, looking over at the shrivelled body of the sorceress. Whatever force had animated her wasted frame had fled her body, leaving a desiccated husk of shrivelled flesh and dried bone.

‘Nothing,’ replied Vaanes, drawing a deep breath. ‘Forget it.’

‘Fine,’ said Grendel, gesturing towards the sky. ‘Honsou wants you back at the compound. The Skull Harvest is about to begin.’

Vaanes looked up, seeing the swirling colours gathering around a toxic swirl of amber, like a cancerous epicentre of a diseased whirlpool.

‘The Great Eye…it’s opening,’ he whispered as Grendel made his way past him in the opposite direction. ‘Are you coming back too?’

Grendel nodded, grinning with feral anticipation. ‘Don’t worry about it. I’ll see you in the arena.’

Vaanes didn’t like the sound of that, but let it go, wondering whose blood stained Grendel’s breastplate. The Iron Warrior looked down at the withered remains of the sorceress.

‘Did she try and tell your fortune?’ said Grendel, kneeling beside the sagging cloth of the sorceress’s robes.

‘Something like that,’ agreed Vaanes.

‘And you killed her for it?’

‘Yes.’

‘Too bad for her she didn’t see *that* coming.’

The Skull Harvest got underway, as all such gatherings do, with sacrifice. Framed by the towering majesty of a growling Battle Titan, the Tyrant of Badab tore the heart from a captured warrior of the Howling Griffons and hurled it into the arena, where it pulsed bright arterial blood onto the gritty sand until it was emptied.

The first day was taken up with the various champions’ warbands announcing themselves to the Tyrant, who sat upon a grand throne of bronze and amber, and the allocation of challenges. Blood feuds would be settled first and a number of champions bellowed the names of those they wished to fight in the name of avenging an insult to their honour.

Honsou expected Pashtoq Uluvent to issue such a challenge, but the red-armoured warrior had yet to appear.

‘I expected Uluvent to be here,’ noted Vaanes, as though reading his mind. ‘Champions of the Blood God are usually the first to arrive and begin the killing.’

‘No, Uluvent’s smarter than that,’ said Honsou.

‘What do you mean?’

‘I think he wants to wait until further into the Harvest before trying to kill me. It’ll be more of a triumph for him if he slays me after we’ve taken other warbands with our own killings. He’ll have his blood feud resolved *and* he’ll take all my warriors.’

‘Then he’s more cunning than most champions of the Blood God.’

‘Maybe,’ agreed Honsou with a smile. ‘We’ll see how that works out for him.’

‘And Grendel, where’s he?’ asked Vaanes. ‘I haven’t seen him since yesterday. He said he’d be here. The other champions will know that one of our inner circle hasn’t appeared for the beginning of the death games.’

‘Forget Grendel,’ said Honsou. ‘We don’t need him.’

‘I see him,’ said the Newborn, gesturing with a nod of his helmet to the opposite side of the arena. ‘Over there.’

Honsou looked over and saw the ranks of gathered champions part as Pashtoq Uluvent took his place on the circumference of the arena. The red-armoured warrior with the ork-skull helmet raised his red-bladed sword and a raucous cheer was torn from thousands of throats as his skull rune banner was unfurled.

Standing beside Uluvent was Cadaras Grendel, his armour streaked with fresh blood and his chainsword unsheathed. The Iron Warrior shrugged and raised his sword to lick wet blood from the blade.

‘Grendel’s betrayed us?’ said Vaanes, his voice thick with anger.

‘It was only a matter of time,’ said Honsou. ‘To be honest I expected it

sooner.’

‘I’ll kill him,’ snarled Vaanes.

‘No,’ said Honsou. ‘Grendel and I will have a reckoning, but it won’t be here. Do you understand me?’

Vaanes said nothing, but Honsou could see the anger in the warrior’s eyes and just hoped the former Raven Guard would be able to restrain the urge to strike down Grendel for now.

‘I don’t understand you, Honsou,’ said Vaanes eventually.

‘Not many people do,’ replied Honsou. ‘And that’s the way I like it.’

A warrior in bronze armour emblazoned with the skull rune of the Blood God made the first kill of the day, disembowelling a champion in spiked armour who Honsou saw was hopelessly outmatched in the first moments of the duel. The slain warrior’s head was mounted upon a spike of black iron beneath the Tyrant’s throne.

The warband of the defeated warrior now belonged to his killer, their loyalty won through the display of greater strength and skill. Such loyalty could be a fragile thing, but few gathered here cared for whom they fought, simply that they fought for the strongest, most powerful champion of the Skull Harvest.

Ranebra Corr’s sword-champion slew the hearthguard of Yeruel Mzax, a clan warrior of the Cothax stars. The clan-laws forbade Mzax to fight under the leadership of another and he hacked his own head off with an energised claw attached to the upper edge of his gauntlet.

Votheer Tark’s battle engine was a hulking monster that had once been a Dreadnought, but which had been altered by Tark’s Dark Mechanicum adepts into the housing for a shrieking entity brought forth from the warp. It tore through the warbands of three champions before finally being brought low by one of Pashtoq Uluvent’s berserk warriors who fought through the loss of an arm to detonate a melta bomb against its sarcophagus.

The daemon was torn screaming back to the warp and the lower half of the berserker was immolated in the blast. Even with his legs vaporised, the berserker crawled towards Huron Blackheart’s throne to deposit the defeated engine’s skull-mount.

The Newborn won two duels on the first day of killing; crushing the skull of Kaarja Salombar’s corsair pistolier before he could loose a single shot, and eventually defeating the loxatl kin-champion of Xaneant’s brood group. This last battle was fought for nearly an hour, with the loxatl unable to put the Newborn down, despite exhausting its supply of flechettes into its opponent.

A daemonic creation of Khalan-Ghol’s birth chambers, the Newborn’s powers of regeneration were stronger in the warp-saturated Maelstrom and each wound, though agonising, was healed within moments of its infliction.

Exhausted and without ammunition, the loxatl eventually pounced on the Newborn, using its dewclaws to tear at its armour, but even its speed was no match for the Newborn's resilience. At last, the hissing, panting beast was defeated, drained and unable to defend itself when the Newborn crushed its neck and tore its head from its shoulders.

As the fighting and killing went on, warbands began to agglomerate as their champions were slain and armies formed as the most powerful warlords drew more and more fighters to their banner.

Cadaras Grendel fought with his customary brutal remorselessness, winning several bouts for Pashtoq Uluvent, and Honsou could see Ardaric Vaanes's fury at this betrayal simmering ever closer to the surface. To dilute that anger, Honsou sent the former Raven Guard into the arena while the Newborn healed and Vaanes eagerly slaughtered warriors from three warbands, one after the other, bringing yet more blood-bonded fighters into Honsou's growing army.

Honsou himself took to the field of battle twice; once to slay a pirate chieftain armed with two razor-edged tulwars, and once to break a kroot warrior leader who fought with a long, twin-bladed stave he wielded with preternatural speed and precision.

As the Newborn strangled a towering ogre creature with its own energy whip, winning a hundred of the brutish monsters to Honsou's banner, the fourth day of killing drew to an end.

The armies of three champions were all that remained.

Pashtoq Uluvent's force of blood-hungry skull-takers, Notha Etassay's blade-dancers.

And Honsou's Iron Warriors.

With the victories he and his champions had won, Honsou's force had grown exponentially in size, numbering somewhere in the region of five thousand soldiers. Scores of armoured units and fighting machines, as well as all manner of xenos and corsair warbands were now his to command. The swords of seventeen warbands now belonged to Honsou and, by any measure of reckoning, he had a fearsome force with which to wreak havoc on his enemies.

Pashtoq Uluvent had amassed a force in the region of six thousand fighters, while Notha Etassay had procured five thousand through his exquisite slaughters. Any one of these forces was powerful enough to carve itself a fearsome slice of Imperial space and enjoy a period of slaughter unmatched in its previous history.

But the Skull Harvest was not yet over and the Tyrant's rule decreed that there could be only one champion left standing at its end.

Darkness closed in as the three warriors stepped into the arena, clad in their

armour and each armed with their weapon of choice. Honsou's arm glittered in the torchlight that surrounded the arena as baying crowds of warriors cheered for their respective champions.

The three warriors marched to stand facing one another in the centre of the arena and Honsou took the opportunity to study his opponents, knowing his life would depend on knowing them better than they knew themselves.

Notha Etassay wore a light, form-fitting bodyglove of rippling black leather with buckled straps holding strategically situated elements of flexible plate. The androgynous champion sashayed into the arena and performed a scintillating pre-battle ritual of acrobatic twists and leaps while spinning twin swords of velvety darkness through the air. Etassay's face was concealed by a studded leather mask with scar-like zippers and tinted glass orbs that glittered with wry amusement, as though this were a meeting of comrades instead of a duel to the death.

Pashtoq Uluvent planted his sword in the bloody earth of the arena and roared a wordless, inchoate bellow of ferocity to the heavens. His armour dripped with the blood of sacrifices and the flesh-texture of his armour seemed to swell and pulse with the beat of his heart. His eyes were like smouldering pools of blood within his helmet and he reached up with a serrated dagger to cut into the meat of his neck.

The champion of the brazen god of battle hurled the dagger away as blood began leaking from the open wound.

Honsou narrowed his eyes. 'Giving up already, Uluvent?'

'If I cannot kill you before my life bleeds out, then I am not worthy of victory and my death will honour the Skull Throne,' said Uluvent.

'Don't expect me to do anything like that,' said Honsou.

'I don't,' replied Uluvent. 'You are the mongrel by-blow of melded genes wrought in desperate times. You are a creature without honour that should never have been brought into existence.'

Honsou controlled his anger as Uluvent continued. 'One of your champions has already sworn himself to me, but I will kill you quickly if you submit to my dominance.'

'I don't submit to anyone,' Honsou warned his enemy.

Notha Etassay laughed, a high, musical sound of rich amusement. 'Whereas it's something I do rather well, though I prefer to be the dominant one in any intercourse.'

'You both disgust me,' snarled Uluvent. 'It insults my honour that I must fight you.'

The howl of the Battle Titan's warhorn echoed across the arena and the cheering warriors fell silent as the Tyrant of Badab rose from his throne to address the gathered champions, the Hamadrya curled around his thigh like a vile leech.

‘Tonight the Skull Harvest ends!’ said Huron Blackheart, his voice carried around the arena to the furthest reaches of the mountain. ‘One champion will be victorious and his enemies will be broken upon the sands of this arena. Fight well and you will go forth to bring terror and death to those who betrayed our trust in them.’

The Tyrant of Badab locked eyes with each of the three champions in turn and raised his mighty clawed gauntlet. ‘Now fight!’

Honsou sprang back from a decapitating sweep of Pashtoq Uluvent’s axe, swaying aside as Etassay’s black sword licked out and sliced into his shoulder guard. Honsou’s black-bladed axe lashed out in a wide arc, forcing both opponents back and the three champions broke from the centre of the arena.

Etassay danced away from Honsou, swords twirling and face unreadable behind the leather mask, while Uluvent hefted his sword in a tight grip, watching warily for any movement from his opponents. Honsou knew Uluvent was the stronger of his foes, but Etassay’s speed was ferocious, and who knew what power rested in his dark blades.

Honsou’s axe was hungry for killing and he felt its insatiable lust to wreak harm running along the length of its haft and into his limbs. Or at least one of them. The power residing in the silver arm he had taken from the Ultramarines sergeant was anathema to the creature bound to his weapon.

This stage of a battle would be where each warrior sought to gauge the measure of the other, searching for signs of weakness or fear to be exploited. Honsou knew he would find neither in these two opponents, warriors hardened by decades of war and devotion to their gods.

Every fibre of Uluvent’s being would be dedicated to killing in the Blood God’s name, while Etassay would seek to wring every sensation from this bout. Winning would be secondary to the desire to experience the furthest excesses of violence, pain and pleasure.

Honsou cared nothing for the thrill of the fight, nor the honour of the kill. This entire endeavour was a means to an end. He cared nothing for the piratical schemes of the Tyrant, nor honouring any one of the ancient gods of the warp.

Etassay made the first move, leaping in close to Uluvent, his dark swords singing for the red-armoured champion. Uluvent moved swiftly, swinging his own sword up to block the blows and spinning on his heel to slash at Etassay’s back. But the champion of the Dark Prince was no longer there, vaulting up and over the blade in a looping backwards somersault.

Honsou charged in, swinging his axe for Etassay, but the warrior dropped beneath the blow and smoothly pivoted onto his elbow, swinging his body out like a blade to take Honsou’s legs out from under him.

Uluvent leapt towards Honsou as he fell, the red-bladed sword thrust downwards at his chest, but Honsou scrambled aside and the weapon plunged

into the earth. Etassay's boot thundered against Uluvent's helmet and the roaring champion of the Blood God fell back, leaving his sword jammed in the ground.

Honsou pushed himself to his feet and furiously blocked and parried as Etassay spun away from his attack on Uluvent and came at him with a dizzying series of sword strikes. The champion of the Dark Prince was unimaginably fast and it was all Honsou could do to keep himself from being sliced into ribbons. His armour was scored and sliced numerous times and he realised that Etassay was playing with him, prolonging the battle to better enjoy the sense of superiority.

Honsou's bitterness flared, but he fought against it, knowing that Etassay would punish him for even the smallest lapse in concentration. Instead he forced himself to concentrate on exploiting the warrior's arrogance. Etassay thought he was better than Honsou and that would be his downfall.

Out of the corner of his eye, Honsou saw Uluvent circling them, waiting on a chance to reclaim his sword with a patience the Blood God's warriors were not known for. Honsou kept himself close to the weapon, forcing Uluvent to keep his distance. One opponent he could handle. Two? Probably not.

At last Etassay seemed to tire of Honsou and said, 'Let the other one have his blade. This contest is tiresome without his colourful rages.'

Honsou did not reply, instead turning towards the sword embedded in the sand and hacking his daemon axe through the blade. Uluvent's sword shattered into a thousand fragments and Honsou sensed Etassay's petulant displeasure through the studded mask.

Etassay leapt towards him, but Honsou had banked on such a manoeuvre and was ready for it. He hammered the pommel of his axe into Etassay's sternum and the champion dropped to the ground with a strangled, breathless cry.

Honsou heard Uluvent make his move and turned as he stamped down hard on Etassay's chest, hearing a brittle crack of bone. Uluvent slammed into Honsou and they tumbled to the sand. Honsou lost his grip on his axe as Uluvent's gauntlets fastened on his throat. The two warriors grappled in the bloody sand, pummelling one another with iron-hard fists.

Uluvent spat into Honsou's face. 'Now you die!'

Honsou rammed his knee into Uluvent's stomach, but the warrior's grip was unbreakable. Again and again he slammed his knee upwards until at last he felt the grip on his throat loosen. He managed to free one arm and slammed the heel of his palm into Uluvent's skull-faced helmet. Bone shattered and the bleeding wound in Uluvent's neck was exposed, spattering Honsou's helmet in blood.

Honsou slammed his fist into the wound, digging his fingers into Uluvent's neck and tearing the cut wider. His foe bellowed in pain and rolled off

Honsou, rising unsteadily to his feet and lurching over to his followers to retrieve another weapon with one hand pressed to the ruin of his neck.

Honsou stood, groggy and battered, and set off after Uluvent, snatching his axe up from the ground next to the groaning figure of Etassay. He ignored the Dark Prince's champion, the warrior was beaten and probably in throes of ecstasy at the pain coursing along every nerve ending.

Honsou felt new strength in his limbs as he followed Uluvent. The warrior had torn off his shattered helmet and Honsou saw his face was hideously scarred and burned. Blood squirted from where Honsou had torn his neck wound further open, but the pain only seemed to galvanise Uluvent as he bellowed for a fresh blade.

Neck wound or no, Uluvent was still a fearsome opponent and armed with a fresh weapon, could still easily kill Honsou.

Cadaras Grendel held a wide-bladed sword out towards Pashtoq Uluvent and Honsou held his breath…

Pashtoq Uluvent reached for the weapon, but at the last moment, Cadaras Grendel reversed his grip and rammed the blade into the champion's chest. The tip of the weapon ripped out through the back of Uluvent's armour and the mighty warrior staggered as Grendel twisted the blade deeper into his chest.

Uluvent roared in pain and spun away from Grendel, wrenching the sword from his grip and dropped to his knees. Honsou gave him no chance to recover from his shock and pain, and brought his axe down upon the warrior's shoulder. The dark blade smashed Uluvent's shoulder guard to splinters and clove the champion of the Blood God from collarbone to pelvis.

Stunned silence swept over the gathered crowds, for none had ever expected to see Pashtoq Uluvent brought low. Cadaras Grendel stepped from the ranks of the Blood God's warriors to stand next to Honsou as the blazing fire of Pashtoq Uluvent's eyes began to fade.

'Sorry,' said Grendel with a grin. 'Honsou may be a mongrel half-breed, and even though I know you'll lead me to a bloodier fight, I think he'll lead me to one I'll live through.'

Uluvent looked up at Honsou with hate and pain misting his vision. 'Give… me… a blade.'

Honsou was loath to indulge the champion's request, but knew he would need to if there were to be any shred of loyalty in the warriors he would win from Uluvent.

'Give it to him,' ordered Honsou.

Grendel nodded and reached down to drag the sword from the defeated champion's chest in a froth of bright blood. He held the weapon towards Uluvent, who took the proffered sword in a slack grip.

'And… my skull,' gasped Uluvent with the last of his strength. 'You…

have… to take… it.’

‘My pleasure,’ said Honsou, raising his axe and honouring Pashtoq Uluvent’s last request.

With Pashtoq Uluvent’s head mounted on the spikes below Huron Blackheart’s throne, the Skull Harvest was over. Hundreds had died upon the sands of the Tyrant’s arena, but such deaths were meaningless in the grand scheme of things, serving only to feed Blackheart’s ego and amuse the Dark Gods of the warp.

At the final tally, Honsou left New Badab with close to seventeen thousand warriors sworn in blood to his cause. Pashtoq Uluvent’s warriors, and those he had won, were now Honsou’s, their banners now bearing the Iron Skull device.

Notha Etassay had survived the final battle and had willingly sworn allegiance to Honsou after hoarsely thanking him for the exquisite sensations of bone shards through the lungs.

Huron Blackheart had been true to his word, and the victor of the Skull Harvest had indeed benefited greatly from his patronage. As the *Warbreed* broke orbit, numerous other vessels accompanied it, gifts from the Tyrant of Badab to be used for the express purpose of dealing death to the forces of the Imperium. In addition to these vessels, the ships of the defeated champions formed up around Honsou’s flagship to form a ragtag, yet powerful, fleet of corsairs and renegades.

Battered warships, ugly bulk carriers, planetary gunboats, warp-capable system monitors and captured cruisers followed the *Warbreed* as it plotted a careful route through the Maelstrom, away from the domain of Huron Blackheart.

The sickly yellow orb of New Badab was swallowed in striated clouds of nebulous dust and polluted immaterial effluent vomited from the wound in real space as the fleet pulled away, and Honsou recalled the final words the mighty Tyrant had said to him.

Blackheart had pointed his dark-bladed claw towards Ardaric Vaanes, Cadaras Grendel and the Newborn as they boarded the battered Stormbirds ahead of Honsou.

‘Kill them when they are of no more use to you,’ said the Tyrant. ‘Otherwise they will only betray you.’

‘They wouldn’t dare,’ Honsou had said, though a seed of doubt had been planted.

‘Always remember,’ said Huron Blackheart. ‘The strong are strongest alone.’

GATE OF SOULS

Mike Lee

Dirge was a cursed world.

It was a planet of bleak stone and black rock, and it didn't belong in the Hammurat system, of that much the Imperial surveyors were certain. It was a rogue world, one orphaned from its home star countless millions of years in the past, and it had wandered through the darkness of space for millions of years more before being trapped in the grip of Hammurat's three blazing suns. Where Dirge had come from – and what strange vistas it had crossed over the aeons – the surveyors didn't care to know. Its surface was a wasteland of deep craters and jagged peaks, shrouded in thick, poisonous air that howled and raged under the cosmic lash of Hammurat's suns.

What mattered was that Dirge was rich: a virtual treasure trove for the ever-hungry forge worlds of the Pyrus Reach subsector. The planet's crust was thick with valuable metals, radioactives and minerals, and the cometary impacts that had shattered Dirge's surface had brought with them even more exotic elements in amounts never before catalogued. When news of the discovery reached the subsector capital it touched off a frantic rush of prospectors and mining expeditions, eager to cash in on the new world's untapped riches. Within the space of a year, almost two million prospectors, miners, murderers and thieves had come to Dirge to feast upon its riches.

Little more than a year later three-quarters of them were dead.

Seething electrical storms burned out equipment and raging winds tossed fully-loaded ore haulers around like toys. Seismic activity collapsed tunnels or trapped gases exploded under the touch of plasma torches. Men were carved up in backroom brawls over claims too hazardous to mine. The outnumbered proctors mostly looked the other way, pocketing bribes equal to

a year’s salary on more settled worlds and counting the days until their transfers came through.

Sometimes prospectors would return to the crater-cities from the crags or the deep tunnels, bearing artifacts of polished stone inscribed with strange inscriptions. When the rotgut was flowing in grimy taverns all over Dirge, men would sometimes go quiet and whisper of things they’d seen out in the storms: strange, corroded spires and dark menhirs covered in symbols that made their blood run cold. No one paid the stories any heed. Prospectors loved to tell tales, and what difference did some strange stones make when there was money to be made?

And so the crater-cities grew, spreading like scabs across the deep impact wounds the comets left behind. Men died by the thousands every day, killed by storms, earthquakes, carelessness or greed. Still more lost their minds from metal poisoning, mounting debt, or simply snapped from the stress of constant danger and merciless quotas from corporate masters dozens of light-years away. They blinded themselves with homemade liquor or wasted away in the grip of drugs like black lethe and somna. Some sought comfort in the words of itinerant priests, putting their salvation in the hands of holy men who took their tithes and sent them back to their dormitories with empty prayers and benedictions.

In the end, nothing made a difference. Until a prospector named Hubert Lohr came down from the crags one day, sold off all his possessions and began preaching a new faith in the bars and back alleys of the crater-cities. Lohr accepted no tithes; instead he offered people the secrets of Dirge. He spoke to broken-down miners, diseased prostitutes and petty thieves and told them of the Lost Princes, who still wandered the void in search of their wayward world. The Lost Princes possessed powers greater than men – greater even than the God-Emperor, who offered nothing but mouldy catechisms and cruel exhortations for the men who lived and died beneath His gaze. Lohr told the fevered crowds that if they made an offering large enough it would shine like a beacon across the void and lead the Princes back to Dirge. And when they returned they would reward the faithful with gifts beyond their comprehension.

By the time the agents of the Ecclesiarchy and the planetary governor realised the peril in their midst it was already too late.

The battered Aquila lander had barely touched the plasteel tarmac before Alabel Santos was out of her seat and striding for the landing ramp. Even without the grim badge of the Inquisitorial rosette gleaming upon her breast she cut a fearsome figure in her ornate power armour. One hand rested on the butt of her inferno pistol and a sheathed power knife hung in a scabbard on her other hip. ‘Get the gun servitors ready,’ she snapped at the portly, middle-

aged man struggling with his own restraints while fumbling for his respirator mask. ‘I don’t plan on being here long.’ Her man Balid bleated something in reply but she paid little heed, her armour’s respirator system whining with strain as she headed swiftly out into the howling wind.

Purple lightning flared overhead, etching the bustling airstrip in sharp relief. Tech adepts swarmed over a long line of parked Vulture gunships, tending fuel lines and reloading rocket pods for another fire support mission over Baalbek City. On the other side of the plasteel tarmac sat a cluster of Valkyrie Air Assault craft, red tags fluttering from the Hellstrike missiles loaded on their stubby wings. A platoon of armoured stormtroopers, part of the Guard regiment’s mobile reserve, huddled near their parked transports, cursing the wind and waiting to be called into action.

Santos spotted the permacrete bunkers of the regimental field headquarters just a few hundred metres from the airstrip, the pale colour of the new structures standing out sharply from the dark grey terrain. The guards on duty raised their weapons at her approach, but hurriedly stepped aside when they saw what badge she wore. She cycled through the atmosphere lock then pushed past bewildered and tired staff officers before marching stiffly up to a broad planning table set with an old-fashioned paper map of Baalbek City. Grainy aerial reconnaissance picts were spread across the table, highlighting different city districts. Studying them was a short, broad-chested officer in the uniform of the Terassian Dragoons, surrounded by a pair of staffers and a tall, forbidding woman whose cold eyes glittered beneath the rim of her peaked commissar’s cap.

The colonel glanced up at Santos’s approach, a curt order on his lips, but his exhausted face went pale at the sight of the gleaming rosette. His gaze continued upwards. The inquisitor’s head was held stiffly erect in a frame of brass, lending her stunning features the severe cast of a martyred saint. ‘Colonel Ravin, I presume?’ she said without preamble. Red light flashed balefully from her augmetic eye. ‘I am Inquisitor Alabel Santos of the Ordo Hereticus. What is your situation?’

To his credit, the colonel didn’t skip a beat, as though having an Imperial inquisitor arrive unannounced at his headquarters was all in a day’s work. ‘Two months ago dissident elements among the mining population engineered a planet-wide revolt, overwhelming the local proctors and PDF contingents–’

‘I know why you’re here, colonel,’ Santos snapped. ‘I’ve been reading your despatches since you arrived on Dirge.’ She studied the picts scattered across the table and plucked one from the pile, sliding it over to the colonel. The aerial image showed a mob of citizens surrounding a bleached pillar of bone, their gloved hands raised in supplication before the blasphemous sigil at its peak.

‘You aren’t dealing with dissidents,’ Santos replied coldly. ‘They are

something altogether worse.'

Colonel Ravin and the commissar eyed one another. 'They call themselves the Cult of the Black Stone,' the commissar said. 'That's all we've been able to learn so far.'

'Then I shall educate you further,' Santos said, leaning across the table. 'This is the symbol of the Word Bearers, colonel.' The inquisitor rapped the pict sharply with her knuckle for emphasis, causing the staff officers to jump. 'The Ruinous Powers have taken an active interest in Dirge, and I have reason to believe that one of their greatest champions is at work in Baalbek City. I've come halfway across the subsector to find out why.' And to stop him once and for all, Emperor willing, Santos thought grimly. You have much to answer for, Erebus.

Colonel Ravin's pallor deepened. 'But that's… that's incredible,' he stammered. 'Traitor Marines? *Here?* How do you know this?'

'Because it is the Inquisition's business to know such things,' Santos snapped, turning back to the picts. Out of the corner of her eye she saw the colonel stiffen, then with an effort she reined in her temper. You have enough enemies without needing to make more, she reminded herself.

'It's all in the reports, colonel,' she explained. 'I've been studying every status report, Administratum log and Ecclesiarchal dictum filed from Dirge for the last six months.' Santos picked up one of the picts: it showed the planetary governor's palace in Baalbek City. Like all city structures, it was low, broad and windowless, built to withstand the frequent cyclones that swept over the crater wall from the wastelands. The resolution of the pict was good enough that she could recognise the impaled figure of the planetary governor, suspended on a girder among an iron forest set on the palace roof. The inquisitor set the pict aside and reached for another.

'Four months before the uprising, merchant ships were reporting strange surveyor readings in the vicinity of the system's far asteroid belt,' Santos continued. 'The local port authority dismissed the reports as pirate activity, but curiously, there was a dramatic drop in pirate attacks in the system over the same time period. Shortly afterward, orbital traffic control detected a number of unidentified flights into and out of Dirge's atmosphere. Again, these reports were passed off as smuggling activity, but I have another theory – a Chaos warship entered the system and is likely still here, hiding in one of the system's asteroid fields.'

Santos studied an image of cultists dragging bloody corpses from a burning dormitory towards the base of one of the cult's sacrificial pillars. She set it aside with a frown of contempt. 'Then there are arrest reports from the local Arbites headquarters. In the days leading up to the uprising several cult figures were arrested and when put to the question they described their leaders as armoured giants – the "Lost Princes", according to one of the

prisoners. The cultist described the greatest of these princes as a god among men, who wore the skins of his foes as testament to his power and bore a mighty talisman of his gods' favour.'

'The Chaos champion you spoke of,' the commissar declared. 'Who is he?'

But Santos shook her head. 'I dare not speak his name. I've placed your souls in peril just telling you this much.'

One pict after another showed cultists at work around hab units and municipal buildings across the city, carting out truckloads of debris and hauling them away. After the fourth such image she began to line them up on the map table in chronological order.

'If the prisoner was to be believed, there were no less than five Word Bearers present on Dirge, including the Chaos lord. That's an astonishing number for such a minor world.'

'Minor?' Ravin said. 'Dirge supplies more than half of the industrial materials used by forge worlds across the subsector.'

'The Word Bearers don't make war according to the Tactica Imperium,' Santos declared. 'They don't think in terms of lines of supply or resource interdiction. They fight for souls, spreading terror and debasement from world to world like a cancer. Dirge, however, is both isolated and sparsely populated. From their standpoint, it's a poor target.' The inquisitor studied the line of images and her frown deepened. 'Colonel, why did you order these images taken?'

Ravin looked over the picts and waved dismissively. 'We were trying to gauge the extent and composition of the enemy fortifications based on how much material they were excavating. Those work teams have been at it day and night since before we got here.'

Santos straightened. 'Excavations.' The inquisitor felt her blood run cold. 'These cultists aren't using floor panels and wall board to build fortifications, colonel. They're hollowing these buildings out to dig for something. That's why the Word Bearers are here. Why *he* is here. The rebellion was just a diversion so they could search the planet without interference.' Her hand was trembling slightly as she snatched up the last pict in the line. The time code in the corner indicated that the last excavation had begun almost three days ago. No new excavations since, she realised. They must think they've found what they're after.

'Colonel, I require the use of your mobile reserve and a flight of Vultures,' Santos declared in a steely voice. 'I'll brief the platoon leader en route.'

The building had formerly housed the local tithe assessor's office. Only three storeys tall, square, windowless and slab-sided, the structure was built like a treasure vault, which wasn't far from the truth. A small army of servitors and stooped scribes had toiled night and day within its cold, gloomy cells,

recording the profits of the mining cartels and the independent prospectors and assessing the Emperor's due.

Now the square outside the building was piled with the guts of the Imperial tax collection machine. Large, ornate cogitators stood in drunken ranks, their wooden cabinets splintered and their brass gauges tarnishing in the corrosive air. Drifts of torn cables and mounds of flooring and wall board were plucked and pushed by the restless wind, and a pall of glittering dust swirled endlessly in the harsh construction lamps erected by the work crews outside the building.

Glass crunched like brittle bones beneath Erebus's armoured boots as he stepped through the narrow doorway. Just beyond the threshold a tiled floor extended for less than a metre before ending in a jagged cliff of permacrete and steel.

The miners of Dirge knew their trade well. Working day and night, they'd completely torn out the first two floors and the building's two sub-levels. Tangles of shorn wiring, crumpled metal ducting and shreds of wallboard hung like man-made stalactites from the gutted ceiling, painted white with a layer of grit that sparkled in the harsh light of the construction lamps.

All work had stopped in the pit below. More than two dozen men set aside their tools and prostrated themselves on the rocky ground at the Chaos Lord's arrival. Erebus looked out over the fruit of their labours and was pleased.

Once the sub-levels had been removed the miners had dug another three metres into the grey, ashy soil before they'd found the first of the black stones. It had taken another day of careful work under difficult conditions to lift away millions of years of rock-hard encrustations that had covered the strange symbols carved into their surface. The work had gone slowly because the delicate sonic brushes would run out of power after only a few minutes in proximity to the rocks, and because the workers' brains disintegrated from prolonged exposure to the symbols themselves. Even from where Erebus stood he could feel the power of the warp rising like black frost from the surface of the accursed objects.

On the orders of Magos Algol, the tallest of the stones had been pulled upright again. It rose five metres into the air, casting a long, misshapen shadow across the excavation site. The surface of the object looked crude and rough-hewn, but the symbols carved into the rounded surface were sharp and precise. They climbed the stone in a kind of spiral, following the rules of a language that had died out before the birth of mankind. At the top of the stone the symbols ended at the base of a perfect sphere, haloed by an arch of stone wrought in the shape of twining tentacles.

Erebus smiled, revealing pointed teeth and the fearful demeanour of a cruel and vengeful god. The Chaos lord was clad neck to foot in the imposing armour of a Space Marine – but where its ancient engravings once extolled

the might of the Emperor of Man, it now preached an altogether different faith. Blasphemous runes and symbols of ruin pulsed sickly from the Traitor Marine's breastplate and the edges of his pauldrons, and the skulls of defiled Imperial priests hung from a brass chain around Erebus's neck. Psalms of vengeance and depravity were scribed in blood upon the tanned hides of fallen Space Marine heroes and stretched between barbed spikes across the Chaos lord's pauldrons and from hooks at his waist. In his right hand Erebus held aloft a talisman of fearsome power – the dark crozius, symbol of his faith in the Chaos Gods.

A broad ramp, wide enough for two men to walk abreast, had been built from the ground floor to the base of the excavation. Its steel supports quivered slightly as Erebus descended slowly into the pit. His black gaze was fixed on the standing stone and the orb at its summit.

Erebus stepped unflinchingly into the stone's twisted shadow. The darkness that fell upon him was unnaturally cold, sinking effortlessly through the bulk of his daemonic armour. The Chaos lord felt his shrivelled insides writhe at the icy echo of the warp, and Erebus welcomed it, spreading his massive arms wide. His mind filled with visions of the Seething Gulf, the ocean of mad wonder that the servants of the false Emperor called the *Occularis Terriblus*. It was the font of godhood, the birthplace of universes. Amid the roiling sea of unfettered power, Erebus beheld a swollen red orb that glittered like a drop of congealing blood. He heard the cries of multitudes, the chorus of supplication sung at the feet of his unholy master, and he longed to join his voice to the song. *Lorgar!* His mind called into the void. *The time draws nigh, unholy one. Soon the gate will swing wide!*

Erebus chuckled to himself, the sound echoing in the cavernous space and causing the cultists to tremble in fear. He turned to the assembled multitude, his eyes alighting on two figures kneeling apart from the storm-suited labourers. One was a hulking giant in red armour similar to Erebus's own; the frail, elderly man hunched next to the Word Bearer looked as slight as a children's puppet, all slender sticks and grimy rags, too fragile to touch.

The Chaos Lord favoured his servants with another dreadful smile. 'Arise, Phael Dubel,' he commanded gravely. 'And you, Magos Algol. Blessed are you in the eyes of the Gods Who Wait.'

The magos rose to his feet with an agility that belied his frail and aged appearance. His skin had the grey pallor of a corpse, his thin, wrinkled lips pulling back from gleaming steel teeth in an avaricious grin. His dark robes, once decorated with the fur mantle and chains of a *Magos Archaeologis*, now bore lines of depraved script that spoke of his allegiance to the Ruinous Powers. Algol's eyes glittered like black marbles in the shadows of his sunken eye sockets, bright with forbidden knowledge and reptilian cunning.

Dubel, one of the Chaos lord's chosen lieutenants, bowed deeply to his

master and stepped to one side, turning so that he could keep the assembled workers and the open doorway in view at all times. One hand rested on the butt of his holstered bolt pistol. The other, clad in a fearsome, outsized gauntlet called a power fist, opened and closed in an unconscious reflex, as though the weapon hungered for a victim to crush in its grip.

Magos Algol walked a careful path around the sharp edges of the stone's shadow, looking up at Erebus with a calculating smile.

'You see, great one? It is just as the *Book of the Stone* described,' Algol's voice was harsh and quavering, like the sharp note of a plucked wire. 'I told you we would find it here.'

Erebus regarded the towering stone greedily. 'Have you deciphered the runes yet, magos? Does it tell us where the Orb of Shadows lies?'

'In time, in time,' the magos said, raising a wrinkled hand. 'The runes require careful study, great one. Their meanings, if interpreted without proper care, could be… explosive. But,' Algol added quickly, 'it does indeed speak of the orb. You will have the answer you seek.'

'Then do not let me keep you from your work, blessed magos,' Erebus said to the man. 'Inform me the instant that you have deciphered the text.'

The magos bowed to the Chaos lord and approached the stone, his hands fluttering eagerly as he began to contemplate the inscriptions. Erebus joined his lieutenant. 'Send word to the *Throne of Pain*,' he said quietly, referring to the cruiser hiding in Dirge's outer asteroid field. 'We will return to Ebok as soon as Algol has uncovered the location of the orb. Then our work will well and truly begin.'

Dubel looked back at the looming stone, his black eyes lingering on the sphere. 'Once we have the orb, what then?'

'Then we seek the Temple of Ascendancy,' Erebus replied. 'I believe it to be on Fariin, in the Elysiun System, but the orb will tell us for certain.'

The Traitor Marine stiffened, fixing his master with a suspicious stare. 'Ascendancy? You seek to follow the same path as Lorgar?'

Erebus returned his lieutenant's stare. 'I? No, Dubel. I am but a humble servant,' he said enigmatically. 'Perhaps I seek to blaze a path for Lorgar to follow *me*.'

Dubel's eyes widened in shock. Before he could reply, however, the ground shook beneath a drumbeat of thunderous explosions as Imperial rockets slammed into the side of the hollowed-out building.

One hand gripping a support strut just inside the Valkyrie's open hatchway, Alabel Santos leaned out into the assault craft's howling slipstream and watched the Vulture gunships streak over the flat roof of the target building. Fires were burning from rocket strikes in the debris-choked square and tendrils of smoke rose from craters blasted into the building's thick

permacrete wall. The landing zone looked clear.

The three Valkyries of the mobile reserve platoon – plus an extra support craft carrying Balid and his gun servitors – were howling along at roof height down one of the city's narrow streets, right on the heels of the gunships. She could already feel the Valkyries start to slow as they dropped toward the deck, preparing to flare their engines for tactical deployment.

Santos swung back into the passenger compartment and addressed the platoon commander. 'Once we hit the ground we're going to have to move fast. Have two of your squads form a perimeter around the Valkyries and I'll have my gun servitors provide support. You and the assault team go in with me. Once we're inside, don't hesitate. Don't think. Just kill everything that moves.'

The stormtrooper lieutenant nodded at Santos, his face hidden behind a full-face tactical respirator that gave him the look of an automaton. His vox unit crackled. 'We're with you, inquisitor,' he said curtly. 'The Emperor protects.'

Santos drew her pistol just as the Valkyrie plummeted like a stone and then stopped less than a metre over the rubbish-strewn square with its engines shrieking. There was a stuttering roar as the door gunner let off a burst with his heavy bolter at some distant target. 'Go, go, go!' she shouted, leaping from the assault craft and heading for the building at a run. Behind her the stormtrooper assault team deployed with speed and precision, hellguns covering the building's entrance. The lieutenant followed right behind Santos, a plasma pistol in one hand and a crackling power sword in the other.

The inquisitor pulled her power knife free from its scabbard and thumbed its activation rune. She rarely carried it; the knife was an heirloom weapon, given as a gift from her mentor Inquisitor Grazlen when she attained the rank of inquisitor.

Santos held the weapon in a white-knuckled grip as she charged into the building's narrow doorway. She was going to bury that burning blade in the Chaos lord's eye or die trying.

Chunks of broken permacrete and twisted plasteel continued to rain down from the gutted ceiling among Erebus and the cultists as turbofans shrieked and heavy weapons fire hammered outside. The Chaos Lord looked for Magos Algol and found the corrupted scholar on his knees, coughing wetly amid falling drifts of dust. 'Finish your translation, magos!' Erebus thundered, then raised his accursed crozius before the huddled cultists and spoke in a piercing voice. 'Rise up, warriors of the faith! The servants of the false Emperor are upon us! The eyes of the gods are upon you – go forth and win their favour!'

With a lusty howl the cultists staggered to their feet and brandished the

tools of their trade: heavy sonic drills, power mattocks and arc hammers. They knew from bitter experience what those tools could do to soft flesh and brittle bone.

Dubel drew his bolt pistol. There was a searing crackle as he ignited his power fist's disruption field. 'Death to the servants of the false Emperor!' he roared, and the cultists surged forward, racing up the ramp to the doorway just as the first of the attackers stepped into view.

An inquisitor, Erebus thought, catching sight of a woman in ornate power armour leading the charge. Her alabaster face was distorted in a snarl of almost feral rage, and she fixed him with such a black look of hate that he could not help but think they'd met somewhere before.

Erebus bared his teeth in challenge and spread his arms in welcome, words of blasphemous power hissing off his tongue.

There! The shock of seeing the Chaos lord again sent a bolt of pure, righteous fury through Alabel Santos. Erebus was mocking her, grinning like a devil, his arms open wide. I'll give you something to smile about, she thought, raising her inferno pistol. Just as she drew a bead on Erebus, another armoured shape rushed in front of the Apostle, bolt pistol raised. The mass-reactive rounds smashed into her shoulder and chest before her ears registered the flat boom of the pistol's report. The impacts spun her around, the servos in her power suit whining dangerously as they sought to compensate for the blows.

Footsteps thundered up the ramp towards Santos as a dozen cultists charged forwards, weapons ready. The lieutenant appeared beside the inquisitor, levelling his pistol and firing two quick shots into the oncoming mob. Bolts of superheated plasma blew the lead cultists apart. 'Flamer to the front!' the platoon leader ordered over his vox.

Armoured stormtroopers fanned out on the narrow lip of permacrete to either side of the doorway, firing red bolts of las-fire into the charging cultists. Then a soldier stepped to the top of the ramp and fired a hissing stream of burning promethium point-blank at the charging miners. The cultists shrieked and fell back from the tongue of searing flame, setting the ramp alight with their tumbling, thrashing bodies.

Two stormtroopers to Santos's right were blown off their feet by bolt pistol rounds, their carapace armour no match for the Traitor Marine's deadly fire. The inquisitor dropped to one knee, trying to peer through the thickening black smoke and strobing las-fire for another glimpse of the Chaos lord. She couldn't see him, but she could hear him, his deep, sonorous voice chanting terrible words that sent a shiver down her artificial spine. The Chaos lord's voice rose to a terrifying crescendo – and for a moment it felt as though the very air in the room was receding, drawing back from the battle as if in

horror.

The screams of the burning cultists went silent all at once. Then Santos felt the fabric of reality come unravelled. She heard a chorus of screeching howls and tasted hot brass on her tongue, and before she could draw breath to shout a warning the daemons were upon them, charging straight through the fire.

They had faces like skinned wolves and their powerfully-muscled bodies gleamed with freshly-spilled blood. Their eyes, their fangs and their twisted horns were pure brass, bright from the forge, as well as the razor edges of their two-handed axes. Upon their sloped brows was carved the mark of the Blood God, and they had come for a bounty of skulls to lay at the foot of his throne.

Men screamed. The stormtrooper carrying the flamer fell to one knee and toppled onto Santos, splashing the inquisitor with blood. Roaring an oath to the Divine Emperor, she pushed the corpse aside just as a blood-spattered figure loomed above her.

She didn't feel the blow. There was a hot wind against her face, and then there was the strange sensation of warm blood soaking through the bodyglove around her shoulder. Her left arm locked in place and Santos felt the sting of needles as the suit's medicae unit attempted to keep her from lapsing into shock. All she could think was *thank the Emperor it missed my head*, then she put her pistol against the daemon's midsection and pulled the trigger. A bolt of pure cyan, powerful enough to pierce the armour of a Land Raider, tore the daemon apart and then detonated with a thunderclap against the ceiling. The bloodletter dissolved in tatters of stinking, oily smoke.

Santos fell backwards, landing against the marble verge. As though in slow motion, she could see another daemon rushing at her, axe raised to strike. There were screams and the clash of steel somewhere nearby – and then, out of the corner of her eye, she saw the smoke shift and reveal the red-armoured form of the Dark Prophet, standing before a monolith of twisted stone.

Death approached on cloven feet. Santos could feel her strength fading, and between one heartbeat and the next she made her choice. Taking her eyes from the daemon, she steadied her pistol against the marble tiles. With a tic of her cheek, she activated her augmetic eye's laser sight. The needle-thin beam glittered in the smoke, tracing a merciless line across the open space and painting a bloody dot on the Chaos lord's forehead.

'This is for Krendan Hive,' she whispered, and pulled the trigger.

The bloodletter howled above her – and then staggered as a bolt of plasma smashed into its head. The daemon staggered, then the blade of a power sword sank into its chest. The lieutenant leapt over Santos's body as the daemon's form dissolved. 'Get the inquisitor to safety!' he ordered, taking aim on another daemon and shooting it in the face. 'The Emperor protects!' he bellowed, taking another step down the burning ramp.

Santos felt hands grab the collar of her armour. Darkness crowded at the edge of her vision. The thunderclap of her shot rang through the open space and she tried to catch a glimpse of Erebus again, but all she could see was the lieutenant advancing coolly into the face of the onrushing daemons and firing shot after shot from his plasma pistol. The weapon's discharge vents were glowing white-hot, and his armoured gauntlet was melting from the heat.

'The Emperor protects!' she heard him say as another daemon loomed before him. The lieutenant fired his pistol again – and this time the overheated power core exploded, consuming him and his foe in a ball of incandescent light.

Santos felt herself dragged across the stone floor and passed out in a fiery wave of pain.

Erebus saw the bright flare of the inferno pistol and for the briefest instant he feared that the dark gods had deserted him. His vision deserted him in a blaze of cyan, and a clap of terrible thunder dashed him to his knees.

By the time he regained his senses the battle was over.

The ramp was gone. Indeed, the entire front of the building had collapsed, sealing the doorway with tons of broken permacrete. A bare handful of flickering work lights still cast a fitful glow over the site.

After a moment, Erebus started to laugh. He raised his crozius and offered his thanks to the Ruinous Powers for their dark gifts. Nothing in this universe would keep him from reaching the Damnation Gate.

Still laughing, the Chaos lord turned to look for Magos Algol, and saw that the Dark Gods had been fickle with their blessings.

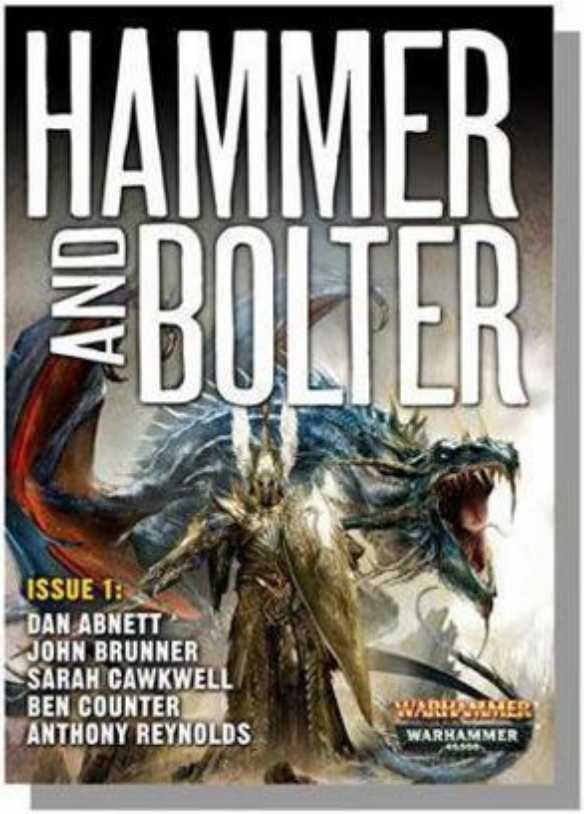
The inquisitor's bolt had missed Erebus and struck the monolith instead. Its dark surface had exploded, erasing the engravings in a storm of razor-edged shrapnel. Algol lay on his back at the foot of the ancient stone, his frail body shredded and a look of surprise etched on his bony face.

Erebus knelt by the body of the dead magos. Nearby, he heard a shifting of fallen rock, and glanced over to see Dubel picking himself up from the rubble. The Traitor Marine saw what had happened to Algol and hissed a vicious curse. 'We'll go back to Ebok empty-handed now,' the Traitor Marine spat.

The Chaos lord studied Algol's shocked face. 'I think not,' he said, taking the magos's head in his left hand. The man's thin neck snapped with an expert twist of his wrist; vertebrae popped in dry succession, and then Erebus held Algol's head up to the flickering light.

'The monolith is gone, but the eyes that beheld it still remain,' Erebus said. 'The eyes are the gateway to the soul, Dubel. And gates, once opened, will give up everything they contain.'

Erebus looked into Algol's eyes and laughed, seeing his future.



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XENOCIDE

Simon Jowett

Prologue

Agra – 'The Emperor's Garden'. Imperial Cartographic Designation: Samax IV. Alpha-class agricultural world. 1.75% Terran mass. Single continental landmass. Climate: temperate. Soil profile: high yield. Exploitable ores, minerals, etc: low-yield.

Surveyed M35,332. Conquered M35,375. Lost M40,666.

– Extract from 'A Concordance of Pre-Heresy Cartographic Data Spools' Vol. XXV. Librarium Collegium Astropathica. M41,572

'Father! Come quick!'

Brael Corfe was in the livestock shed when he heard his son's shout of excitement. Moloch, the young buck Brael was hoping would replace Magog, the ageing sire that presided over the farm's herd of milk-heifers, had gone lame. Brael had moved him into the shed and was treating the traces of green-white hoof rot that he had found on one of the animal's front feet.

The mould was a common enough pest. If it was noticed soon enough and treated with a well-known medicament composed from various local roots and herbs, it was soon eradicated. If left to develop, however, it would invade the core of the animal's hoof, reducing it to an evil smelling mush and leaving the farmer no choice but to destroy the animal.

'Father! Mother! The sky's on fire!' Bron was jumping up and down in the yard. Brael dipped his hands in the water trough by the shed door and wiped them dry on a scrap of cloth as he walked across the yard towards Bron. The yard was a squared-off half-circle, centred on the well from which Corfe men and women had been drawing water for generations, and bounded to the east and west by the long, low structures of the livestock shed and the hay barn.

Across the northern edge of the semi-circle, its door facing south, stood the farmhouse. The shed and barn had wooden roofs, the farmhouse roof was thatched. Warm, yellow light from an animal-fat lantern burned in the

window of the kitchen, its shutters were open as were all the others on this gentle summer night. Bron had been born beneath the farmhouse's broad low thatch, as had Brael, his father and his father before. Men of the Corfe clan had lived and died hereabouts for countless generations; Brael fully expected that he and Bron would do the same.

Bron was jumping about in the middle of the yard. Had it been daytime, he would have been able to look out across the flat, fertile grassland upon which Brael and his cousins grazed their herds. On a clear summer's day, it was possible to see as far as the Southern Hills, three days' ride from Brael's farm. Ownership of land meant little when there was so much of it. Ownership of stock and crops was much more important and, for better than three days' ride in every direction, the name attached to the livestock and crops was Corfe. Hardly a day went by without Brael looking forward to teaching Bron what it meant to be a Corfe and to work the land.

Brael saw Vika emerge from the house, also wiping her hands. Bron got his excitable nature from his mother, Brael was sure. He loved to listen to her stories of heroes from the distant past, of men who could fly like birds and shoot fire from their eyes. Some of the stories were thrilling, even Brael would admit that.

Unlike his wife, however, Brael didn't believe them to be true.

'Can you see them?' Bron asked, pointing up into the night sky. 'You can see them, can't you?'

Brael reached his son and followed the boy's gaze skyward. Lines of light were drawing themselves across the night, arcing north along long curved trajectories.

'Falling stars, Bron,' Brael told his son. He ruffled the boy's fine, fair hair. He got that from his mother, too; Brael's hair, like his father's, was thick and dark. 'You've seen falling stars before. That's all they are.'

'I've never seen this many before,' Bron replied. He looked up at Brael, and then at his mother, who had joined them and was also watching the starfall.

'Is it the star gods?' Bron asked. 'Are they coming?'

'Bron...' Brael began.

'We live in hope, Bron,' Vika replied. 'We have faith in the Varks.'

'Vika, they're just falling stars,' Brael said. 'Nothing more.'

'The *Dogma* says there'll be signs and wonders, doesn't it?' Bron looked to Vika for confirmation. The only book in the house was Vika's copy of *The Dogma of the Holy Varks*. Vika used it to teach Bron to read; he was the first Corfe that was able to do much more than make his mark. Vika smiled down at him and looked as if she were about to say something.

'Your Aunt Brella used to believe in signs and wonders,' Brael cut in. Vika rolled her eyes. She had heard this story before. 'Once she claimed to have

seen a buck walk backwards and say her name. She said that this meant your mother would have a girl child and that she would be unlucky. You were born eight months later.'

'But she didn't know I was pregnant,' added Vika.

Brael couldn't find an answer to that. Brella had already been ancient when he was born and had a reputation for knowing things she shouldn't have known. By the time Brael had brought Vika home, Brella seemed impossibly old, clinging onto life by her iron will and the preservative effect of the grain liquor that was her preferred tipple. The drink was held to be responsible for some of the wilder inaccuracies in her presentiments.

But somehow she had known of Vika's pregnancy before Vika had mentioned it to anyone but Brael.

'Does this mean we're going to visit the temple again?' Bron asked. Vika had wanted him blessed by the priests of the Varks, in their temple in the southern city of Mallax. It was called the Iron Town, thanks to the foundries and workshops that fouled the air with their smoke and noise. 'I'm old enough to remember it, now.'

'We'll go again one day,' Brael replied, remembering the clattering iron caravan journey south – ten days and nine nights. 'When you're older and I've taught you how to run this place.' He massaged his neck. An ache was beginning to blossom at the back of his head. He recognised it as the start of the throbbing pain that had, on occasion, confined him to a darkened room for the best part of a day.

Brella had a phrase for it. 'Wisdom trying to fight its way out,' she'd say, then fix Brael with a significant look. Brael would smile, kiss the old woman, and offer to refill her glass.

'Headache?' Vika asked. Brael nodded. 'I know just the thing to make it go away.' She paused and smiled. 'And if that doesn't work, I'll just have to send you to bed with a cold cloth over your eyes,' she added. She took Brael's arm and turned back to the farmhouse.

'Can I watch the sky a bit longer?' Bron asked.

'Why not?' Brael replied, smiling at his wife. 'They're only shooting stars, after all.'

Vika thumped him playfully on the chest.

'Don't stay out here too long,' she told Bron. 'I'll expect you to be in bed before moonrise.'

'I will,' Bron replied. 'You go and look after Dad's headache.' There was such a knowing tone in his voice that Brael and Vika stared at each other, both struggling not to laugh, as they walked to the kitchen door.

Brael didn't remember falling asleep. He woke to find a shaft of silver light cutting through a gap in the bedroom shutters. The moon must have risen

while he slept. Judging by the intensity and angle of the moonlight, it was close to its zenith. Dawn was still some way off.

Brael couldn't remember what he had been dreaming, or why it should have woken him. He eased up into a sitting position, careful not to disturb Vika. Blinking and absently rubbing the back of his neck, he looked down at her, still asleep beside him, fair hair fanned out around her head. He felt a familiar tightness in his chest. He had felt that same tightness the first time he laid eyes on her.

Brael's father had been still years from the grave when Brael accompanied his elder cousin Ralk on an iron caravan to the annual market at Giant's Pass, at the foot of the North Hills. The gentle, rising country marked the border between the wide rich grasslands and the ragged hill country that grew wilder and steeper with every day's travel north. The ancient, smoke-belching engines that travelled the iron roads, all of which had their terminus in Mallax, were of no use in the north country. Here the people moved their flocks from peak to peak in search of pasture and wintered in valleys where the snow would pile as high as the roofs of their stone-walled cabins.

'Northern women are like the bleaters they tend,' Ralk had warned Brael with a smile. 'Always ready to wander off and never know when to quieten down.' Brael laughed; he knew how Ralk's wife, Jenna, would react if she heard her husband. Women raised among the wide, grassy plains of Brael's homeland were more than capable of using a sharp tongue or flying kitchen bowl to make their opinions known, and Jenna's aim was legendary.

Brael stayed in the north after Ralk returned with the rest of the caravan to the grasslands. He endured the biting winds and unremitting cold of the hilltops and the well-meant ridicule of Vika's kinfolk; they were sure he'd be dead before Vika deigned to return his attentions. Luckily for his frozen, aching limbs they were wrong.

Vika's independent mind and adventurous spirit both attracted and puzzled Brael. Even by the standards of the hill clans, her family were particularly well travelled. Brael was surprised to learn that they had travelled as far south as Mallax, primarily to visit the Temple of the Holy Varks, home of an obscure sect, hardly known beyond the city walls. Brael had considered this no more than a curiosity of her family history until she fell pregnant with Bron. One night, as they lay together, she had told him that after the birth she wanted to take their child south to be blessed at the temple.

Brael had been unsure. All he had heard of Mallax were travellers' tales of a smoke-clogged, soot-blackened scab of a place. Once the men of Mallax worked in shafts and galleries beneath the ground, tearing rock from the earth, then transforming it through ancient processes into the knives and ploughshares used by farmers everywhere, and the swords and lances with which the city barons armed their militias.

But that had been long ago. Men no longer ventured beneath the earth. Instead, the men of Mallax spent their time repairing what their forefathers had made: the tools and the machines, including the engines that pulled the iron caravans. Meanwhile, the stones of their city grew ever blacker from the dirt spewed into the air by the chimneys of the city's workshops.

He had been about to forbid the journey when he caught sight of something in her eyes, in the set of her jaw. She would go without him, and take their new babe with her. Some men in his family would have called him a fool, but the moment he realised that, he also remembered why he loved her.

Six months after Bron's birth, he arranged for his nephew Rebak to look after the farm while he and his new family travelled south.

Mallax was everything he had heard it to be and more. The noise was worse than deafening, it was an assault: the hammering of metal on metal; the cries of foremen and workers; the rushing, artificial inhalations and explosive, hissing exhalations of engines like those that pulled the caravans, only much, much bigger. There was a reek of burning metal always in the air and grit crunching between your teeth. When Brael looked skyward, past the forest of smoke stacks that seemed to jostle for space above the tallest of the city's rooftops, it was as if he were looking through a grey veil, a gauze of smoke and grit and the combined excrescence of too many souls packed too closely together.

Brael was not a bumpkin. He had visited Vinara, the city-state that claimed administrative control over the region in which his family farmed and to which they paid regular tithes of produce. He had also made one trip to Primax, the greatest of the city-states. Both were large, bustling, curtain-walled cities, home to powerful families and their militias and the temples of deities associated with the seasons and the fertility of crops, beasts and men. They were every bit as crowded as Mallax and probably not much cleaner. But the smells of Vinara and Primax were those that he recognised – animals, crops and dirt – and they didn't seem to cling to your skin like a thin film of oily fat.

Vinara belonged to its landscape; its stepped streets mirrored the vine-planted terraces that surrounded it. Primax seemed to share the grandeur of the vast prairies of productive farmland at whose centre it sat. Mallax, by contrast, was a dark, cacophonous imposition on the land.

During their journey, Vika had explained to Brael the Dogma of the Varks.

'It is a beacon,' she had told him, shouting over the constant clattering of the caravan's iron wheels. 'It is by its invisible light that the gods will find their way back to us.'

The gods had been born among the stars, Vika explained. They had travelled together in peace and joy until, becoming tired, they had set down on this world and rested here for centuries. During this time, they gave birth

to the first true inhabitants of this world, the ancestors of everyone now living on the world they named Agra, which meant ‘farm’ in the star gods’ holy tongue. But, just as paradise seemed complete, they were called away to confront a vast, unknowable danger that threatened to destroy all that was good and pure.

So that their children should not feel abandoned, the gods gave them the Varks. Some stories claimed that every child of the gods had a Varks of their own, through which the gods spoke, promising their anxious children that one day, when the danger had been defeated, they would return.

But they didn’t return. The Varks fell silent. Generations passed and the children of the gods changed, forgetting their heritage and the knowledge their parents had given them. The huge, glittering machines with which they once tended the open grasslands and even took to the air like birds fell out of use, then fell apart as the knowledge required to maintain them was lost.

The last remaining Varks was housed in the temple in Mallax and only in Mallax did people struggle to preserve the knowledge of the gods and to maintain what few examples remained of their wonders. Without their efforts, the iron caravans would have long ago ceased to run and the only means of transport that remained would have been of the four-legged variety.

Though he said nothing about it, Brael was amazed that his wife could believe such nonsense. While there may once have been machines as miraculous as those in the stories – it was not unusual for unfamiliar objects, battered and rusted by unguessable ages underground, to be unearthed during the digging of a sewer ditch – they had been made by men and abandoned by those same men, probably for very good reasons of their own. As far as Brael was concerned, the land was the land, men were men and beasts were beasts.

Brael remembered the dark and relative quiet of the Temple of the Holy Varks, separated from the rest of the city by its high precinct wall. There was a low hum that seemed to pervade the space, but it was not unpleasant. Hooded priests moved to and fro, their footsteps scuffing on the flagstoned floor.

He hadn’t known what to expect, but this wasn’t it. It looked pretty much like every temple he had ever seen.

‘Only the priests stand before the Varks,’ Vika had explained. ‘They take our prayers to it and bring its blessings back.’

One of the priests had noticed them. He padded over to greet them and threw back his cowl.

Brael opened his eyes with a jolt of surprise. He had dozed, only to jerk awake again when his head lolled forward. The memories of meeting Vika, having Bron and travelling south had raced through his mind in a matter of heartbeats. And, judging by the familiar tightness at the base of his skull, the

headache he had gone to bed with was about to pay a return visit.

Easing himself out of bed he padded from the bedroom to the kitchen, where moonlight shone brightly in through the unshuttered windows. His mouth was dry and gummy, so he decided to wind up a bucket from the well, take a sip and then splash the chill water over the back of his head. He glanced out through the kitchen window. There was something in the yard. A body.

Bron had not gone to bed as his mother had asked. He had lain on the packed earth and counted the shooting stars, eventually falling asleep where he lay.

Brael smiled down at his son, then went outside and gathered him gently into his arms. Before turning back to the house, he spared a glance skywards. The light of the moon had all but obliterated the stars he knew to be there and there was no trace of the falling stars that had so entranced his son.

A sickly yellow blotch blossomed behind his eyes and his stomach lurched. Vika’s ministrations had merely delayed the inevitable. By the time he reached the kitchen door his head was pounding. After slipping Bron into his bed he returned to lay beside his wife, pustules of gaudy colour swimming behind his closed eyelids until morning.

PART ONE

From the collation of survivors' reports and the analysis of the few pieces of documentary evidence thus far unearthed and translated from this planet's debased form of pre-Heresy Imperial Gothic, the invasion of Samax IV appears to have proceeded exactly as one would have expected. The invaders were technologically superior. The indigenous population were limited in their technology, but enjoyed a vast numerical superiority.

At first the invaders' advance was swift, seizing control of the most northerly quarter of the planet's single continent. Very few reports of the attacks appear to have reached the rest of the population. Transcriptorum Servitors record only one reference to a rumour concerning 'storms in the north' and 'fires among the mountains.'

Over the next year (approx. 1.25 Terran solar cycles) the invaders moved south. Again their initial gains were swift, but news of their advance travelled quickly through the more populous central regions. Evidence has been found of some disbelief in early reports of the invaders' progress from the mountains. Gorna Haldek, a diarist and civil functionary in the court of Luydos, self-styled High Baron of Caspera, describes early reports as: 'the stuff of a child's nightmares, no more.' Caspera was shortly to fall beneath the invaders' advance.

The few survivors of Caspera's hastily assembled defence force – little more than the city baron's standing militia augmented

by every able-bodied inhabitant of the region – were forced to retreat and to swell the ranks of the forces being assembled by the as-yet untouched city-states. This process of catastrophic loss followed by the retreat and regrouping of the remaining forces was to continue down the length of the continent.

These larger forces would succeed in slowing the invaders' advance, albeit briefly. Some units of the defenders were equipped with ancient slug-throwers (Cross ref. 665/1468-archeotech designations: flintlock; wheel-lock; musket) and the wreckage of primitive artillery pieces has been unearthed along the invaders' route south. There appear to have been rare instances of the defenders learning to use weapons captured from the invaders. However, the defenders' main weapon was their numbers and their willingness to fight to the death.

When this was set against the technological superiority of the invaders, and combined with the invaders' inhuman predilection for bloodshed, the eventual outcome could never have been in doubt.

The inhabitants of Samax IV were doomed.

– Extract: 'Inquisitorial communiqué 747923486/aleph/Samax IV' Author: Inquisitor Selene Infantus. M41,793

Wiping the sweat from his eyes as he ran, Brael wondered for what might have been the ten thousandth time if this was the day he was going to die.

Ahead of him, Fellick stumbled and almost dropped the long musket he was carrying as the toe of his ragged boot clipped a piece of the debris that littered the streets. Even before the attack, the town – Grellax, Brael remembered someone telling him – had looked like it had been sacked and abandoned.

Grellax had been a well-established market town, set among a landscape of rolling hills. The farmer that Brael had once been, a year and what felt like a hundred lifetimes ago, couldn't help but note that the grass on the hills he had marched over to reach Grellax, in column with the rest of the army – an amalgamation of regiments from Primax, Mundax, Caspera and Terrax – was richer than that of his flatter homeland to the north. The animals raised on this feed would have produced rich milk and dense, wholesome meat.

Grellax had grown prosperous enough to spill beyond its ancient and crumbling walls. Those buildings outside the walls were now ablaze and the walls themselves were shattered, the stone blown to dust by engines of destruction that had no place in this world.

The buildings of Grellax's older quarters were built stoutly of stone quarried some way off, their roofs made of red tile, another indication of the wealth that had resided here. Brael and Fellick were running along one of the broad avenues that ran through the centre of the town, in what must have been a district of shops and taverns, an area dedicated to giving the Grellaxians something to do with their money.

However, since the three ragged armies had rendezvoused outside the town, with the intention of re-provisioning and moving on in a single, combined column, Grellax's inhabitants had been quick to pile what belongings they could into what transport they could find and attach themselves to the rear of the column. It moved out two days after the last army – Brael's as it turned out – had arrived.

Brael had been lucky so far – luckier than any normal man had a right to be, according to some – but he knew it couldn't last. He and his men were assigned to join the rearguard.

As he drew level with Fellick, Brael reached out – with his left hand, the one that had been shorn of its first two fingers in a skirmish during the withdrawal through the Cornos Forest, the dense woodland that marked the border between the baronets of Caspera and Vinara – and slapped the broad-backed Primaxian on the shoulder.

'Keep moving!' Brael shouted.

'I wasn't planning on doing anything else!' Fellick replied without taking his eyes from the street ahead.

The street was lined with shops no one would patronise again, taverns in which tankards would never again be raised. Their doors hung open, some off their hinges, as if their owners had torn them away in their haste to be gone from their homes. And, given what he had seen in the year since the lights fell from the sky, Brael could understand why.

A guttural roar came from the end of the street behind them. Automatically, both men accelerated their pace.

'Too soon!' Fellick hissed through clenched teeth. The market square

towards which they were running was still half a street-length away.

Brael heard a second inhuman shout, followed by a harsh metallic clatter. ‘Cover!’ he shouted as he swerved suddenly to the left, slamming into Fellick and propelling him towards a tavern’s hanging door.

An appalling cacophony erupted from the end of the street: a coughing roar from the many-headed animal that was devouring the world. As Fellick crashed into the tavern’s main room, Brael knew what was coming next.

Thunderous impacts chewed a line in the dirt behind the men, throwing up a shower of fragments of the street’s cobbled surface and the hard-packed dirt beneath. In the heartbeat before he crossed the tavern’s threshold, Brael risked a glance along the street.

Two of them came towards him at a run, firing from the hip, bandoliers jangling about their impossibly broad and deep torsos as they came. They looked like statues come alive, statues carved from dark green boulders cast upon the shore from the furthest depths of the ocean. Tusks like those of the sea-cows that migrated every year from the frozen northern sea jutted from their lower jaws and, even at this distance and in so brief a glance, Brael would swear that he could see the malevolence burning redly in their deep-set eyes.

Another burst from the engine-driven rifles they carried so casually, when it would take a strong man most of his strength even to lift one, tore the doorway to shreds moments after Brael had disappeared inside.

The tavern had been ransacked during the evacuation. Pitchers, flagons and jars had been smashed, tables and chairs overturned. A trapdoor behind the bar stood open, and the rich scent of spilt ale rose from the cellar beneath. The landlord clearly had decided that his stock would provide no refreshment to the invaders.

Fellick preceded Brael through the bar room, moving parallel to the street as quickly as possible. The thunder of the greenskins’ engine-rifles continued to batter their senses and flying splinters slashed and bit at their faces as the rifle shells chewed through the lathe and plaster of the tavern’s frontage. The projectiles burst into the bar and slammed out through the rear wall, their momentum barely impeded by the building’s substance. Supporting uprights and crossbeams were sliced through like saplings cut down by a single axe-stroke. With a chorus of explosive groans, the bar began to collapse in on itself in the wake of the fleeing men.

Ahead of them was the end wall. To Brael’s relief a door stood in its centre. ‘Hope it’s not a broom cupboard!’ Fellick shouted above the skull-shredding shriek of the greenskins’ weapons. Two more running strides and he hit the door, left shoulder lowered to take the force of the impact.

The door exploded outwards, spilling Fellick and Brael into a narrow cross-street. A left turn would take them away from the street down which they had

been running and along which they knew the invaders were advancing, still spraying the tavern with gunfire and reducing it to little more than kindling. As what remained of the tavern roof fell into the bar with a splintering crash, expelling a cloud of dust and debris out through the end door, Brael and Fellick turned right.

The two men sprinted from the mouth of the cross-street and across the entire width of the main street before jagging back and forth, anxious to present as difficult a pair of targets as possible to the greenskins, who had ceased firing when the tavern roof fell in. Catching the scent of fermented products, they were about to begin picking through the debris when the humans reappeared.

Brael and Fellick raced down the street, their paths crossing and re-crossing, past more abandoned shops, an apothecary's and a butcher/surgeon's. It was important that the greenskins didn't lose sight of them for long. Despite the hazards of the debris-strewn street, Brael risked another glance back. Their pursuers had spotted them; already they were bringing their engine-rifles to bear. And behind them, Brael saw three more hulking figures were making their way down from the far end of the street.

Come one, come all, Brael called to them in his mind as he ran. Ahead, the street opened into the market square. *We'll see our land soaked in your blood before we let it go.*

Grellax belonged to the invaders from the moment their war-party appeared on the horizon. Though little more than a vanguard for the army that was advancing inexorably southwards, burning, looting and pillaging as it came, the sight of the creatures, the roar of their war engines, louder and more terrible than the largest iron caravan, and the reek of oil and smoke that soon reached the town walls caused more than one of Grellax's defenders to foul themselves in fear. Brael knew how they felt.

The first time Brael had seen the invaders he had been part of one militia company among many on the flank of the Casperan Combined Companies. He had managed to maintain his self-control until after the battle. The Casperan barons, tutored since childhood in romantic fantasies of war, chose to meet the invaders on a broad plain edged by a low sierra to the west and a wide, fast-flowing river to the east. Stories of war machines that gouted smoke and fired thunder were discounted as the ravings of the mad.

When the greenskin army came into view, the barons had expected them to stop, perhaps to parley before the battle, as the heroic code demanded. The last thing they expected the invaders to do was to speed up, closing the gap between the armies faster than a gallop, their roaring, wheeled machines pluming black smoke and their engine-driven rifles barking death.

Brael, along with most of his company, broke and ran before the invaders reached their lines. They left twenty men lying dead on the field, holes punched in their bodies by the greenskins' weapons, fired from impossible distances. His company only stopped running when they had reached the cover of the woods that hugged the riverbank. Then his self-control deserted him and he vomited uncontrollably into the bright, clear water.

Brael learnt a valuable lesson that day – a year ago, by the time he arrived at Grellax: do not engage the invaders in a pitched battle on open ground. If only the barons had learnt the same lesson.

The smaller war engines attacked Grellax first, racing in on two or three fat wheels, trailing clouds of smoke and oil. Machine-rifles chattered and coughed from fixed mounts on the engines' bodywork or from separate gunners' stations behind the rider or in sidecars. A few of the attackers tossed explosive charges at the old town walls, hastily patched up in anticipation of the attack and manned mainly by Grellaxians who were too old or too stupid to leave, bolstered by a smattering of more experienced fighters. The shells from the invaders weapons did enough damage, punching through ancient stonework and shredding the bodies sheltering behind it; the explosives tore holes in the fortifications large enough to drive bull-carts through, two abreast.

The foot soldiers ran forward as the war engines retreated, some of them spraying the walls with gunfire from the machine-rifles they carried, which were not very much smaller or lighter than those that were mounted on the two and three-wheelers. The defenders could only reply with a handful of blackpowder muskets, whose lead balls ricocheted from the plates of metal hung on the attackers' monstrous green bodies. The pair of aged cannon which had stood in the town's main square for generations did more damage, until first one then the other exploded, either due to a fault line in the aged muzzle cracking under the sudden strain or because of inexpert packing by the terrified crew. No one knew or cared. By that point, most of the defenders had fled the walls to begin the ugly process of fighting through the streets, doing their best to delay the inevitable. Grellax would fall. It was just a matter of time.

Brael and Fellick raced across the market square, one of several dotted around Grellax, lined by the houses of the more prosperous merchants. At each corner of the three avenues that led into the square were shops and teahouses, that had once sold pastries and other delicacies. Now the grand front doors hung open, scraps of finery dangled from open windows and littered the square – luxuries dropped and forgotten in the hurry to be gone.

'Five!' Brael shouted, apparently to no one, to the open doors and the empty houses. 'Wait till they're clear of the street!'

Brael ducked behind an upturned farm cart next to the ornate fountain in the centre of the square. Already crouching behind the cart and below the lip of the fountain were several of his men. Two of them – Costes and Perror – had been in the first unit of scratch militia Brael had joined, when the caravans of refugees from the north had begun arriving, adding credence to what had been considered 'only stories.' He knew that Perror in particular was responsible for some of the stories that had begun to circulate about him, but he meant no harm and no one could argue that he wasn't a good man in a fight.

Costes handed Brael a loaded rifle, the pouches containing the musket balls and what remained of his ration of blackpowder. Brael had not wanted to risk the loss of his rifle, should the greenskins have brought him down before he and Fellick had drawn them to the square. Fellick, however, had not let his rifle out of his sight since the war began and had become superstitiously possessive of the weapon. He was convinced that the one sure way to guarantee that the greenskins would have his head would be for him not to take his rifle with him, despite its weight and unwieldy length.

Fellick angled his run towards one of the buildings that edged the square. Brael made a wager with himself that it would turn out to be another tavern. Until the invaders came, Fellick once told him, his life had consisted of two things: beer and butchery. He had worked in the slaughterhouses that supplied meat to the noble houses of Primax. These houses had supplied many of the generals and field commanders of the armies whose retreat Brael's men had been assigned to defend and about whose competence and courage Fellick had strong, uncomplimentary opinions.

As Fellick disappeared through the building's front door, a muzzle appeared above the stone window ledge next to it.

'They're here!' Perror hissed.

Brael peered around the side of the cart. The first pair of their pursuers had come to a stop a few paces inside the square. Warily, they scanned the apparently deserted area, sweeping their machine-rifles in slow arcs. Brael offered a silent prayer to gods he had long ceased to believe in that the greenskins would not notice the rifle barrel pointing at them from across the square.

'Come on, where are the others?' Brael shot a look at Berek, the skinny Casperan who was crouching between Perror and Costes. 'You said there were five,' Berek whispered, struck by Brael's gaze. Costes punched his shoulder and, when Berek turned to protest, placed a finger against his lips.

Perror, who was peering through the gap between the overturned cart and the lip of the fountain, pointed in the direction of the greenskins, then splayed his hand, palm outwards. Five.

'Fuses!' Brael shouted after a glance around the cart confirmed Perror's

report. Before pulling his head back behind the cart, he saw the muzzles of five machine-rifles swing in his direction.

The cart disintegrated under the fusillade. Brael was already on his feet, running behind Perror, Costes and the others, hoping to draw the greenskins' fire past them as he ran for the far corner of the square. To the invaders he looked like merely another fleeing human.

Once the arc of fire had passed over their heads, decapitating the ornate stone fountain in the process, Brael's men brought their weapons to bear over the lip of the fountain bowl and let fly. Two of the musket balls panged harmlessly off the greenskins' armour. A third hit one of the invaders just beneath its drooping dog-like ear.

Releasing the trigger of its machine-rifle, the creature swatted at the stinging impact of the musket ball. Seeing on its fingers the ichor that began to run from the wound more and more freely, it bellowed its outrage and adjusted the direction of its fire.

The men were on the move before the greenskin's renewed cannonade smashed chunks from the fountain's stonework and then raced across the cobbles after them.

'Split up!' Perror yelled, then turned sharply away from the others, who also made sudden turns to the left or right. Berek seemed to trip, then make an ungainly jump to his right before landing heavily on the cobbles, his back an exploded ruin.

Musket fire was coming from windows and doors around three of the four sides of the square. The greenskins returned fire, hammering lumps of masonry from the buildings. Though it was probably due to the way the tusks jutted from their lower jaw, lifting the corners of their thick upper lips, Brael thought that they seemed to be almost smiling, enjoying his men's futile attempts to harm them.

Brael took a shot from his new position at the corner of what had once been a shop selling sweet breads and pastries, then ducked back to reload. His fingers dug into the small leather pouch that contained the musket balls. Selecting one, he unconsciously noted that only two remained. In his blackpowder pouch there was enough left for three shots at most.

'Fuses!' he shouted as he reloaded, tapping the ball down and priming the pan with as few grains of the precious powder as he could get away with. Most of the unit's powder reserve had gone towards the charges Kobar had assembled and set in the buildings on the far side of the square.

'Kobar, answer me!' he shouted again. The former quarryman from the north should have retired to cover by now and the twisted fuses should be burning towards the charges. 'The fuses! Did you set the–'

A cannonade of muffled explosions echoed across the square. Compared to the raw, hateful cacophony of the greenskins' machine-rifles, they sounded

pathetic. Then came a growing rumble, the grinding of masonry in motion.

Brael risked a look around the corner. The buildings to either side of the street down which he and Fellick had led the invaders were falling, sliding down to earth and throwing out stray chunks of their substance as they fell. All but one of the greenskins was already lost in the plume of dust and debris. There was no time to lose.

'Go!' he bellowed, racing from cover. He left his rifle where he had sheltered and, as he ran, he unhooked the oversized meat cleaver that hung at his belt – a greenskin trophy of the retreat from Erewell. Without having to check, he knew that the rest of the men had also broken cover and were closing on the lone greenskin.

Confused by the sudden acceleration of events, the creature took four or five long heartbeats to realise that he was under direct frontal attack and to decide upon a response. At last it pressed its weapon's trigger.

Jarran flew backwards, her body virtually bisected by the burst of gunfire. Those nearest to her hit the dirt. One of them at least still held a rifle. Its ball pinged uselessly off the beast's breastplate, but it held its attention for long enough for the others to close in.

The greenskin was looking to its left as Brael closed from the right. He was close enough to see the corded muscles of its neck shift; it was about to turn its head towards him. He cocked his right arm back so far that the heavy cleaver threatened to overbalance him. Then, without slowing his pace, he brought it forward.

With a sound like an axe head biting into wood, the cleaver slotted through the gap between the beast's shoulder plate and its bucket-like helmet and bit into the neck. There was no chance of him extracting the blade quickly enough for a second strike, so Brael sprang back, almost stumbling on one of the lumps of masonry that were still falling in the vicinity of the booby-trapped buildings.

Brael heard a shout. Tylor, who had been with them since Erewell, was charging at the stricken greenskin, pike lowered, the weapon's heavy metal tip aimed at the creature's throat.

The pike-head struck sparks from the rim of the beast's breastplate before slamming into its throat. Bitter experience had taught the Agrans that the invaders' skin was as thick and tough as well-tanned leather. To get through it, you needed to strike with the kind of commitment that did not allow for a second chance.

The head of Tylor's pike came to a stop when it struck the massive column of bone and gristle that supported the shovel-jawed head. The greenskin fell where it had stood, bellowing its pain and trying to stem the tidal rush of ichor that issued from the wound.

Still wary of any last reflex-traces of life in the invader's body, Brael

stepped around the out-thrown hand that still grasped the oversized machine-rifle, wrenched free the cleaver and hung it back on his belt. Though blood was still singing in his ears from the explosions and the frontal assault on the greenskin, the sounds of other conflicts reached him.

The dust had all but settled from the explosions. Two of the greenskins were nowhere to be seen; buried, Brael assumed, beneath the rubble. That was more luck than they could have expected. Of the remaining two, one had been felled in much the same manner as the corpse that lay at Brael's feet. Fellick, appropriately, was leading the butchery of the still-twitching beast.

The last of the greenskins still had plenty of life in it, despite the fact that it was pinned to the ruined wall of a nearby building by two pikes, the head of one jammed into its shoulder, the second through what in a human body would be the lower ribs. While three of Brael's men and a boy that Brael didn't recognise applied their weight to the pike staves in order keep the creature pinned, it continued to rage and bellow, make sweeping grabs for its tormentors and then reach out for the machine-rifle it must have dropped when the pike-heads struck home.

Something began to nag at Brael's mind as he bent to examine the corpse at his feet. It might have been there for a while, but the noise and confusion of battle had muffled it.

There. Brael spotted a stubby pistol lodged in one of the wide belts that hung about the creature's tree-thick waist. It took both hands to cock the hammer action. Brael held it like a sawn-off scattergun as he quickly approached the trapped and raging beast.

The greenskin was beginning to weaken due to blood-loss and pain, but it was still a long way from being dead. Seeing Brael's approach, Fellick and several of the others began shouting, drawing the beast's attention off to its left. Brael stepped up from its right and pressed the gun to its skull, just behind one ear. Without waiting to see how the creature would react, he braced himself against the recoil and pulled the heavy trigger.

'Time to go,' Brael told Fellick. Most of the men were stripping the green corpses of what little was light enough to be useful: knives as large and long as short swords, hacking weapons like the cleaver Brael wore at his belt, the odd piece of armour or a thick and wide belt made from the skin of an animal that had never walked on Agra.

Costes and Perror had decided to take one of the machine-rifles with them, along with as many belts of shells as the rest of the unit could carry. They had selected the lightest of the weapons and were busily distributing the ammunition belts to the other men.

'You all right?' Fellick asked. He had seen the slightly nauseous expression on Brael's face before. Brael nodded.

‘Time to go,’ he repeated. The nagging something that had been scratching at the edges of his mind had grown louder, more insistent. As he returned Fellick’s concerned gaze, a bilious yellow blob exploded behind his eyes, growing to fill half his vision before it faded.

‘Get them moving,’ he added, waving Fellick away. Fellick nodded then moved off, shouting for the men to prepare to move.

‘I can hear something!’ It was the boy – young man really, perhaps seventeen summers old. Brael thought of Bron and immediately regretted it.

The boy was standing beside one of the piles of heavy rubble. He pointed. ‘I can hear something,’ he repeated. ‘Something’s moving.’

‘What are we supposed to do when they won’t even die when you drop a building on them?’ Kobar asked. Several of the men laughed.

‘More blackpowder next time, Kobar!’ called Tylor, prompting more laughter.

‘Leave it, boy,’ Fellick called. ’We’ll be gone by the time they crawl out from under that lot.’

‘You’re leaving?’ the young man seemed incredulous. ‘But... but you’re here to protect us!’

His words got the loudest laugh of all.

‘Sorry kid,’ said Costes. ‘We were left here to die as slowly as possible so that the rest of the army can get as far away as possible.’

‘And now we’re leaving, right?’ Fellick directed his last word at Brael who, head swimming, managed an unsteady nod.

‘Quickly,’ he said. ‘Very quickly.’

They left the square at a run, most of them jangling with looted ammunition belts, Costes and Perror already swearing about the weight of the machine-rifle they carried between them.

A high-pitched whine peeled through the air, growing in volume, but descending in tone.

In the market square, a slab of masonry shifted. It slid down the side of the pile of other such debris, revealing a green-skinned hand, fingers thick as a baby’s arm, and a massively corded forearm, covered in crudely drawn tattoos. A choking sound issued from within the pile; the sound of a creature dying from crushing internal injuries. Those appalling wounds did nothing to dampen the creature’s burning, instinctual rage, its overwhelming desire to kill.

From within its ready-made tomb, the creature heard the sound of the incoming ordnance and knew its waaagh was over.

The ground bucked under the men’s running feet. Slates fell from the surrounding buildings, shattering on the cobbles over which they ran. The young man, whose name was Vikor Lodz, glanced back as he ran. All he saw was a vast rolling cloud of dust racing along the street towards him.

When the dust cloud overtook them, the men ran on, coughing and spitting as they went. Leaving it behind, they kept up the pace, running over ground that continued to shake from the sound of other impacts. A bombardment had started.

‘I thought they’d at least spend some time looting before they pulped the place,’ said Tylor. They had finally come to a halt in another square, smaller than the last. The streets in this part of town were narrow, as were the buildings, which seemed to lean across the street towards each other.

At the square’s centre stood a votive shrine to a minor harvest deity. Vikor Lodz realised with a start that he was only a few streets from his family home, though his family – just his mother and sister, really – had joined the caravan of wagons that left with the soldiers.

‘They probably worked out that they can come back here and loot any time they like,’ muttered Tombek, a massively built Vinaran with a melancholic streak. ‘It’s not as if anyone’s going to try to stop them.’

‘I thought that was what you – I mean we – were supposed to do,’ Vikor blurted out. ‘I thought we were going to stop them.’

The absurdity of his words struck him the moment they were out of his mouth. This time, however, the others did not laugh. That only made him feel even worse.

‘I’m afraid we’re done here, kid,’ Brael said. ‘All we can do now is stay alive long enough to kill some more of them.’

‘We going out the south gate, following the army?’ asked Costes. The combined column of the armies and the caravan of refugees had gathered there before moving off. Brael shook his head, as much to clear it of the nagging ache as in answer to Costes’s question.

‘Even a blind man could follow that trail. You’ve seen how fast those two-wheeled wagons move. They’d run us down before dusk. I got a look at a map during the briefing for the rearguard. A river cuts through the land on the other side of the hills to the south. The army is heading for a shallow ford that’ll allow them to get the wagons across. They’ve been gone a day and a half, which means they’re not far from it by now. There was another crossing point marked on the map, off to the south-east. It looks deeper and wider, but we haven’t got to get wagons and horses across it.

‘But we still have to get out of here through the south gate, so let’s get moving.’

The rest of the men nodded.

Vikor raised his hand. ‘You – we – don’t have to go out through the south gate,’ he said. ‘We can go through the stockyards. It would be much quicker and we’d already be heading south-east.’

Brael regarded him for a heartbeat, head cocked as if he was waiting to hear someone whisper to him from his shoulder. Then he nodded.

‘All right, young man, lead on.’

As he led the strangers through the stockyards, whose wide gates the retreating army had neglected to secure, past open-sided butchers stalls and over the open blood-sewers that criss-crossed the flagstoned floor, Vikor thought about his mother and sister, huddled aboard one of the wagons that would be jouncing along in the army’s rutted wake. His heart sank at the thought of the invaders’ smoke-belching machines catching the civilian wagons at the rear of the column.

‘C’mon, kid.’ Kobar, who was walking alongside him, looted ammunition jangling across his chest, a pike propped over his shoulder, slapped Vikor on the back. ‘Whatever it is you’re worrying about, don’t bother. What really happens is always going to be worse.’

Navigating by the angle and direction of the sun’s path across the sky, Brael’s men marched south-east at a brisk pace. Their course took them through a gulley in the rolling hill-country, what might have once been a tributary to the river towards which they were heading, but which had dried up generations ago. The land rose on either side of them and the sound of the bombardment, which had hammered at their backs as they left doomed Grellax behind them, gradually faded away.

The gulley curved around the foot of a low hill, taking Brael’s men out of direct sight of Grellax. Before he lost sight of the town, Vikor looked back. Plumes of smoke rose over the houses, lit from within by licks of flame, and over the shattered town walls. The wind shifted and he thought he caught the scent of burning wood and something else: the tang of oil.

He remembered his outburst in front of the strangers with whom he now marched and felt a rush of embarrassment. Grellax was dead long before he had realised it. All the greenskins were doing was cremating its corpse.

Then Fellick called to him to keep up and he hurried after his new comrades.

Dusk fell and they marched along the gulley into the night. The moon was on the wane when the sound of fast-running water reached them. They made camp amongst a stand of trees a short way from the steeply-sloping, reed-strewn riverbank and Brael dispatched men to scout the bank in either direction. Only when the scouts had returned with reports that the bank was deserted in both directions and, as far as they could tell, on the far side of the river as well, did Brael allow a small fire. Someone produced a small, battered can and a handful of tea leaves. Someone else had liberated a few scraps of meat from a butcher’s stall in the stockyards.

The combined smells of tea and cooking meat drifted on the air as Vikor told his story: after seeing off his mother and sister – his only family after his father had succumbed to a wasting illness a year and a half ago – in the

caravan that followed the army away from Grellax, he had been given a pike and was assigned to a reserve platoon. They were to reinforce areas of the wall defences as it became necessary. He and a few of the others were on their way to do just that when something exploded nearby, throwing everything – even his memory, it seemed – into confusion. He remembered blood and screaming and the blank, vacant expression on the face of an old friend as he lay slumped against a wall, one side of his chest a mess of seeping meat and exposed bone. He remembered little after that until he found himself in the market square, where Kobar had been directing the positioning of the booby traps.

'And we were out playing bait,' said Fellick. 'Brael's idea, of course.'

'Sounded like suicide to me,' said Massau. Vikor had noticed that the slender man with what had once been a carefully-clipped moustache drooping over his upper lip did not share the others' sense of closeness.

'Brael's no fool,' Costes replied. 'He was probably safest of all of us.'

'What do you mean?' Vikor asked.

'Bumpkins' superstitions!' Massau scoffed before anyone else could answer. The others shot him looks that ranged from pity to contempt.

'You weren't with us at Erewell,' Perror said. 'There were twenty of us just before things got really bad. Ten of us didn't listen to Brael.'

'Coincidence!' Massau blustered.

'And why aren't we still in the square back there, picking over the greenskins as the bombardment came in on top of us?' Costes asked. 'You may not have had much use for things you can't record in your guild's ledgers, but you're not in Primax now, you–'

'I agree with Massau.' Heads turned sharply. Brael was standing over them. He had been listening, unseen, from a short way off. 'We make our own luck by keeping our eyes and ears open for things that might kill us...' He surveyed his men, their faces painted by the firelight.

'And then make sure we kill them first.' The men laughed and nodded. Brael noticed that Massau had missed the point; the Primaxian wore a self-satisfied expression, sure that Brael had proven his argument for him. All Brael cared about was making sure that his men aimed their hatred at the greenskins, not at each other.

He moved away from the fire. Looking up through the trees, he saw that the sky was almost cloudless, the stars as bright as gems. It reminded him of a similar night, a year ago. But he forced himself to think ahead to the route they should take to catch the rest of the army.

It would be so easy to think of Vika and Bron, to imagine how their lives had been since he set them upon an iron caravan's open wagon and waved to them as they pulled away. It would be so easy to imagine how it would feel when he saw them again, among the crowds of people who will have gathered

behind Mallax's high walls by the time Brael and his men arrive.

If only he had not woken, less than a month after their departure, gripped by the sure and certain knowledge that they were dead.

Dawn had begun to tint the sky when the remains of the fire were kicked over and the men moved down to the riverbank. The water rose to mid-chest and ran quickly and forcefully over slick, rounded rocks. Vikor found the noise of its passage oddly soothing – a reminder of the natural world, after the overwhelming noise of the greenskins' infernal machines. Invisible among the treetops, birds began to sing their greeting to the new day.

They moved carefully across the river, holding their powder pouches overhead as they felt their way around the largest of the riverbed rocks with their toes. Brael was first across, half-sliding down the steep bank into the icy water, pushing through the stiff reeds and then fighting to hold his balance against the strong current, all the while feeling his way with the toe of his boot as the water rose to chest height before the riverbed at last began to rise towards the gentler, less reed-clogged opposite bank.

On the far side, Brael secured a line around the nearest tree and threw it back to Kobar, who was waiting waist-deep in the water. He and the rest of the men used the line to help maintain their balance against the force of the river. With his mutilated hand, Brael would have been unable to take much advantage of it.

The land rose gently ahead of them as they marched away from the river, covered with tough, low-growing shrubs and the occasional moss-encrusted boulder – whether they had rolled down from the hilltops in ages past, or else were left there by ancient floodwaters, Brael couldn't guess.

Again steering by the sun, Brael tried to keep them moving along a south-westerly route that would bring them back in line with the army's southerly course. That was assuming he had remembered the map correctly – he had only seen it for a moment; the minor baron who had given the briefing didn't expect any of the men he was addressing to survive.

Gradually, the roar of the river faded behind them and for a while they marched in silence. The grassy land undulated softly beneath them and maintained a gentle upward gradient. Only the muted noises of the equipment they carried marked the time.

The sun was approaching its noon-point when a new sound reached them: a low rumble. At first, Vikor took it to be distant thunder, though the storm season was still two or three months away. The looks on the faces of his companions made him think again.

'Distek! Kleeve!' Brael beckoned and broke into a run. Distek, a farmer like Brael, and Kleeve, a trader in tanned hides, slipped the ammunition belts they were carrying from their shoulders and ran after Brael, quickly

disappearing through a stand of trees that marked the crest of the long rise they had spent the morning climbing.

Those left behind didn't slacken their pace. As they marched, they began to check their own and each other's equipment; those who had rifles loaded and primed their weapons. Costes and Perror began to debate how best to set up the machine-rifle.

The sun had passed the noon-point by the time Distek reappeared, a look of urgency on his face. He beckoned them on then turned and ran back the way he had come. The rest of Brael's men ran up the still-rising land after him. The sound that Vikor had taken to be thunder had long since resolved itself into the sound of explosions punctuated by the ratcheting cough of engine-driven rifles and the deeper growl of two-wheeled war machines.

They passed through the line of trees and were surprised by the suddenness with which the land dropped away, scooping down into a shallow vale dotted by stands of trees. A taller hill rose from the far side of the valley, its top disappearing into the blue distance. Brael and Kleeve were standing at the edge of the drop, staring down at the carnage.

The dead lay along the length and breadth of the valley: a few greenskins, many more Agrans. Trees and shrubs were burning, the ground appeared to have been scorched by the passage of the engines that had rolled over it, slaughtering as they went. A phalanx of two-wheeled machines had run the length of the column from the rear, firing indiscriminately, first at the packed wagons, then the foot soldiers. Wagon drivers had whipped their horses into a gallop, making for the valley sides. The war machines had driven them down, pumping round after round through the wagon's bodywork and the screaming refugees within. The corpses lay with the ruined wagons across the length and breadth of the valley floor.

The small number of mounted fighters had wheeled their horses to face the oncoming greenskins, with predictable results: the torn and shattered bodies of men and their mounts lay among the other corpses of militiamen who had tried to fend off the sudden attack.

Brael remembered the first lesson he had learned: do not engage the invaders in a pitched battle on open ground.

He counted four men still on horseback. A rider whose purple helmet plume identified him as belonging to the Primaxian hussars weaved between two overturned and shattered wagons, jinking his horse right and left to avoid the greenskins' fire, until he was finally able to outflank one of the two-wheeled monstrosities and skewer its rider with his cavalry lance. The greenskin was hurled from its saddle and the machine careered away, the gunner seated in the sidecar frantically lunging for the handlebars.

A burst of gunfire from another of the wheeled attack vehicles cut short the hussar's moment of victory. Both he and his mount were punched to the

ground, gaping holes torn in their bodies by the high-calibre shells.

Seeing this, the three remaining horsemen wheeled their horses about and made for the far end of the valley at a gallop, disappearing into the drifts of smoke that wandered across the vale from the pyres of shattered wagons and scorched corpses.

Gunning their engines, the greenskins roared after the horsemen, their wheeled war wagons eating up the distance at an impossible rate, their riders howling with barbaric glee, until they too disappeared into the smoky distance.

'They must have expected us to run,' muttered Brael. Fellick had come to stand beside him. All of his men watched in silence, momentarily rooted to the spot. 'They must have sent scouts around Grellax while the main force came through the town.'

'But how did they find the column so quickly?' Fellick asked. 'I know they left a hell of a trail but any scouting party would still have to cover a lot of ground to–'

A broad shadow passed overhead. Everyone ducked involuntarily. Tylor was the first to look skywards.

'Gods of harvest and home!' he breathed. 'It's not possible. It's... it's unholy!'

The flying machine swooped gracefully away from them, its path taking it out over the battlefield. It appeared to be little more than a child's kite, constructed on a much larger scale: a framework of struts and vanes, roughly lashed together, covered by a sheet of fabric that somehow caught the wind and held the whole thing aloft. And, hanging face-down in a harness beneath the wings: a greenskin.

'Now I know we're doomed!' said Tombek.

'I can't believe it's taken you this long to work that out,' replied Kleeve.

It was as if the sight of the impossible machine – somehow more impossible than the engine-driven chariots, the machine-rifle and the mere existence of the greenskinned invaders from the heavens – unlocked something in Vikor. His last memory of his mother, being held aboard a wagon by his sister, Freytha, and a woman he didn't recognise, flashed before him. Lowering his pike he charged down the incline, into the valley.

'Little idiot's determined to get himself killed,' declared Massau.

'He'll have family down there, somewhere,' Brael replied. He turned to his men. 'Whatever happens, we'll need transport out of here.' He jabbed a finger at Kleeve and Tombek, who nodded then headed off down the slope. 'The rest of us are going to see if we can't take some survivors with us.'

'Corfe,' Massau stuttered. 'You can't seriously mean–'

'It's coming back!' Tylor interrupted the guildsman. Those still gathered around Brael followed his pointing arm. The flying machine had climbed,

then wheeled round to retrace its path overhead.

‘It’s letting its friends on the ground know we’re up here,’ Fellick commented. ‘Maybe we should get moving.’

‘That’s exactly what I–’ Massau began.

‘The greenskin riding it can’t be wearing much armour,’ Brael said, almost to himself. ‘You wouldn’t want to make that machine weigh any more than it already does.’

As he spoke, Brael unslung his rifle from his shoulder. Almost unconsciously, those among his men who also had rifles did likewise. Eight of them, they aimed high.

The greenskin aboard the flying machine must have realised what they were planning. Working a set of pulleys, whose cable-ends hung before him from the glider’s frame, he began to alter course. It was, however, too late. The muskets fired in unison, several punching tiny holes through the fabric of the wings, several more hitting the pilot in the face and chest.

Brael’s men watched as the flying machine pitched away, rapidly lost altitude and slammed into the ground halfway down the incline and some way off to the left. A couple cheered, but Brael was already reloading and moving down the slope.

‘Think you can cover us?’ he shouted back to Costes and Perror, who were lashing together a pair of pikes to serve as a stand for the machine-rifle’s barrel. Kobar was the last of the men to deposit at their feet the ammunition belts they had carried away from Grellax, then follow Brael into the valley.

Smoke from burning wagons moved in drifts along the valley floor. Vikor had recovered some of his senses and now used the wrecked wagons for cover as he moved across the battlefield.

‘Freytha!’ he called for his sister, knowing that she would not have left their mother. All he heard in reply was the sound of the invaders’ seemingly-inexhaustible weapons and the roar of their war engines.

A shadow, taller than a man, loomed out of the smoke. Vikor recoiled instinctively and brought up his pike as the riderless horse, bleeding from several wounds, galloped across his path. He heard musket fire away to his right and wondered if Brael and his men had followed him onto the battlefield. The smoke seemed to be getting thicker and a tang like cooking porker drifted on the air.

I’m already dead, he told himself. I’m already dead and this is where the damned spend eternity.

‘That way! Hurry!’ Fellick roared at the small group of militiamen and civilians he had found huddled in the lea of an overturned wagon. He jabbed a finger towards the wagon that Kleeve and Tombek had succeeded in righting.

Kleeve, something of a rider in more peaceful times, was soothing the horses that had been unable to free themselves from the harness when the wagon overturned.

Dropping to his haunches behind the wagon, Fellick grabbed one of the soldiers by the collar and shouted in his face: ‘Weapons! Powder! Do you have any weapons or powder?’

The militiaman – the unicorn on his shoulder crest marked him as a member of the Mundax Reserve – stared blankly at Fellick for a moment, then managed to shake his head.

‘Powder wagon took a direct hit,’ he stammered. ‘Lost everything. Nothing left. No shot. No powder.’

‘Then take this.’ Fellick unhooked an old butcher’s knife from his belt. ‘We’re heading for the wagon over there. See it?’ Again he jabbed a finger towards the wagon. Tylor and Lollack had arrived. They had a couple of survivors with them. The militiaman nodded and took the butcher’s knife.

‘Th-thanks,’ he mumbled.

‘It’s okay,’ Fellick replied. ‘Now follow me and bring your friends.’

Brael threw himself to the ground as the war machine roared past, firing blindly into the smoke. Whatever strategy the greenskins may have had appeared to have been abandoned; they continued to ride over the battlefield, shooting at shadows, because they enjoyed it.

‘Massau, you all right?’ Brael shouted, craning round to look for the guildsman, but finding no sign of him. Brael cursed. Massau was an effete fool, but he was a good shot and Brael was loath to lose his marksmanship.

The roar of the war machine had faded, so Brael climbed cautiously to his feet. He carried the long rifle balanced loosely in his crippled hand, the looted greenskin cleaver in his right. The stubby pistol with which he had dispatched the greenskin in Grellax pressed against his back where he had holstered it through his belt. He moved silently, senses alert for any kind of movement nearby.

The shot came from the right: a sharp report, a flash and the buzz of a projectile as it narrowly missed his ear. Brael ducked, moved quickly away to one side, then back at an angle that brought him up behind the sniper’s position.

She was perhaps sixteen summers old, huddled with the corpse of an older woman. She swung the empty pistol round to face Brael as soon as he emerged from the drifting smoke.

‘It’s empty,’ he told her, then had to knock it from her hand as she rose at him, attempting to use the pistol as a club.

‘My skin’s not green,’ he said, hastily hooking the cleaver onto his belt and then grabbing her wrist as she made to claw at his eyes with her nails. ‘And I don’t have time to waste. We have transport – or we should have – and we are

getting away from here.'

The girl stared at Brael for a heartbeat then uttered a single word – 'Mother' – before wrenching herself free from his grasp and dropping back beside the dead woman. 'I promised I wouldn't leave her,' she explained when Brael crouched before her.

'She wouldn't want this,' Brael replied. 'I have a son and, if I was dead, I'd want him to go on living. The last thing I would ever wish for would be to be the cause of my son's death.' Swallowing hard and remembering the faces of his wife and son as the iron caravan pulled away, Brael held out his free hand.

Fellick had loaded the refugees aboard the wagon. The militiamen had recovered themselves and were standing with the others around the wagon while Kleeve continued to talk to the horses calmly.

'How much longer?' asked Tylor. The smoke was thinning as the wagons burned themselves out. It was becoming ever more likely that they would be spotted.

'Soon,' Fellick replied. He didn't like the way he was expected to assume command in Brael's absence. 'We give them a chance to get back to us.'

'There's Massau!' Kobar pointed to where the guildsman had emerged from the drifting smoke. Massau ran towards them, shouting. 'Get moving! I lost Brael then heard gunfire.' Massau shouted as he reached the wagon. 'Surely we can't risk waiting any longer,' he continued between gulps of air.

Tombek snatched Massau's rifle from him and checked the firing pan. 'This hasn't been fired,' he announced.

'I couldn't, I told you,' Massau began to splutter. 'They fired first. I couldn't risk lifting my head to aim.'

'You said you only heard gunfire,' Tombek persisted, stubbornly.

'There!' shouted Distek. Two figures were running towards them through the last wisps of a drifting curtain of smoke.

'And there!' Lollak – a reticent former tanner from Terrax, far to the west – pointed away at an angle, where a lone figure was also running towards them. The smoke was clearing fast and they could make out who it was: Vikor.

'Kleeve, get the horses ready to go,' Fellick ordered. Kleeve climbed aboard the wagon and readied the reins. 'Come on, Vikor, lad, move!'

Vikor had no idea how he had found his way back through the smoke. He only knew one thing: he had failed to find his mother and sister. His mind swam with images of them, lost somewhere on the battlefield, calling his name and receiving no reply.

Then why was he running towards the wagon that his new comrades had been able to make ready? Shouldn't he turn back, continue his search? To do that, he realised, would mean going to his death. And he wanted to live.

The cheerful one – Fellick – was beckoning to him, urging him on. Then, between one step and the next, death took him, tossed him aside in broken, bloody pieces and roared away to claim his friends.

The burst of gunfire punched Vikor off his feet and through the air. By the time he hit the ground he was already dead. The war machine roared out of the smoke behind him. Its fat front wheel rolled over Vikor's pelvis, snapping bones like old twigs and grinding them into the dirt as its rider steered towards the wagon.

'Gods, Kleeve, get moving!' Fellick shouted. 'Everyone aboard!'

Flicking the reins, Kleeve urged the horses on. The animals, hearing the scream of the approaching engine, needed no encouragement; they took fright and bolted up the slope, hauling the bucking and jouncing wagon after them.

Brael pushed the girl to the ground the moment Vikor was hit. Shielding her body with his, he watched the young Grellaxian fall and his men and the wagon head for the rise. He saw Fellick look towards him from the wagon, clinging to the jolting boards and wearing a helpless expression. They had been through a lot together, seen things neither would have believed possible. This, it seemed, was where it ended.

Tombek grabbed Massau's rifle and fired at the oncoming greenskin. The shot went wide and Tombek was almost thrown from the wagon as a wheel hit a sudden dip.

Kleeve worked the reins frantically, desperate to urge a little more speed from the horses, whose flanks were already slick with sweat, their lips pulled back and flecked with foam.

The war machine roared closer with every heartbeat. Its rider fired a short volley – a ranging shot which chewed up the ground to the right of the wagon, spraying its passengers with dirt. Everyone on board the wagon ducked, then stayed crouched low, expecting the next burst to be the last they heard. But the next burst of alien gunfire chewed a single line of impacts that ended at the war machine and its rider. Several shells punched through the machine itself; one exploded the fat rear wheel, causing the machine to fish-tail wildly. The rider struggled to regain control of his ride. Then a second burst slammed him from the saddle.

The riderless machine veered off, bleeding oil from its punctured innards and tearing a furrow in the dirt with its collapsed rear wheel. As the wagon continued up the slope, its passengers watched as the greenskin staggered to its feet, still able to move despite the ugly impact wound it had received high on its chest. It howled after the fleeing humans and unslung a wide-barrelled rifle from across its back.

A third burst of gunfire from the top of the slope hit the beast, throwing it backwards off its feet, this time rendering its misshapen skull into raw meat and bone. Splayed out with its feet facing the retreating wagon, its corpse continued to twitch as if some instinct remained after life had gone, knowing that its quarry was getting away.

Kleeve barely succeeded in reining in the panicked horses and brought the wagon to a stop a few strides from where Costes and Perror were celebrating, shouting to be heard over the ringing in their ears, their faces and hands coated with smuts ejected from the machine-rifle. The weapon sat propped against the lashed-together pike staves, smoke drifting from its barrel and the reek of hot oil tainted the air.

Brael hauled the girl to her feet and ran with her up the slope. They reached the wagon as the machine-rifle was being loaded aboard.

'Good to see you,' Fellick said.

'You too,' Brael replied. He surveyed the number of people gathered around and sitting in the wagon. Too many for them all to ride in the wagon without killing the horses in less than a day. As before they would only be able to move as quickly as the slowest of them could march.

'Who's your friend?' Fellick asked.

Brael looked at the girl. Tall and slim, she had the dark hair and olive complexion of the local population. Her eyes still held a trace of the wildness that had been in them when she tried to club Brael with the empty pistol. She had retrieved the ancient-looking weapon from where it had fallen before following Brael away from her dead mother and was holding it limply in one hand.

'I have no idea,' Brael said. 'What's your name, girl?'

'Freytha,' the girl replied. 'Freytha Lodz.'

'We're ready to move!' Kleeve called from his seat aboard the wagon. The women and children among the civilians Fellick had found had been loaded aboard the wagon, along with Perror and Costes, who had set up the machine-rifle to point to the rear. The men were grouped around the wagon, awaiting orders.

'We should get going,' Fellick said. 'The greenskins will be on our tail soon enough.'

Brael nodded. 'Head south,' he said. With the army gone – either lying dead in the valley, or scattered to the winds in small groups of battle-shocked survivors, there was only one place left for them to go: the iron city. Mallax.

PART TWO

Mallax was founded on the few mineral and ore deposits that were ever found on this primarily agricultural world. Over the generations of decline which followed Agra's loss of contact with the Imperium (cross ref. 666/852-hist: Age of Apostasy) the Mallaxians continued to mine these deposits and, in their manufactoria, to work them into agricultural implements and weapons of war.

As the ore deposits were exhausted, Mallax's manufactoria were turned to the repair and maintenance of those Imperial artefacts and machines that had survived the generations since contact was lost – though their origin and the existence of the Imperium was already slipping into the realm of myth and legend. Mallax became the workshop of the world.

The other city-states, such as Primax (the site, its city charter suggests, of the first human settlement on Agra), Terrax and Mundax, looked down upon Mallax, despite their reliance on its workshops for the maintenance of their agricultural machinery and the weapons with which they occasionally fought their petty wars. Contempt turned to envy, however, as the invaders rolled across Agra's verdant continent. Only one city had sufficient stockpiles of weaponry, ancient and patched though much of it was, to stand a hope of offering any real resistance.

– Extract: 'Inquisitorial communiqué 747923486/aleph/Samax IV' Author: Inquisitor Selene Infantus. M41,793

An ancient lantern held in his damaged hand, the stubby greenskin pistol in the other, Brael moved as swiftly as he dared along the tunnel beneath the city. Though the tunnel floor had been worn smooth by the passage of countless feet in ages past, the roof was of uneven height; the threat of dashing out one's own brains on an unexpected overhang was very real.

The lantern gave off a thin yellow light and the scent of animal fat. Its glow illuminated a few paces of the tunnel ahead, but neither Brael nor the men who had followed him down the shaft into the darkness beneath Mallax needed to see too far along the tunnel to guide them towards their destination. The shouts, screams and loud guttural roars, punctuated by the occasional gunshot were enough.

It had been almost three weeks since Brael and his men arrived at Mallax. They made their way warily through the deserted districts outside the city's tall curtain wall and identified themselves to the sentries – although Brael was sure that they had been tracking them for some time before making their presence known. After a short debriefing, they were assigned to a defensive station atop the wall and a reserve station below the battlements where they were to spend their off-duty hours.

A week after they had reached Mallax, the vanguard of the invaders' army had topped the horizon. As more and more of the infernal machines roared into view, carrying with them the greenskined plague that had wiped the Agran people from the rest of their land, the harrying attacks began. Two- and three-wheeled war engines rushed through the outer districts, firing up at the defences, testing them. Brael was of the opinion that they weren't trying to breach the wall. They were just amusing themselves until all their forces were assembled. Then they would come, together, to erase the last Agran stronghold from planet.

Brael's unit had been the third to respond to the cries of 'Attack from within!' Runners had been sent from the first unit to discover the attack and descend to meet it. Appalled that the greenskins might have found a way under the curtain wall, Brael led his men down from their reserve station and east through the streets to the head of the mineshaft.

To their great chagrin, Brael ordered Costes and Perror to stay with the machine-rifle. There were those among the city's swollen ranks of defenders and refugees who were not above stealing such a weapon and selling or bartering it to another militia company.

'And besides,' Fellick added when Brael's orders didn't manage to quieten their protests, 'you finally seem to have worked out how to hit something with it. You wouldn't want to waste all that practice.'

At the mineshaft, a tower stood over the hole in the ground, with a wheelhouse huddled at its base. The area immediately surrounding the mine was clear of buildings, but was overlooked by warehouses that ringed the open space. The area itself was not completely featureless; it was dotted by ancient piles of slag and other debris brought up with the valuable black rock that Mallax's engineers used to refine and use as fuel for their machines. The slag heaps were so old, hardy weeds had sprouted and covered them with grey and green patches.

By the time Brael's men had made their way down from their reserve station to the head of the ancient, disused mine shaft, a second platoon had descended to reinforce the first. Neither had returned, nor sent out a man with word of their progress. Brael and his company were the third to descend into the darkness.

'The next gallery's clear.' Mab, their Mallaxian guide, appeared in the light from Brael's lantern. On the long ride down the shaft, huddled close in a metal cage hung from an ancient chain whose links were bigger than a man's fist, Brael had been surprised to learn that their guide didn't come from a mining family.

'I'm a historian,' she had told him, smiling at the absurdity of the notion. 'Mining ended in Mallax so long ago, we're the only people still interested in the mines. I've only been down a couple of times, but have made careful studies of the plans.'

'I'll do my best to feel reassured,' Fellick said with a smile that was swallowed by the utter blackness through which they fell.

Brael was surprised by the size of the man-made cavern he stepped into. The uneven roof rose over them in a shallow dome almost two man-heights high and wide enough for twenty men to stand side-by-side. It was virtually featureless, just a vast cave drilled into the earth – the very idea set Brael's mind spinning. To be down here, away from the sunshine, the wind and the seasons seemed an awful way to live, no matter how impressive it was to think that men had once been able to do so.

Ancient timbers, thicker than a man, supported the roof and were themselves supported by a lattice of smaller timbers wedged diagonally between them. Several of Brael's men eyed them warily.

'If they've stayed up this long, I doubt we've got anything to worry about,' said Lollak.

'We should be worrying about what's down the next tunnel,' muttered Tombek, morosely.

'Oh, I'm worrying about that, too,' Distek replied as he gingerly placed a hand on one of the timbers as if to reassure himself of its stability.

Niches had been carved into the curving walls by the men who had dug out

this gallery long ago. Presumably they had been to accommodate more lanterns of the kind Mab was carrying. Mab's lantern – more powerful than those handed out to Brael and his men – illuminated the entire space when she opened its shutter to the fullest.

'So men used to dig metal out of the ground here?' asked Kobar. He ran a hand over the rock, mentally comparing it to the raw salt deposits he used to blow out of the cliff faces in his homeland.

'Not here,' Mab replied. 'Further on. The next tunnel branches out towards the work faces. This was where they collected the unrefined metal that they had mined. They would load it into wheeled wagons and tow it back along the way we came, then up to the surface.'

'This is where all the tunnels come together?' asked Brael.

Mab nodded. She ran a hand over her close-cropped hair. Brael caught sight of the additional digit that grew out of the knuckle joint of her little finger. There was one on her other hand, too; Mab made no attempt to hide them. Brael had first seen them on the surface, in the daylight that seemed only a fantasy in the utter blackness of the mine – he had experienced the same sudden shiver he had felt years ago, in the Temple of the Holy Varks.

'Charges here, then,' Brael said to Kobar, who nodded and dipped a hand into the canvas bag that was slung across his chest. He withdrew the first of several cylindrical objects he had brought down from above: a kind of compact explosive, more powerful than twice the same amount of black powder. Mallax had preserved through the generations the secrets to its costly manufacture. Also in the bag was a coiled length of a fast-burning fuse, more reliable than the greased twists of cloth Kobar was used to.

'Charges?' Mab echoed Brael's word with concern.

'Here's where we'll stop them,' Brael replied. 'One way or another.'

In a low-ceilinged space beyond the gallery intersection, the remains of the first and second companies were gathered behind the bodies of their comrades, losing a desperate attempt to defend the main tunnel that led towards the surface. That they had succeeded in holding back the greenskins for so long was testament to their courage. Courage, however, would only last so long.

Brael's men emerged from a slit-narrow tunnel that had been practically invisible, appearing to be little more than a shadow, even in the powerful light of the greenskins' lanterns. Mab, refusing to return to the surface after guiding them along one of the tunnels that led from the intersection at which Kobar had been left to work on the charges, led them along the crevice. Historians believed it to have been constructed to provide ventilation to the furthest work faces, perhaps even a means of escape in the event of a cave-in.

Whatever the intentions of those who had created it, the tunnel allowed

Brael's men to strike at the flank of the greenskins, driving a wedge through the centre of their force as the bulky invaders struggled to turn and meet the surprise attack in a co-ordinated manner.

They emerged into a scene painted in shadows and light. The long, low space had once been a work face from which Mallaxian miners tore unrefined metal from the rocks. Most of the light came from the invaders' torches, strapped to foreheads or breastplates, which appeared to use some power source other than animal fat to produce beams of powerful yellow brilliance. Brael had been all but blinded when the first of the creatures turned to meet his attack. Luckily Fellick, directly behind Brael and therefore shielded by his shadow, was able to thrust a pike – its shaft cut to half-length before the descent into the mines – into the animal's face.

One of the greenskins had fallen before the rest of them began to realise that they were under attack from another direction.

A shot from the heavy pistol Brael had taken from the dead greenskin in Grellax blew out the back of another's head. The recoil kicked up Brael's arm to his shoulder and the report in the confined space set his ears ringing. Cracking the barrel open along a hinge in its stock, he removed the smoking shell case and inserted another from his belt.

Brael and his men discovered shortly after their arrival that Mallax had become a marketplace for stolen greenskin weaponry. Along with tales of long, hard retreats from the invaders, many of those who had gathered behind Mallax's walls had brought with them all manner of alien artefacts: engine-driven swords, whose blades were made up of countless fast-moving teeth; machine-rifles like the one Costes and Perror had made their own; all manner and size of ammunition.

Brael stepped over the green corpse, snapping the pistol shut as he did so. His next target saw him coming and brought its rifle to bear.

Instinctively, Brael dropped to the floor the moment he saw the rifle barrel swinging in his direction. He shouted a warning to those behind him and, through the ringing in his ears, he heard answering shouts and cries of alarm.

Then the greenskin fired.

The ringing in Brael's ears suddenly became a high buzzing, then nothing. Silence settled round him like a blanket while sharp, hot fragments of rock scored his forehead and cheek, carved from the wall and ceiling by the wildly ricocheting shells.

To his right, a body hit the floor. By the light from the torch fixed to its breastplate, Brael was shocked to see that it was one of the invaders, half its face a smoke-edged crater. In the tunnels and galleries beneath the last human city, at least some of the greenskins' unholy weapons were as much of a threat to their users as their targets.

With no way of knowing if the fusillade had ceased, Brael lifted his head.

The greenskin with the machine-rifle had released its trigger. Perhaps the expression on its shadow-splashed face was one of appalled surprise at what it had just done. Perhaps orders had been issued forbidding the use of machine-rifles until the surface was reached.

Brael pushed himself to his feet. A glance to one side located another corpse. A lantern lay a short way from it, the shutter wide. It was Mab, her face pale and upturned, eyes open, the rest of her dark with shadows and blood.

A beam of light stabbed across Brael's eyes. Raising his damaged hand to shade them, he aimed his pistol and fired directly into the light. He didn't hear the sound of his gun, but the light swung upwards, slashing its beam across the uneven ceiling and he moved away, not waiting to see how much damage his shot had caused.

His men were pressing towards the defenders at the end of the gallery. The greenskins had already adjusted to the new situation and were beginning to push back.

Distek fell, torso bisected by a machine-sword, the only engine-driven weapon it was safe to use in the confined space. Tylor, fighting at Fellick's back, took a crushing backhanded blow to the throat. While Fellick spun, short pike still in hand, to counter and return the attack, the young man from Erewell choked and died as his shattered, swollen larynx closed off his windpipe.

'Forward!' Brael shouted at the top of his lungs. He hoped that at least some of his men could hear him, even it he could not hear himself; his voice was a low, muffled thing confined within his skull. He could see that his men were faltering, their attack slowing as they lost the advantage of surprise. They had to drive on, to reach the small group of shattered-looking survivors from the first two companies, and then sweep them along the tunnel towards the gallery in which Kobar waited with his charges.

Without the time or even the space to reload his looted gun, Brael had re-holstered it in his belt at the small of his back and unhooked his greenskin cleaver. The press of bodies at the tunnel mouth had become so tight it was barely possible to swing the weapon. The sweat, anger and fear of the invaders mingled with that of the defenders. The body of every combatant was smeared with a mixture of Agran blood and the sickly ichor that ran beneath the greenskins' hide.

He kept shouting as he pushed and hacked, as he used the pommel end of the cleaver to put out a glowering red eye then reversed the weapon to slash it across the exposed vein that throbbed between the cords of the creature's neck. A second slash severed the fingers that the beast pressed against the spouting wound. And still he shouted, urging his men on and the defenders to hold out for one heartbeat longer, one–

With a start, Brael realised that he was staring into the exhausted, almost dead eyes of another human being. A man from one of the first two companies, his clothing hung in tatters and he was covered in the blood of two species.

Brael shouted instructions. The stranger nodded and turned away. At that moment, Brael was hit by the kind of certainty that he had become used to being accompanied by a drumming inside his head and a bilious display of lights before his eyes. Whether it was the utter confusion of the battle or his deafness, those accompanying sensations did not materialise. All Brael knew was that something awful was about to enter the gallery. Something that could spell the end for them all.

Still shouting, he grabbed the nearest of his men – Kleeve, as it turned out, wearing the same half-crazed expression Brael was sure was also on his own face – and all but threw him into the tunnel. Brael turned, grabbed another of the defenders – this time a man he didn't recognise – all the while shouting that despite the risks, they must get out of this gallery now.

Where possible, the defenders ducked away from the conflict, heading for the tunnel mouth – which was only two or three steps behind any of them, so close had the press become. Several were cut down by the greenskins, who were in turn forced to retreat by Brael and Fellick, each standing to one side of the tunnel, stabbing and slashing with cleaver and cut-down pike.

'Now!' yelled Brael and turned to run down the tunnel, slapping Fellick on the shoulder as he did so. And at that moment, the greenskins paused. Several cocked their heads as if they had heard something, though Brael could still hear nothing. That gave the last two living Agrans the chance to sprint down the tunnel, heedless of the uneven floor, stumbling and righting themselves as they ran.

Someone had left a lantern on the tunnel floor, without whose light to warn them, Brael and Fellick would have run at full speed into the rock wall as the tunnel made a sharp left turn. As they made the turn, the first shells impacted the wall that they would have hit, punching craters into the rock and filling the air with razor-sharp splinters.

Fellick stumbled, uttering a sharp cry that Brael was unable to hear. Catching his balance he continued to run, hand pressed to his side.

'Reinforcements!' Fellick gasped out after he and Brael had burst from the tunnel and all but fell into Kleeve's arms. Though unable to hear Fellick's voice, Brael saw that others were already working to staunch a wound in his side. Fellick winced, his back arching involuntarily, as Tombek eased a long sliver of rock from his back, just below the curve of his ribs.

'Damn greenskins sent reinforcements!' Fellick gasped out as his wound was bound in a length of filthy cloth torn from the remains of someone's shirt.

‘Either they got impatient or always planned to send them, but they’re on their way.’

‘We’d have still been in the gallery when they arrived,’ realised one of the survivors from the second company to enter the mine. ‘If we hadn’t moved *before* they arrived, they’d have cut us down like grass.’ He was staring at Brael as he spoke.

‘Coincidence,’ said another from his company.

‘I said that,’ added Tombek, looking up from fastening the makeshift bandage around Fellick’s torso. ‘Once.’

‘If they’re on their way, then we haven’t got time to chatter,’ Kobar cut in. He was standing at the entrance to the tunnel that led to the metal cage and the shaft to the surface. With an almost inhuman detachment, Brael watched Kobar’s mouth work frantically as he beckoned to the others and pointed at the tunnel. At his feet were bunched the ends of the fuses he had run the length of the gallery, leading to charges placed around the tunnel mouth and in natural nooks and crannies around the walls.

‘Kobar’s right!’ Brael shouted unintentionally, causing everyone to start. ‘Let’s move. We have no time!’

Kleeve looped Fellick’s arm over his shoulder and led the way along the tunnel, followed by those of the first two companies that had sustained wounds. There were only three or four, Brael noted. Greenskin weapons were not intended to wound, but to annihilate, on the scale of the individual or of cities, lands, perhaps whole worlds. Vika’s stories of distant worlds and creatures that might bestride the gulfs between them seemed far less fanciful now.

Brael made sure he was the last to enter the tunnel. He paused as he passed Kobar, who crouched by the bunch of fuses, striking the tinderbox he had brought with him from his home in the shadow of a distant range of mountains.

‘Go,’ Kobar said, then waved along the tunnel. ‘I’ll be directly behind you.’ The tinderbox caught and he lowered it gently to the fuse-ends, which began to fizz and burn away towards the charges.

Kobar rose and Brael turned to take a step along the tunnel. With a start he realised that he could see his own shadow, clearly defined by a light far stronger than an oil lantern’s, stretching along the tunnel floor.

Alien gunfire erupted from the far side of the gallery. Though unable to hear it, Brael could feel the machine-rifles’ drum-like concussions in his guts and bones. Ducking instinctively, he glanced behind him.

Kobar had been hit. A glancing blow, the shell had still managed to tear an appalling, ragged hole in his side. The impact had spun him round and deposited him against the slightly-curved wall of the tunnel, a stride or so from the opening to the gallery.

Brael turned and took a crouching step towards Kobar. Seeing him coming, Kobar held up a shaking hand, then jabbed a finger at something on the floor between them. At first Brael could see nothing, then he spotted it: the tinderbox. By the time he looked back up at Kobar, the former quarryman had slipped one of the cylindrical charges and a length of fuse from his canvas bag.

Another burst of gunfire almost forced Brael to his knees. Ducking flying splinters, he scooped up the tinderbox, then darted forward and handed it to Kobar. Kobar nodded his thanks through a rictus of pain, then nodded away along the tunnel. He had bitten off a tiny length of fuse and inserted it into the charge. The last Brael saw of him, before sprinting away along the tunnel, racing to get out of the powerful light of the greenskins' lanterns and into the sheltering dark, Kobar was striking his tinderbox alight for one last time.

Brael was running in darkness, head bowed to avoid any dangerous protrusions from the ceiling, when the sound wave of the explosion reached him. The dry, burnt scent of the explosive reached him on the air that was forced along the tunnel. Up ahead, Brael saw a pale, weak light: the rear of the survivors' column, heading for the up-shaft. He ran on.

It must have been Kobar's intention all along, Brael realised as he ran, to close the tunnel entrance, to make sure as many of the greenskins as possible were bottle-necked in the gallery, working to clear the fallen rock when the main charges blew.

'Where's Kobar?'

Brael had caught up with the others and Tombek had noticed that he was alone. Brael pointed at his ears and shook his head. Tombek pointed back down the tunnel and furrowed his brow to indicate a question.

Realising what Tombek wanted to know, Brael just shook his head.

At that moment, the tunnel floor shifted beneath their feet. Brael felt a rising pressure, rolling through his chest. Tombek and several of the others looked anxiously upwards as dust and small fragments of rock fell from the ceiling.

The main charges. Brael couldn't resist a smile at the thought of what was happening in the gallery they had just left: the weight of the earth, the weight of the city above them, pressing down upon the greenskins, crushing them beneath it. Brael wondered briefly whether a greenskin could feel fear as a man could, the absolute terror that comes with the knowledge that one's life is of no account in the events one is caught up in – the abject knowledge that your life is over. He hoped so.

The storm of dust and rock fragments rushed along the tunnel and enveloped them, extinguishing most of the lanterns. The survivors were forced to cough and gasp, to feel their way towards the shaft. Beneath their

feet, above and around them, the earth continued to move, to creak and moan as if in protest at the acts that had been committed within its depths.

One of the first company wounded was dead by the time they reached the bottom of the shaft, where the lift cage was waiting for them. ‘He stays down here,’ Freytha told his three surviving companions.

Brael had been unable to prevent Freytha slipping aboard the cage moments before it had descended into the mine, but he had ordered her to remain at the bottom of the shaft, ready to tug on the cage’s telegraph handle, which would give the signal to those above to raise the lift. Even if every human down here was dead, those above had to be told. ‘The less weight we have on board, the faster we get to the surface.’

One of the dead man’s comrades stepped forward menacingly, unwilling to be told to leave another friend below ground, equally unwilling to be ordered to do so by a girl. Lollak stepped between them.

‘You know she’s right,’ he said quietly. ‘Honour his memory by staying alive and killing more greenskins.’

Even though the dead weight was left at the bottom, propped against the shaft wall in a seated position, cold hands clasped in his lap in an attitude of prayer, the ride to the surface was agonisingly slow. The grinding rumble of falling rock faded and light seeped down from above. Instinctively, everyone in the cage lifted their faces, like plants seeking sunshine, anxious to be out of the dark.

A wave of tiredness rolled over Brael as the lift made its way to the surface, a reaction to the powerful sense of dread he had experienced just ahead of the arrival of the greenskins’ reinforcements. As always when he felt this tired, he found himself thinking of his home, his bed and his family. And as always, he pushed those memories back down, as deep inside himself as possible.

‘…an… ear… thing…’t?’ Freytha touched his arm and, Brael assumed, was shouting her question. He frowned a question in reply and she repeated herself.

‘A little!’ Brael shouted, after working out what she was asking. He could hear some of the louder clanging and grinding from the cage superstructure and the chain as it drew them to the surface. Hopefully, this meant that his hearing would return to him.

The cage rose into soft light and a cold breeze. Time seemed to have stopped while they were underground but, above them, the day had come to a close. Dusk painted the sky a delicate rose and the early evening breeze dried the sweat on their skin as they stepped from the cage. An anxious crowd awaited them. Brael estimated there were at least two companies of men, armed and ready to descend, should the news from Freytha have been bad.

Beyond the armed men was a crowd of civilians – though no one in Mallax could really be counted as a civilian any more. Women, older men and the

very young – some might have gathered around the pit head in the hope of seeing a loved one emerge alive. Others may have wanted to know if the greenskins had broken through and, therefore, how much longer they had left to live.

'You!' Tombek had spotted a familiar face in the crowd: Massau. The former guildsman had disappeared on some unspecified errand of his own, moments before the call to the mineshaft came. Now he hung around the edges of the crowd, perhaps hoping to discover to how many of his comrades he would have to explain his absence. Seeing Tombek lunging through the crowd towards him, Massau's face assumed an expression of almost comic alarm and he darted away.

'Tombek, leave him,' Brael called after the tall Vinarian and was relieved to discover that he could hear his own voice again, even though it sounded as if he was speaking from a distance. 'You need rest. And food. We all do.'

'And we need to mourn our dead,' added Kleeve, who was still supporting Fellick. Brael saw that the normally voluble Primaxian looked haggard, his face pale from the amount of blood that continued to seep through the rough dressing.

'First we take care of our living,' Brael countered, indicating Fellick. Tombek slipped Fellick's other arm over his shoulder and he and Kleeve went in search of the nearest physic station. The bonesetter would only be able to stitch the wound shut and dress it with a clean bandage. It would be up to Fellick's powerful constitution to get him back on his feet. When the final assault came, Brael feared he would have to meet it without his oldest comrade at his side.

From amongst the gathered militia companies, officers and men alike were firing questions at Brael and the others. How many greenskins were down there? Were they sure the rock fall blocked the tunnel? Brael answered those that he was able to work out from the fragments of speech he was able to hear. No one who was down there could doubt that Kobar's charges had brought down enough rock to completely block the greenskins' passage into the city via the mine. However, Brael realised as he answered the question, it also had cut off any hope of escape under the walls when Mallax fell.

After standing in line to collect food from one of the communal kitchens set up throughout the city, Brael returned to his company's reserve station on its wide walkway, halfway up the tall curtain wall. The station was occupied by a company of strangers, who informed him that his company – 'Both of them!' one of the strangers laughed – had been sent to take up position on the wall itself.

Costes and Perror, still dutifully guarding the machine-rifle, greeted Brael's arrival with twin looks of horror. Realising that they thought he was the only

survivor, he quickly reassured them as far as he could, considering the losses their company had sustained. ‘The others are getting food, some are looking for baths to wash off the greenskins’ blood.’ Brael looked down at the mess of drying blood and ichor that coated his clothing and wondered if he shouldn’t do the same. ‘I think Lollak said something about a sweet-faced young wound-dresser at the physic station under the foundries to the west.’

‘Tylor, Distek, Kobar,’ Perror muttered. ‘After so long together.’

‘And Fellick?’ Costes asked.

‘Time will tell,’ was all Brael would say. He looked out through the firing hole in the barricade that had been built on top of the wall’s ancient metal and stone battlements through which Costes and Perror had mounted the machine-rifle. It was summer and the long dusk was coming to an end. The sky was still streaked with pink, but the horizon was already dark – except where it was lit by the campfires of the enemy. The hulking shadows of their encampments lined the horizon from flank to flank. Flames gouted from the exhausts of their war machines as they made ready for what Brael was sure would soon come.

He imagined that they had been awaiting word from the infiltrators; had they broken through, some signal would have been given and the rest of the army would have roared towards the city. But the defeat of the probing mission through the mines would not stop them. Soon the greenskins would send their whole army against Mallax. He imagined that he saw them coming: a black, flame-belching line rushing towards the city from the horizon, through the abandoned districts outside the gates, to wrap itself around the city walls and begin the brutal, unstoppable process of battering their way in.

‘Time will tell,’ Brael repeated softly as he watched the smoke from the distant army blot out the last of the sky’s colour. ‘Time will tell.’

According to most of the primary sources found in the vaults beneath the city’s central librarium, Mallax was known not only for its manufactoria, its workshops and the pall of dust and smoke which was said to hang perpetually over it, but also for the effect which some of the ores that were mined by its inhabitants and the processes by which the ores were refined and worked (cross ref. 695/446-A. Mechanicus archive: smelting and related processes; chemical cracking and combining) had on future generations of the miners and refinery workers.

Those most grossly afflicted rarely survived post-partum. Most

mutations, the sources report, were minor – a third eyelid, perhaps, or additional digits. However, without the guiding hand of the Imperium to weed them out, Mallax's population grew to exhibit greater variations from the blessed human norm.

The Priesthood of the Varks, Agra's oldest religion, was one such self-selecting variant group.

– Extract: 'Inquisitorial communiqué 747923486/aleph/Samax IV' Author: Inquisitor Selene Infantus. M41,793

Mallax had always been a restless city. At its height, the mines, foundries and manufactoria worked day and night. The warehouses that sat grouped around the iron caravan termini were always receiving or dispatching goods: foodstuffs, wines and luxury cloths came in; farm machinery, parts for steam- or water-powered looms went out. And to slake the workers' thirst and satisfy their hunger, the streets were always busy with food vendors, the taverns always open to welcome men at the end of their shift.

Though Mallax's glory days were generations past, it maintained much of its insomniac energy. Brael had been awed by it the first time he had come here. It had seemed unnatural, a ceaseless motion divorced from the rhythm of the seasons. Though he never admitted it to Vika, it unnerved him that men could create such a place.

Since the greenskins came, however, he had come to share Mallax's insomnia, even before he arrived at the city for the second time in his life. And though dusk had passed and night had fallen, he roamed the streets while the rest of his company – how had they become a 'company', Brael wondered, when once they were just a group of men thrown together within a brigade of scratch militia – dozed atop the battlements.

People streamed through the streets, some carrying messages between generals, each of whom had command of a section of the defences, others on the look-out for fresh weapons, powder or ammunition for their companies.

Brael knew that he would never find what he sought in the city's streets, but that didn't stop him looking.

Vika hadn't wanted to leave Brael, but, head throbbing, he had insisted. Many

of his clan had already sent their families south on the iron caravans that travelled the rails less and less frequently. The men and boys of fighting age had presented themselves at the gathering places in the market towns nearest to their farmsteads. The time it took Brael to persuade Vika to take Bron to Mallax meant that he was the last of the Corfe clan to leave the land.

Word had it that the next iron caravan to pass through Clovis Halt, the staging post closest to Brael's farm, would be the last. On a clear day, it was said, columns of smoke were visible, towering into the sky on the northern horizon. Brael made it clear to his beautiful, stubborn wife that he expected her to take their son to safety, to a city she revered. Something in her eyes told Brael that her faith in the Dogma of the Holy Varks was not as powerful or as comforting as once it had been.

'I need you to be safe,' he told her late into their last night together, camped along with ten or twenty others around the small collection of huts that made up Clovis Halt. 'I need to know that whatever happens, whatever I have to do if any of these stories are true, that, when it's over, I'll be able to go and find you and bring you home.'

Brael was as surprised by this speech as his wife. During the months since he loaded them aboard one of the caravan's iron wagons, he wondered if she only really decided to go after hearing that.

If that was the case, then no one could argue: he had killed his wife and child.

Following their arrival at Mallax, Brael's company was debriefed by a major from a Primaxian regiment who, Brael estimated, could be no older than the boy Vikor they had found and lost at Grellax. If boys had risen to become majors, it didn't bode well for the defence of Mallax. After debriefing, the wagon and horses they had taken from the battlefield outside Grellax were commandeered to join the pool of wagons being used to ferry men and arms through the city streets. Brael and his men were assigned a section of the wall to defend when the time came and a reserve post at which they would spend the hours when they were not on guard.

As soon as his men had settled, Brael went in search of the terminus at which Vika and Bron's caravan would have arrived. He remembered it from his last visit: its metal roof had been turned green by a lifetime's exposure to the rain and to the effluvia of the neighbouring manufactoria.

Beneath the vaulted cathedral roof the iron caravans sat silently. Refugees – mostly the elderly and the very young – had set up camps along the platforms. He moved among them, asking if anyone had worked on the caravans, if anyone could tell him what had become of the last caravan from the north.

An old man claimed to have travelled on the caravan that had been sent out to the site of a disaster – a 'derailing', he called it. The southbound caravan

had somehow jumped from the tracks and twisted itself into a tangle of iron and blood.

‘So many people dead,’ the old man’s reedy voice took on an almost priestly tone in the cathedral space of the terminus. ‘Crushed and broken. Women. Children. So young.’

Brael described Vika and Bron to the old man – Vika’s northern complexion and fair hair would have marked her apart from most of the caravan’s passengers – but the old man could tell him no more. They could do nothing but salvage what parts they could from the engine and the wagons – Mallax was a city devoted to salvage, to maintaining the ancient machinery. The rails were beyond swift repair. The few survivors – wide-eyed, most of them, and trembling with shock – were loaded aboard the caravan along with the salvage and carried the rest of the way to Mallax.

And so Brael walked the city. He knew Vika and Bron had died on the caravan he had insisted that they take. He knew it with the same certainty he had known when to leave Grellax, that reinforcements were about to enter the mine gallery, and as he had known when and where to move to avoid countless dangers during the long hard year that had led him to Mallax. He felt it in his heart, just as he felt the itching of the fingers he no longer possessed – lost the last time he tried to ignore the wisdom, as old Aunt Brella would have it, that was forcing its way out of him.

Brael knew it, but the old man had not said for certain that he had seen their corpses.

And so he walked in the vain hope of seeing a face, a splash of fair hair in a crowd or hearing a voice inflected with a northern accent or a snatch of the boyish laughter that echoed in his mind during the moments he allowed himself to rest.

The sound of raised voices reached him as he walked through the narrow streets of the old town. Ironically, the old town was the most brightly lit part of the city, the only place where the oil-fired gas lanterns still worked. Brael was walking through pools of gentle yellow radiance when he heard the voices, then the sound of something breaking.

Cutting down a side-alley in the direction of the noise, Brael emerged in a street he was surprised to recognise: a thoroughfare that cut through the close-packed old town. It was lined with open-fronted shops that once sold fruit, meats and wines intended for tribute, sacrifice and libation in the pyramidal temple whose precinct dominated the square into which the thoroughfare opened. He had walked down this street once before, when Bron had been very young.

Brael jogged along the road and out into the open square. Yet more stalls

that once had sold religious tokens, artefacts for the faithful to have blessed within the temple, then returned for installation in a household shrine. Brael caught a faint whiff of old straw and remembered that one of the stalls was a chaos of caged birds and young porkers and bleaters – the stall-holder, claiming some minor dispensation from the temple elders, would bleed an animal and prepare it for offering to the priests within the precinct.

At the far side of the square lights burned atop the gateposts of the precinct, illuminating the angry crowd at the gates. The sound Brael had heard was that of the gates being forced inwards, one wrenched off its hinges by the weight of the crowd.

Brael jogged across the square, hands unconsciously checking the weapons at his belt. The last of the crowd, whose shouts had grown louder and more violent since they had achieved their initial aim of gaining entry to the precinct, had pushed through the gateway, leaving a robed figure slumped against the precinct wall.

'Are you badly hurt?' Brael asked the priest of the Holy Varks. His hood had been partly torn from his robe in the scuffle that erupted when he stepped out between the gates in an attempt to calm the crowd. At first, all Brael could see was the top of his shaven head as the priest raised a tentative hand to the middle of his face. Blood had already begun to drip from his nose and pool on the flagstones.

'I think my nose is broken,' the priest replied, his voice shaking slightly. Removing his hand from his face, he regarded the blood on his fingers, then looked up at the stranger who stood over him.

'They want the Varks,' the young priest said as he looked up, his single eye blinking away the last of the tears caused by the punch that broke his nose. Every member of the priesthood was the same, each had but a single eye set just above the bridge of the nose. 'They say we're to blame.'

Brael was surprised to experience a powerful sense that he had been here before, talking to this priest outside the temple. He half expected that, if he looked to his side, Vika would be standing there, six-month-old Bron in her arms. Of all the unusual forms the bodies of some Mallaxians took that shown by the priest of the Holy Varks was the one that shook Brael the most.

The priest was on his feet and running across the precinct in the wake of the mob, which had hit the doors of the Sanctum like a crashing wave. On its way to the Sanctum, the mob had vented some of its anger on the plinths atop which were set votive candles and bowls of scented water and had shattered the small shrines that lined the walls before which Brael remembered Vika kneeling while the priest took Bron before the Holy Varks, behind the Sanctum's tall wooden doors.

Brael followed in the priest's wake. He doubted that the priests still inside the Sanctum would be foolish enough to open the doors while members of the

mob struck it with their fists, slammed against it with their shoulders and howled for the destruction of the holy thing within. None of them had ever seen the Varks – only initiated priests were ever allowed into the Sanctum – but, from their shouts and threats, it was clear that they blamed the Varks for the arrival of the greenskins.

Brael could see their point. The Varks, it was claimed, was a relic of the days after the star gods' departure, to be used by the children they left behind to speak with their parents, no matter how far away. Inside the Sanctum was the last of the devices somehow still capable of sending a message into the darkness beyond the sky, still calling out to the star gods, telling them that their children still awaited their return.

If even half of the dogma was true, if whatever was kept behind the Sanctum doors – which were beginning to bow under the weight of the mob's continued assault – had somehow been sending a message into the void all this time, then it may have acted like a beacon to draw the greenskins, who must be creatures from a void more terrible than the worst imaginings of man.

'Stop!' The priest had reached the crowd. 'This is blasphemy! Now, more than ever, the Varks is our only–'

A broad-shouldered man detached himself from the rear of the mob and hooked his fist into the side of the priest's head. From the fluidity of the motion, Brael guessed he could have been a prizefighter before the war.

The priest stumbled but didn't fall. Seeing this, the broad-shouldered ex-fighter cocked his fist for a second, and no doubt more damaging, attack.

'You!' Brael shouted as he jogged the last few paces between them. 'What's your company? Why aren't you at your post? If the greenskins come tonight, where will you say you were? In the temple, beating up a priest?'

The ex-fighter paused, then lowered his fist. Several others looked round from the mob.

'If the greenskins come tonight, it'll be their fault!' shouted one of them, jabbing an accusing finger at the priest. Most of the mob seemed to hear this and to shout their agreement.

'Why should you care?' shouted one of the mob. 'I'll bet your hand had all its fingers this time a year ago.'

'My wife was a believer,' Brael replied. He knew now that there was nothing he could do to stop them.

'Then she was a fool and you were a bigger one for having her!' declared the ex-fighter, before grabbing the priest by the front of his robe.

Without thinking, Brael stepped forward and punched the big man in the side of the head, where the bone beneath the skin was thin. A year of fighting the greenskins had given him an eye for an opponent's weak points and an understanding of the value of being the first to strike.

The big man let go of the priest and staggered to the side. Brael saw that his

knees were no longer steady and he advanced on him, fists cocked.

The splintering crash of the door to the priests' quarters, set to one side of the precinct, caused all heads to turn away from Brael and the ex-fighter, who had dropped to one knee and was pressing a hand to his bruised temple. A splinter group of five or six from the main mob pushed its furious way inside. The sounds of furniture being overturned and smashed began to emerge from behind the shuttered windows.

'Come on, we should be in there!' shouted someone in the middle of the mob outside the Sanctum. Ignoring Brael, they turned as one and began reapplying their weight to the tall doors. Something must have been broken during their last assault. With the sound of ancient hinges giving way and an exhalation of sweet, incense-laden air, the doors swung inwards.

The mob rushed up the three low steps and through the doorway. The young priest, his nose still bleeding, ran after them. Brael looked down at the ex-fighter, then held out his hand. The big man regarded the hand for a heartbeat, then took it and eased himself to his feet.

'Might was well see what they've been keeping in there all this time,' Brael said. The sound of shouts, scuffles and breaking furniture came from the dim-lit space behind the open doors.

'You know, I don't think I give a damn any more,' the ex-fighter replied. 'Good luck when they come,' he added then turned and began to make his way out of the precinct.

'You too,' said Brael, then he turned and followed the mob into the Sanctum.

Apart from the heavy scent of incense and the less powerful illumination provided by oil lamps set in high brackets on the walls, the Sanctum looked very similar to the roofless precinct outside: more votive bowls atop plinths, a slightly larger trio of shrines set in a line across the middle of the space, and more priests braving the angry fists of the mob, desperate to save their treasures.

Ranged along the sidewalls were sets of shelves, each of them bearing a number of decorated and carved boxes. Members of the mob swept the boxes from the shelves – their lids popped open or splintered when they hit the floor, ejecting the objects they had held for generations: pieces of metal bearing strange designs; a hollow metal finger from the statue of a giant; scraps of cloth. Rubbish being treated as relics. Some of the intruders waved the relics in the faces of the priests, before stamping them to dust or hurling them through the air.

Brael moved through the space, ignoring the sounds of breaking bowls, shattering plinths and the shouts and cries of mob and priests alike. This is where that priest brought his son, while he and Vika waited in the precinct. Bron was here once.

But where was the so-called ‘Holy Varks’? Did the priest just cool his heels in here for a while, then return to the precinct, hand Bron back to his mother and accept a handful of coins in tribute? Was the Varks a joke, a moneymaking scheme that had lasted down the ages?

The Sanctum building was four-sided, its roof stepped. The space within, however, was different, Brael noticed. From the outside, the four sides were of equal length. From within, he saw, the walls to the left and right were shorter – almost half the length they should have been.

A glance at the roof above him confirmed his suspicion: the rear wall met the stepped slope of the ceiling at a higher point than the front or sidewalls. The rear wall, upon which hung an ancient, ragged banner whose design appeared to be that of a two-headed bird, wings spread, concealed another space.

Brael stepped up to the rear wall and cautiously drew aside the hanging. Despite its obvious age the fabric felt soft beneath his fingers, as if it were the product of a finer loom than had ever weaved cloth on this world. Behind the hanging was a door, its upper half a decorative grille.

Brael’s cleaver sheared away the old lock and, letting the banner swing back into place behind him, he stepped cautiously into the room beyond.

‘In the star gods’ name begone!’ The priest that flew at him must have been older than Brella had been when she finally passed away. He flapped weak, liver-spotted hands at Brael, who brushed him away as carefully as possible. Old knees gave way and the priest slumped to the floor, keening in an almost child-like voice.

‘Our only hope!’ the old priest wailed. ‘Our only hope!’

Another priest – this one about Brael’s age – rushed to the old man’s aid. Brael didn’t notice. He was staring at the Varks.

The web of wires and metal supports almost filled the otherwise bare space, reaching from wall to wall and from floor to the ceiling, which was barely visible in the weak yellow light given out by the three of four oil lamps that sat in niches in the walls. A low hum and a vibration that Brael felt in his breast gave him the sense that something living might be sitting within the web, drawing life along the cables and wires, which seemed to pulse with an almost imperceptible beat.

The delicate sound of well-oiled wheels turning in the darkness above drew Brael’s attention upwards. Weak yellow lamplight caught the moving edges of a complex arrangements of cogs and gears. Thick, brass rods, their lengths turning and shining a dull, golden colour in the lamplight, reached down from the shadows to complex, geared connections with thinner rods of the same substance. These thinner rods then reached out to linkages with the web of hair-thin wires amongst which the Varks seemed to crouch, like a patient, hungry spider. Somehow, Brael was sure, the rotating rods fed power to the

humming wires, which in their turn fed the pulsing, throbbing machine that beat in the room like an ancient mechanical heart.

Brael pressed a thumb to his temple as the beat seemed to seep into his skull. Behind him, the younger priest eased the still-keening elder to his feet.

‘The Varks is our only hope,’ the old priest wailed. ‘As it was in the beginning, as it has been throughout our generations of solitude, so it is now.’

Brael spared a glance in the priests’ direction. Satisfied that they were unlikely to try to eject him a second time, he took a step deeper into the room. The vibration in his chest intensified slightly, as did the pressure in his head. Looking at the dizzying construction of metal and wire that crossed and re-crossed the room induced a sense of vertigo, which Brael countered by focussing on one hair-thin wire that ran taut just above his head. He reached up towards it.

‘NO!’ The young priest’s voice carried enough genuine fear that Brael paused before his fingers brushed the wire. ‘The balance is delicate. One unbidden vibration will cause another and another...’

‘This is the Varks?’ Brael asked. ‘This child’s puzzle? My wife believed... I was told that the Varks was a beacon.’ Brael was surprised by a sudden rush of anger. Vika had been duped into believing this nonsense could somehow speak to the stars. He thought briefly of not waiting for the young priest to answer, of just grabbing a handful of the wires and tearing the fragile construction to pieces.

‘It is a beacon,’ the priest replied. ‘Can’t you feel it?’ He placed a hand against his chest. ‘It’s not a beacon as you might imagine – a fire atop a hill or the sound of a horn. Its signal passes invisibly through flesh and stone. It reaches up past the sky and out towards the stars. The web that fills this room provides it sustenance and serves to augment the signal, send it further into the void. The Holy Varks sits at the centre – as it should. There.’

Talking about the Varks had calmed the young priest; even the old man had stopped wailing. Brael squinted through the yellow gloom in the direction in which the young man was pointing. Through the web of intersecting wires he saw it: a metal box, no larger than the baskets that fruit-pickers would wear on their backs at harvest-time. Its surface glowed dully in the light, showing irregular patches of what might have been its original colour or the discoloration of the ages. Above the plinth on which it sat, the wires came together, twisting around each other as they swooped down towards it, becoming a single, tightly-wound cable before plunging into a socket set into its top. A single red light pulsed beside the machined collar that reinforced the connection.

‘That speaks to the stars?’ Brael was incredulous. ‘I don’t know who’s the more ridiculous: you one-eyed clowns or the idiots that blame you for bringing the greenskins down on us.’

Brael strode towards the door. His head had begun to pound and he wanted to be out of here, out of this room, away from the buzzing in his head and the humming in his chest, out of the temple, away from everything that had somehow achieved the impossible, everything that had made Vika look foolish in his eyes.

The door burst open when Brael was still several steps from it. The old priest turned and he let out a screech when he saw the intruders pushing through from the outer chamber.

‘Our only hope!’ he wailed again. One of the first through the door broke his jaw then slammed him aside. As he fell, one of his legs broke with the sound of a snapping branch.

‘No!’ The younger priest held up his hands in a doomed attempt to halt the tide that just broke over him. He was punched to the ground, where he was kicked and stamped on almost in passing by everyone else who pushed through the door.

The mere presence of so many people in the room at one time had already begun to affect the network of wires that supported the Varks. The pulsation had become more noticeable, wires began to give off notes of differing pitches as they rubbed against each other or against the thicker metal frame from which they hung. The vibration in Brael’s chest had changed, too. It had become irregular, like the broken rhythm he had felt in the chests of farm animals before the moment of their death.

‘This is the Varks?’ a thin, bald man asked Brael, who by now had pushed his way through the crowd and was about to leave the room. Brael just nodded. Then he heard it: the high-pitched snap of a tightly stretched wire giving way.

‘One unbidden vibration will cause another and another...’ Brael recalled the younger priest’s words as the room was filled with the sound of snapping wires and crashes as sections of the frame were hurled to the floor. The rioters were not going to wait and see if one snapped wire was all it took. The network of wires and cables had already begun to sag around them as they tore at its fabric. Cables and struts fell from the shadows that obscured the ceiling, hitting those below. This only intensified their anger, which had already been stoked up by the destruction of the relics in the outer chamber.

The older priest’s voice rose above the cacophony of the Vark’s destruction once more: a single, ululating note of despair. Something about the sound made Brael’s stomach roll over. Brushing past the bald man, he ducked out of the room.

Most of the priests had abandoned the outer chamber. Those that were left were tending to the more badly injured, then helping them to their feet and heading for the main doors. When they saw Brael walking quickly through

the chamber, they hastily stepped aside, not wanting to provoke another attack.

Brael ignored them. His stomach hadn't stopped churning and the ache behind his eyes was getting worse. He wanted to be away from the temple before he threw up.

There was a large crowd in the temple precinct. Brael presumed they had been drawn here by news of the riot. They were not, he noticed looking towards the Sanctum doors, through which he had just stepped. They were looking up at the night sky. Some were pointing. Others were muttering. No one seemed very happy at what they saw.

When he looked up, Brael saw that he sky was on fire. Lights fell through the inky blackness, drawing short, burning trails behind them. With a shock that was like a punch in the chest, he was standing in his yard with his son again. In a moment, his wife would emerge from the farmhouse and they would stand together, watching the display. There was no war, no invasion. No one had died. There was just a nagging ache at the back of his skull.

'Gods of harvest and home, no more!' wailed one woman. The man beside her put an arm around her and drew her to him. Others took up her lament.

'This is your doing!' A priest cried hoarsely. Dragging his gaze from the falling lights, Brael saw that it was the young man with the broken nose he had met outside the precinct.

'You and your kind have defiled the temple, destroyed the Holy Varks and have brought more misery upon us all. Look!' He jabbed a shaking finger skywards. 'Our damnation is confirmed! Our only hope is gone!'

And not one voice was raised against him.

PART THREE

The keys to the defence of Mallax were threefold:

Time. Mallax was able to organise its defences in the year it took for the invaders to reach it. The manner in which the more northerly cities fell was analysed through the interrogation of survivors, collated by the city's Librarium staff and incorporated into the defence plans.

Manpower. Mallax appears to have been the defenders' ultimate fallback option almost from the moment they raised the citizen militias to augment the small standing armies maintained by the city barons. During the first six months of the invasion, those moving to Mallax were refugees – the very young, the very old and women with families. In the latter half of the invasion, fighters retreating from shattered cities and towns or from battlefield routs made directly for Mallax. By the time the assault began, the city's population had increased by a factor of four.

Technology. Mallax's guardians had made an effort to preserve its heritage, albeit obscured by myth and preserved in fragmented and debased forms (cross-ref. 663/159 – A. Mechanicus Archivum: manufactoria processes; ballistic archaeotech). The weapons held in museum storage were made ready for the attack that was sure to come. Treatises on siege warfare were unearthed from vaults beneath the Librarium and their High Gothic script pored and puzzled over.

Further investigation has led to the conclusion that, though these preparations had a positive effect on the defenders' morale, most were under no illusions as to how the final battle would be fought: street-by-street; hand-to-hand; to the death.

– Extract: 'Inquisitorial communiqué 747923486/aleph/Samax IV' Author: Inquisitor Selene Infantus. M41,793

The first warning was the sighting of black shadows chasing across the sky, long wings held rigid, too big to be birds. Then they dropped. Then the bombs fell. The attack had begun.

The bombs beat an explosive tattoo in the city at Brael's back. His company had moved up from their reserve post and now occupied a short stretch of the curving eastern wall. Piles of debris had augmented the ancient stone and steel battlements – scrap from the manufactories, lumps of masonry from buildings in the outer districts that had been demolished for the purpose. Incongruously, what could only have been an old bedstead jutted out from the detritus a short way west of their position.

Beyond the skeletal shape of the bedstead could be seen the tall gatehouse towers of the heavily defended North Gate. Every other gate had been sealed. Only the North Gate might one day be opened to allow the population of Mallax – which probably now counted as the population of the whole of Agra – to leave the city.

Looking along the curve of the wall, packed with armed men and women, weapons ready, their faces set and determined, it might be possible to believe they had a chance. But, when Brael looked out over the inner lip of the battlements' walkway, he saw the plumes of dirt and smoke kicked up by each bomb's explosion, he saw buildings crumble and he heard the cries of those trapped beneath the falling stones. As he looked over the city, he saw a manufactory's roof disappear beneath the impact of another bomb. A cloud of industrial filth puffed out of the building's windows and enveloped the district in which it sat. People would be choking in the streets, blinded by the thick, sooty cloud. Some might die, their throats fatally clogged.

It was almost a relief to turn away from the cityscape and to return his gaze to the horizon and the smoke-belching war machines, ridden by the greenskinned abominations that were assembled there.

Brael had returned from the Temple of the Varks to find Costes and Perror scanning the lightening horizon through the fire slit. The rest of the men were checking their weapons by the light of several oil lamps.

The company had grown, Brael noticed as he moved amongst them. Men from the mines had chosen to join his company rather than return to their own. Brael didn't ask why, nor did he attempt to reason them out of their apparent willingness to believe in an old aunt's tale.

'Keep your heads down!' Brael shouted over the sound of the explosions, more for the benefit of the new arrivals than the men who had fought and survived with him, some for the better part of a year. 'Keep your nerve!'

'We brought one of those damned things down outside Grellax,' Kleeve shouted. 'Why not now?'

'They're too high!' Brael replied. At that moment a shadow passed over them. Brael glanced up. The black silhouette that wheeled against the dawn sky seemed as large as the flying machine they had brought down outside doomed Grellax, but it wheeled and swooped higher above them, which meant it must be larger, the wings broader and perhaps better armoured.

'Maybe if they come down towards us,' he added.

'To get a better view of the slaughter?' Kleeve asked, a wry smile on his face.

'They're retreating!' Tombek shouted. The drumbeat of the bombs had ceased, to be replaced by the sound of falling masonry, the cries for help, the ringing of fire bells and the shouts of those assigned to man the mobile pumps that now clattered through the streets.

'I'd heard about those things, but I never imagined they were real,' said one of the survivors from the mines, a Mundaxian named Karel. 'Don't think much of their aim even now. I doubt any of them managed to hit the walls.'

'I doubt they were trying,' muttered Tombek. 'They just want to tell us what we can expect when they're through the walls.'

Karel looked as if he was about to say something in reply, but a familiar whistling cut through the air above them.

'Artillery!' came the shout from further along the street-wide walkway that ran behind the battlements. Once again, heads dropped between shoulders, hands covered ears and prayers were offered up to gods few believed in any more.

Not like this, Brael asked silently. He thought of the shattered Varks and of Vika and Bron. I want more blood on my hands before I die. Greenskin blood.

The walls bucked as the first shell landed. A cheer went up; it had landed in the empty districts in front of the wall.

'Ranging,' Tombek muttered.

The second artillery shell sailed over the heads of the men atop the western battlements and landed in the streets behind them, causing more damage than all of the bombs dropped from the flying machines. A chapel that had been converted into a physic station was vaporised, along with its immediate neighbours. Those buildings that escaped utter destruction were left shattered

and teetering on the edge of a broad, deep crater.

The cheering on the walls ceased.

‘Here it comes,’ muttered Tombek.

The artillery fire came down upon the walls of Mallax like a hard rain, scouring away the metal and stone detritus that had been hauled up from the city streets to augment the ancient battlements. The men and women who sheltered behind, praying for a chance to strike back against the attackers, were reduced to tatters of skin and fragments of bone. Some panicked, broke cover and ran, only to be cut down by swarms of shrapnel from a hit further along the wall. The walls shook beneath the defenders’ feet, as if a giant as tall as the sky was stamping down upon them.

Karel half rose from where he crouched against the battlements. Lollak, crouching beside him, put a restraining hand on his arm.

‘I don’t want to just sit here and wait to die!’ the Mundaxian shouted over the bombardment. Lollak shook his head and pointed to where Brael crouched, back to the wall, beside the firing slit and the machine-rifle.

‘We move when he says it’s time!’ Lollak shouted. ‘He’ll know when. Don’t ask me how.’

They didn’t need to do more than they were already doing, Brael thought as he sheltered in the lea of the battlements. So long as their ammunition lasted, they could pound Mallax to scrap and rubble from a distance that made them untouchable by the few ancient war machines that had been rescued from the city museum and pressed back into service on the wall: a handful of cannon; a complex-looking construction of wood and iron that hurled rocks by means of some kind of sling-shot action; a pair of huge crossbows, able to fire bolts the size of small trees. The wall shuddered again, like an old man with the ague, as Brael wondered how many of the museum pieces had survived the bombardment so far.

The invaders could destroy Mallax from the horizon, but they would not. It wasn’t their way. Something in their nature demanded that they tear apart whatever they found with their bare hands. Their appalling engine-driven weapons were just machines by which to accomplish this – to prepare their victims, to transport the greenskins to the battle at unnatural speed and to enable them to stand at the heart of the destruction. Their capacity and their enthusiasm for bloodshed was breathtaking, as unthinking as the fury of a storm and every bit as unstoppable.

They would come, Brael knew. Sooner or later, they would come.

> *The destruction of the North Gate, along with much of the gatehouse and neighbouring defences, appears to have acted as a signal for the ground assault to begin, though the city wall had already been breached at several other points by this time.*

Motorised units – objects of terror and awe even among those that had fought against them in the past – led the assaults at the North Gate and the other breaches. Bomber-variant gliders (cross ref. 775/xeno-tech – engine-driven catapult launching mechanism) re-joined the attack; one might assume they did so in order to sow confusion within the city ahead of the ground troops, though sheer bloodlust would be an equally credible motivation for this xeno-type (cross ref 114/xenology – Orkoid species).

Despite the city's preparations, its destruction could now be measured in hours.

– Extract: 'Inquisitorial communiqué 747923486/aleph/Samax IV' Author: Inquisitor Selene Infantus. M41,793

Brael ducked as a stretch of the defences to his company's right exploded, showering them with shrapnel. The shadow of a greenskin flying machine passed over their bowed heads like a presentiment of doom.

'It's coming back!' shouted Tombek, who had been the first to raise his head. Costes and Perror, huddled around the machine-rifle, were the first to recommence firing at the greenskins that were still racing at them in ragged waves, some on foot, others bouncing on the flatbeds of four-wheeled engines that ran on the same fat wheels as the two- and three-wheeled war machines. The four-wheelers seemed designed to carry their brutish cargo to where they could do the most damage, then tear back through the ruined outlying districts to collect another load.

The machine-rifle roared and coughed oily smoke as Perror depressed the trigger. The makeshift tripod, constructed from lashed-together pikestaves, shook violently as he swung its heavy barrel after one of the retreating motor-wagons. The heavy shells tore into the ground in its wake as it jagged across the narrow street in an effort to evade the gunfire.

A shell clipped one of the rear wheels, which exploded, sending the wagon into a slewing skid before slamming sideways into the wide frontage of what must once have been some kind of warehouse. The force of the impact brought down the wall and half of the roof.

Costes, crouching to one side of the weapon, checked that the ammunition

belt would continue to feed through the rifle's inner mechanism without jamming, then slapped Perror's shoulder in celebration.

The walls were lost, Brael was sure. Off to their left, usually obscured by the curve of the wall and the height that had been added to the battlements, the North Gate had taken several hits at once. Shattered masonry and fragments of the gate's defenders had risen in a fluid gout, as if the greenskins had the power to transform the ground in which the city was rooted to liquid. At that moment, large numbers of the attackers had veered away from their original points of attack to make for the ruined gate. Within minutes, the first of them would be inside the city.

Brael's first instinct had been to lead his men to defend the breach, but the reappearance of the flying machines and their explosive payloads had pinned his company to their spot on the wall.

Following Tombek's shout, Brael looked up. There was the flying machine, wheeling in the sky in a parody of a bird's graceful arc.

Brael slapped Perror on the shoulder. When the gunner looked round, away from the firing slit, Brael pointed skywards.

'What to do you think?' he shouted. Perror and Costes exchanged glances then nodded, almost in unison. Under other circumstances, it would have been almost comical, the way in which they had formed a partnership around the looted greenskin weapon.

'We'll need something to rest it on, to raise the barrel,' Costes said. Brael nodded and began tearing at the rubble and rubbish that had been used to augment the battlements. An itch had begun to nag at the back of his mind which, he was sure, had nothing to do with the flying machine's diving approach.

Working quickly, Costes and Perror withdrew the rifle from the firing slit. Resting the tripod on the pile of detritus Brael had pulled from the wall, Perror had only heartbeats left to steady his aim.

'Thank the gods he's coming right at us,' Costes muttered, a moment before Perror depressed the trigger.

The greenskin must have realised what was about to happen. Brael saw the creature tug at the control levers that hung before him. The flying machine began to turn but, being larger than the machine they had encountered outside Grellax, this one was not so quick to change course.

The skin of one wing all but vanished as the machine-rifle's shells tore through it, breaking the wing struts before racing across the pilot's chest and doing the same to the other wing. The dive had become a fall.

'Move!' Brael shouted. He grabbed Perror by the back of his tunic and hauled him away from the gun. Costes, who had also realised where the creature's fall was going to end, had already begun to move.

The wrecked flying machine ploughed into the machine-rifle, shedding

fabric and fragments of its superstructure, which seemed to chase Brael, Costes and Perror along the wall. Tombek, Lollak and most of the rest of the company joined them as they retreated at speed from the tumbling, rolling mess.

As soon as the flying machine had exhausted its momentum, they moved cautiously towards it, close-quarters weapons drawn. Perror was cursing it, threatening retribution if it had damaged the machine-rifle.

The pilot was dead, its slab-like head twisted at a fatal angle. Brael saw that several bombs were still attached to the harness in which the pilot had been suspended beneath the wings. They were long-handled things with a round charge at one end, the size of a man's fist, and they looked equally suited to throwing as they were to being dropped from the sky.

Perror's fears had been realised: the machine-rifle had not survived the flying machine's impact. While he cursed, the others fell to stripping the wrecked machine and its pilot.

Brael let them work as long as he dared before ordering them off the wall. Several of the newer members of the company raised eyebrows – there had been no order, no call to abandon the battlements, but those who had fought beside Brael before moved without question.

The shell that vaporised the section of wall Brael's company had been assigned to defend was as large as a small house. It had been fired from beyond the horizon by a cannon as large as the engines that pulled the iron caravans, before the city leaders had blocked up the termini gates and ordered that the rails be uprooted, in order to prevent their use by the invaders.

The shell's only victim was the rapidly cooling corpse of the glider-bomber's pilot. Brael had already led his men down from the wall and out into the city.

> Once inside the *city walls, the invaders abandoned all pretence of strategy. Confident of their eventual victory, their command structure appears to have devolved upon small groups, possibly defined upon tribal or familial lines, operating individually, seeking first to destroy then to plunder.*
>
> *[NOTE: though the above is speculation, it is informed by close study of relevant texts pertaining to ork psychology and reported endgame tactics. (Cross ref 1119/xenology – psych sub-list: Orkoid species and sub-species).]*

Ironically, this lack of overall tactics proved beneficial in the close-lined streets of Mallax, where large-scale actions would have been impossible to co-ordinate successfully.

The fighting moved from street to street. The invaders always pushing forwards, the defenders in barely-disguised retreat.

– Extract: 'Inquisitorial communiqué 747923486/aleph/Samax IV' Author: Inquisitor Selene Infantus. M41,793

'What in the name of all that's holy are they?' Tombek hissed the words as he and Brael looked down from the window of a refining works that overlooked the flat, slag-strewn area around the minehead, the buildings that surrounded the shaft and the wheelhouse that stood over the shaft itself.

There were figures moving warily around the wheelhouse: greenskins, but unlike any they had seen thus far. They were smaller than the animals that were rampaging through the city, smaller even than men of average height, Brael estimated. They appeared to be armed with lighter weapons than their larger kin: handguns and wickedly serrated knives. They wore little or no armour and moved between the slag piles and the buildings closer to the minehead in quick darting runs. It was impossible to estimate how many of them there were above ground.

'They must have climbed up the shaft,' Brael hissed his reply as he motioned for Tombek to slip silently back, away from the window. The rest of the company were waiting for them a street away. Those who recognised the area of the city they found themselves in, after Brael pulled them out of the dogged street-by-street retreat towards the old town, were already muttering their incomprehension.

'Either up the sides or using the chain like a ladder,' Brael continued as they moved quickly down the stairs to ground level.

'Aren't you forgetting something?' Tombek asked as they darted across the street at the rear of the refining works. 'Kobar closed the mine. You were there.'

'I know,' said Brael as he beckoned to the rest of his company from the corner of the street in which they were sheltering. His men moved quickly from doorways and out over window ledges to assemble around him. 'But you saw them. You saw them come out of the wheelhouse.'

Tombek could only nod glumly and check the heavy pistol he had taken from the dead pilot of the flying machine while Brael briefed the rest of the men. Another of his notions had proved right. Tombek was too stolid, too concerned with the here-and-now to waste time with talk of witchcraft, but the accuracy of Brael's notions was uncanny. Brael always dismissed talk of them as anything other than good luck, but, as Fellick once commented, Brael must have grown good luck along with the animals on his farm to have accumulated so much. And this time he had led the company back to the mine like a hunting dog on a scent. He had known that there was danger there, danger that had to be met.

'We all know what's going to happen to Mallax.' Brael surprised everyone by adding a coda to his typically terse briefing. 'And we might not know exactly how it's going to happen, but we know the same thing's going to happen to us. I'm a farmer. I never wanted to be a soldier, but the greenskins made me one. They did the same to most of you. All I've ever wanted to do, since this nightmare began, is to make those animals regret what they turned me into.' Heads nodded in agreement. Brael scanned the faces that surrounded him.

'It's been an honour to know you, no matter how long it's been. Now let's go. For Mallax. For Agra.'

'For Mallax. For Agra.' Most of the company quietly echoed Brael's words, then moved off to their assigned positions.

It was probably just his melancholic disposition, Tombek told himself, but he couldn't shake the feeling that he had just heard the company's funeral oration.

From her vantage point at the window that Brael and Tombek had used to reconnoitre the area, Freytha Lodz watched most of the company run out from between the buildings below her and towards the mine's wheelhouse. None of the smaller greenskins had noticed them yet. Brael wanted to get as close as possible to their target before alerting every one of the creatures within earshot with the sound of gunfire – even if that gunfire was covering their advance.

Two loaded muskets of varying vintages were propped beside the window from which she peered. Five others had been assigned the job of covering the advance, each from their own vantage point; between them, they had divided up the company's entire stock of rifles, balls and blackpowder. Those who were racing towards the wheelhouse carried only hand weapons.

Something moved between the buildings off to the right. Freytha shouldered her rifle and brought it to bear. One of the smaller greenskins, armed with a pistol, was taking aim at Lollak's back.

Thinking of Vikor and her mother, Freytha squeezed the trigger.

It was just one more gunshot in a city that rang with the sound of death's machinery, but it was enough to alert the greenskins that they were not alone. Brael spared a glance to his right; one of the smaller greenskins lay sprawled between two buildings. Its fellows grouped outside the wheelhouse now turned, bared evilly outsized teeth and brought their weapons to bear.

A few strides more, that's all I would've asked, he thought, then fired his looted greenskin pistol from the hip. A greenskin's face dissolved before it could fire its own pistol.

A glance upwards brought more bad news. The wheel atop the wheelhouse tower had begun to turn. The cage was rising.

A shot kicked up the ground ahead of him. More of the greenskins were running from between the buildings that surrounded the mine. Were they acting as scouts for their larger cousins? The creature that missed its shot at Brael was almost cut in half by Tombek's looted cleaver, held parallel with the ground and swung forward to strike while on the run.

Brael clubbed another greenskin down with the butt of his pistol, now held clumsily in his injured hand. In his good hand he held his own cleaver, which he brought down on the creature as it lay half-stunned at his feet. The larger greenskins were objects of awe as well as hatred, but these smaller animals made Brael's skin crawl.

He turned as something flashed by his cheek: a rust-flecked, serrated blade, wielded by another of the little monstrosities. Suddenly there seemed to be hordes of them, despite the covering fire from Freytha and the others, who were picking off a greenskin with every shot.

Brael brought his knee up into the creature's chest, knocking it back a step, before swinging his cleaver into the chittering, red-eyed mask of its face.

Above the killing ground, the wheel had come to a stop.

Kleeve was closest to the wheelhouse. Bleeding from a ragged cut to his arm inflicted by the last greenskin he had killed, knocking it to the ground with the pommel of his broad-bladed sword and then stamping on its skull until he felt the bone crack. He was only a stride from gaining the wheelhouse door and, a short way beyond it, the shaft and the lift cage. The explosive charge Brael had handed to him from the downed flying machine hung at his belt. There would be more of the smaller greenskins inside, he was sure, but by then it would be too late. They wouldn't be able to stop him using the bomb.

Dropping the sword, Kleeve pulled the bomb from his belt and made ready to pull the cord that hung from the bottom of its long handle. This would prime the charge. He would throw it into the cage the moment he was through the wheelhouse door.

'For Mallax!' he shouted. 'For–'

He didn't hear the familiar ratcheting cough because the first burst of

gunfire at such close range reduced his entire upper body to little more than a red mist. The hand holding the unprimed bomb, severed at the elbow, hit the ground heavily. The greenskin filled the wheelhouse doorway, howled something incomprehensible and sprayed the killing ground with indiscriminate fire, killing as many of its smaller kin as Agrans who suddenly cut this way and that in search of cover.

Costes fell awkwardly, his left knee shot from under him. The pain was indescribable, but he managed to unhook the charge that he carried and hurl it to where Perror crouched behind a pile of centuries-old slag. Perror caught the charge, laid it at his feet, then made as if to run towards Costes.

'Wrong way!' Costes shouted through gritted teeth. He jabbed a finger towards the wheelhouse, where two more of the larger greenskins had stepped into view. Thinking back to his journey in the cramped cage, he wondered how many of the beasts, packed in with their oversized weaponry, could make the trip to the surface at once.

For a heartbeat, Perror looked undecided. Then he nodded, picked up Costes's charge, primed it and stood to throw it towards the wheelhouse. It was still in the air when he unhooked his own bomb, primed it and threw it in the wake of the first.

One of the beasts at the wheelhouse door reacted quickly to the movement to its flank, bisecting Perror with a long burst from its machine-rifle. The bombs, however, were already in flight.

The double detonation became a triple concussion as Perror's bombs set off Kleeve's dropped charge, filling the wheelhouse with smoke and littering the ground around the doorway with lumps of bleeding alien meat. One of the greenskins – the furthest from where Perror threw the charges – was still twitching, its one remaining eye glowering and livid. Karel, who had seen most of his company die in the mines, drove the wide hunting knife that was all that remained of his previous life deep into the red socket.

Karel was still bent over the no-longer twitching corpse when, bellowing its rage and bleeding from a dozen minor shrapnel wounds, a fourth greenskin emerged from the smoke that hung across the shattered and sagging wheelhouse doorway.

A volley of sharp reports rang out, like fire crackers at a harvest festival. The greenskin took a step back, surprised by the musket balls that ricocheted off its breastplate, and slapped at the two bullets that found bare skin. It roared its defiance to the snipers it couldn't see, then took a step towards Karel, who took a corresponding step back. The hunting knife in the Mundaxian's hand looked absurdly puny when compared to the broad-bladed axe wielded by the beast that stalked towards him.

The pistol that Brael had scooped up from where its smaller greenskin

owner dropped it, fingers snapping open when a shot from Brael's own looted pistol punched through its skull from front to back, made a deeper sound. The huge greenskin jolted backwards, hand raised to its face, before dropping to its knees.

Tombek was already running towards it, having kicked away from the smaller greenskin that had been dancing around him, trying to gut him with a long, hooked blade. The greenskin was wearing a helmet that covered the back of its neck, so Tombek had only one good target to aim for.

As if on cue, the creature took its hand from its face. One side of its huge shovel jaw was a leaking mess. Tombek cocked his arm and picked up speed.

The greenskin saw Tombek coming but had no time to react. The cleaver blade struck beneath its chin, severing its windpipe and lodging amidst the dense muscles of its thick neck. The blade also hit a vein, sending thick ichor jetting over Tombek as he jinked to one side to avoid any reflex counter attack from the dying beast.

'Gods, is that it?' Lollak's question hung in the air. Brael suddenly realised that there seemed to be nothing left to fight: the ground before the wheelhouse door was scattered with green corpses of different sizes. Any of the smaller creatures that were still alive must have ducked back into the cover from which they had come. Were they naturally cowardly creatures, unlike their bloodthirsty cousins?

Hearing a now familiar creaking from overhead, Brael looked up. The wheel was turning again.

'Tombek! Lollak! With me!' Brael barked. 'The rest of you, cover our backs.' Brael sprinted for the wheelhouse door, pistol left in the dirt, cleaver held ready to parry the attack he expected to meet him as he jumped through the doorway.

The small greenskin at the winch controls was badly wounded, its body peppered with shrapnel. Another of the creatures lay face-up and blank-eyed a short way off. Seeing Brael, the wounded creature had time to utter a single shriek before its headless corpse dropped where it stood, hand still clutching the winch control lever. The head, propelled by the force of Brael's blow, bounced as far as the other green body before coming to rest.

Brael gripped the lever and pulled back, bringing the cage to a stop somewhere in the shaft below. In the sudden quiet that replaced the sound of the heavy lift chain feeding down the shaft, Brael could hear voices – guttural, animal voices – echoing up from the depths.

'How many of them are down there?' Lollak wondered out loud. He and Tombek had moved to the open pit-shaft gate. Both had unhooked the last of the flying machine's bombs that hung from their belts.

'And how did they get there?' Tombek added. 'Kobar brought the gallery down upon their heads. If they have engines that can drill through that...' His

speculation trailed off. Perhaps the greenskins had found another route to the shaft, but Brael doubted it. Mab had spent years studying the layout of the mine and she had been sure that there was only one tunnel, which meant the invaders had tunnelled through the mountain of rock Kobar had dislodged in less than a day.

'We haven't got a hope, have we?' asked Lollak, as if realising this for the first time.

'Not if they get to the surface,' Brael replied. Tombek nodded and primed his bomb. Lollak made to do likewise.

'Save yours,' Brael said. 'I've a sense we'll need it.'

They sprinted from the wheelhouse while the bomb was still falling. The remainder of the company, none of whom was without at least a minor wound, followed their example, racing towards the buildings in which the snipers crouched.

The explosion was muffled, almost lost in the sound of heavy artillery still pounding the walls. It was followed, however, by a much larger concussion that rippled through the ground beneath their feet. Turning back towards the wheelhouse, they saw the tower on which the wheel sat begin to fall in on itself. One girder at a time it began, then faster, like a leaf being crumpled in the palm of a closing hand.

Then suddenly it was gone, dropping out of sight in a cloud of black smoke and soot, taking much of the wheelhouse's roof and walls with it on its way down the mineshaft.

'They must have been carrying some bombs of their own,' muttered Karel.

'That was one of their own bombs,' Tombek added. Brael was astonished to see the large, melancholic Vinaran smile beneath the second skin of filth, blood and alien ichor that they all wore.

'Where now?' Lollak asked. The snipers had left their posts and were stepping warily into sight, scanning the area with their musket barrels. Brael smiled when he saw Freytha emerge from the doorway of the warehouse in front of which they had assembled. Seeing Brael, Freytha smiled back.

Hearing Lollak's question, all eyes turned to Brael.

'Wherever we'll do the most good, I suppose,' he said, unable to think of a better answer. For a moment, the hopelessness of their situation threatened to overwhelm him. No matter where they went, the final outcome would be the same: annihilation.

'We should move, in case the noise attracts a larger force. We don't want to get trapped here.' He forced himself to think constructively. 'Can you move?' he asked Costes, who was being supported by two men whose names Brael couldn't recall – they had joined his company after the first action in the mine. Costes nodded tightly, but his pain was writ large across his face. His

shattered knee had been wrapped in strips torn from someone's tunic, but the wound was still bleeding freely.

'When I can't go any further, just leave me with one of those,' Costes said through a rictus of pain, indicating the remaining charges carried by Brael and Lollak.

Brael smiled and nodded. He was about to give the order to move out when the front of a nearby warehouse dissolved in a cloud of ancient brick dust and flying debris. Brael's men scattered, some diving to the ground for cover, others ducking back inside nearby doorways.

Kneeling in a firing position in the doorway she had only just stepped out of, Freytha aimed down the long barrel of her musket at the cloud of dust that still hung in the gap where the warehouse wall had been. Something was stepping into sight. Something big. Something that roared with the same oil-clogged voice as the greenskins' wheeled war machines.

It was built like a man – two arms, two legs, a barrel-shaped body it would take two men to reach around, standing half as tall again as Tombek, the tallest man in Brael's company. Instead of flesh, its hide was of beaten metal plates riveted together in a haphazard manner and daubed with coarsely-executed tribal markings of the kind that adorned all the invaders' machines and other weapons.

And it was not alone.

Two more of the roaring metal creatures flanked the first. In place of one arm, one of the flanking creatures had what appeared to be a double-barrelled cannon, while the other's left arm ended at the wrist, where a circular blade had been attached. This blade was spinning in a blur of serrated teeth. Each of the machines' remaining arms ended as did both arms of the first, in heavy pincer jaws.

Freytha steadied her aim, then fired at the long slit which ran across the front of the machine on the left of the trio. Her shot ricocheted off the plate metal. Alerted to her presence, the machine turned, coughing plumes of black smoke from the engine it wore bolted to its back like a heavy pack, and brought its cannon to bear.

Freytha was already on the move when the doorway in which she had sheltered dissolved. Tracing a zigzag path she found cover behind one of the piles of slag that dotted the area around the mine. The war machine adjusted its aim as it marched towards Brael's scattered company in ragged formation with its fellows. Brael's men now began vainly to pepper its hide with gunfire from muskets and looted greenskin pistols.

Seeing the cannon swing towards the pile of ancient, solidified muck behind which Freytha had dived, Brael jumped to his feet, priming his charge as he did so. But he threw quickly and misjudged the distance. It exploded harmlessly off to one side of its target. The juggernaut's cannon fired again,

reducing the slagheap to a crater.

‘Pull back!’ Brael yelled. ‘Pull back!’ The machines had moved apart, looking to encircle at least some of the men. The cannon fired again – claiming the lives of two recruits from the mine – and again, this time vaporising a militiaman Fellick had rescued during the retreat from Grellax. After each shot, it needed only a heartbeat’s pause before it could fire again.

The pitch of the circular blade’s whine changed as it carved through the broad wooden doors of a warehouse into which Brael had seen another of his company flee. The blade withdrew and the pincer-hand reached in. It was greeted by a short scream, suddenly cut off. The pincer shone wetly when it was withdrawn from the doorway.

The first of the machines to come into view slammed a foot down beside a prone figure that lay face down, arms and legs splayed out. As the machine strode on, the body moved. From where Brael now crouched – behind an overturned goods wagon – he saw that it was Lollak. From beneath his body, he drew the last of the looted bombs. Easing himself quickly to his feet, he ran after the war machine that had passed him by.

Brael fired a round at the machine’s eye-slit, anxious to keep it from noticing Lollak, who primed the charge and threw it with a delicate underarm action. It flew between the monstrosity’s articulated legs and landed directly beneath its body as it completed another step.

Brael caught a glimpse of Lollak hurling himself to one side before the machine erupted. Fire gouted from the engine bolted to its back. Shards of twisted metal were torn free from its bodywork and sent spinning in all directions. Smoke boiled up, around and through its bodywork, emerging in a stream from the eye-slit. One leg was blown away and the machine keeled over, its engine screeching wildly for a moment longer before it too fell silent. Thick, foul-smelling oil began to pool around the inert carcass.

There was no sign of Lollak.

Brael ran past the still-burning metal corpse. Already the sickly-sweet odour of roasting meat hung in the air. Casting about, Brael spotted the prone figure, evidently thrown aside by the force of the blast. As before, Lollak’s arms and legs were flung out at odd angles. This time, however, he was not faking.

Brael saw the mess made of one side of Lollak’s head by the blast and the rain of flying shrapnel: bloody torn skin, through which Brael glimpsed bone. Lollak’s eyes were open, the whites filled with blood and they bulged slightly from their sockets. Blood ran in a thick trail from his slack mouth.

Suddenly, Brael felt very tired. More tired than he had felt since the war began. More tired than he had imagined it was possible to feel. It was over, he was suddenly sure: the war, his life, everything.

The ground shook. Brael turned and saw one of the dead machine’s

comrades stamping towards him. The spinning blade whined as the machine held it high, ready to bring it down upon him. He knew he should something – run, hide, counter-attack, anything – but, as time seemed to stretch and the screeching blade hung over him for a lifetime, he also knew that nothing he did would make the slightest difference.

From somewhere high above him, Brael thought he heard another engine howl – another of the invaders' war machines, he was sure. Then every hair on his body stood on end. His skin began to tingle and a thin metallic taste coated his mouth.

And then the sun reached down from the sky and hurled the war machine aside.

A burst of blue-white brilliance dazzled Brael and a warm pulse of air seemed to pick him up and hurl him in the opposite direction. He landed heavily, then rolled instinctively to his feet. The torpidity that had seized him as he knelt over Lollak's corpse was gone. Shaking his head and blinking away the blotchy after-images that clogged his vision, he reached for his belt, to find only an old hunting knife he had carried with him since he had left his farm. The looted pistol and greenskin cleaver were lost.

The engine-howl he had heard was louder now, though the note was deeper, as if the mechanism were running more slowly. A figure landed heavily on armour-shod feet in the space where the greenskin war machine had stood. Like the invaders' creation, it stood half as tall again as any man, its smooth hard skin decorated with symbols: crossed arrows, wings on the massive plates that covered its shoulders. Its skin was dark crimson, almost the colour of clotted blood, and though hard and unyielding as the skin of the invaders' walking machines, its clean lines closely mirrored the shape of a man. It had a kind of sheen that reminded Brael of nothing so much as the glaze on fired pottery.

The engine-whine came from a mechanism mounted high on the figure's back and shoulders. Vanes within its two exhausts glowed white hot and the heat washed over Brael as he shook the last of the blotches from his sight. In one hand the figure held a sword, as long as a man's arm and bearing a row of serrated teeth which, Brael was sure, could leap into blurring motion in a heartbeat. In its other hand, the figure held what looked like a breed of pistol. A slight blue-white glow danced around the weapon's barrel.

As if realising that it was being watched, the figure turned. Its mask-like face bore a pair of red, glowering eyes, reminding Brael of the bloody malevolence in the invaders' gaze. On its chest were displayed a pair of spread wings that Brael had seen before: on the wall-hanging in the Sanctum of the Temple of the Holy Varks.

With a shock that almost unmanned him, Brael realised that he was standing before of one of Vika's beloved star gods.

With the same descending note from the engines on their backs, three more crimson-skinned gods dropped from the sky. While still at the height of the surrounding rooftops, they fired a volley of explosive shells at the remaining war machine. The shells ploughed up the ground around the monstrosity, whose own cannon had been cranked as high as possible and was returning fire. One of the invaders' shots struck one of the gods high on the chest, causing his falling trajectory to spin out of union with his fellows. Struggling to regain control of his flight, the figure crashed through the roof of one of the surrounding warehouses and disappeared in a shower of timbers and rubble.

The remaining three pumped round after round into the barrel-chested machine, which staggered back under the multiple impacts before crashing to the ground and lying still, smoke and oil pouring from cracks and punctures in its bodywork.

Eyes flicking wildly around the scene, Brael saw that the survivors from his company were emerging from cover to watch as the gods landed and took up what Brael was surprised to recognise as perimeter positions. A warehouse doorway exploded outwards, causing the gods to shift their positions, ready to meet a new threat. When the god who had been hit by a cannon round emerged, they resumed their earlier stance.

Brael was relieved to see Freytha among the survivors, though one side of her face was painted black by the explosion and red by the blood that ran freely from a long cut across her scalp. Seeing Brael, she shouted to the others who turned and saw him standing before one of the creatures from the sky.

With a rasping, machine-quality, the star god spoke to Brael. Most of what it said was unintelligible, though Brael was amazed to discover he could make out two or three words. Then the metallic tirade ceased and the star god turned away, striding towards the others of its kind, over whom it appeared to have some authority.

Freytha ran to him, as did many of the others, Tombek among them. The tall Vinaran paused briefly over Lollak's corpse.

'Are they? Are they really?' asked Freytha, breathlessly.

'Star gods?' Brael replied, barely able to hold back tears, so powerfully did he feel Vika's presence at that moment. 'I... I think so.'

'Did it speak to you?' asked another of the recruits from the mines. 'I thought I heard it speak to you. What did it say?'

'I'm not sure,' Brael tried to find some meaning in the few words he thought he had understood. 'It sounded like our speech, but there was a lot I couldn't make out. I think he said "High God's Hunting Birds".'

'Could be their name,' Tombek added.

Others joined in the debate, but Brael suddenly felt light-headed, on the verge of tears. He waved what he hoped was a reassuring hand at Freytha, then walked slowly past Lollak's corpse and the still-smouldering remains of

the war machine the dead Terraxian had destroyed. He was dimly aware that the star gods were moving around the immediate area, making it secure, perhaps for the arrival of more of their kind – Vika's stories told of whole armies of gods, all serving a god of their own, the high god.

Vika. His dead wife seemed to walk before him, leading their son by the hand and telling him the stories he never tired of hearing. The memory of her voice, the sense that she was there, no more than an arm's length away, was so powerful it threatened to crush him. For a moment, his vision was edged with grey. A high-pitched whining grew to fill his ears.

Suddenly, Vika and Bron were gone. The high-pitched whine resolved itself into the sound coming from the last of the invaders' war machines to fall. Brael had walked towards it unaware, following his wife's ghost. Eyes refocusing on the machine, he saw that part of its upper structure had been torn away by a glancing impact. The eye slit had been torn open; Brael saw green skin and a glowering red eye.

Its pincer arm was a ruin, but still sufficiently strong to enable it to right itself. One knee joint was locked solid. Apparently unaware of Brael's presence, the invader within the barrel-like shell manoeuvred the machine with a dragging, shuffling gait until it faced the star gods, three of whom now stood in a group, while a fourth planted a device in the ground nearby. A light atop the device pulsed with a steady rhythm.

With a distressed grinding, the war machine's cannon was brought to bear on the crimson figures.

Shouting incoherently, Brael sprinted towards the war machine and threw himself into the air. He hit the machine just behind the shoulder joint of the shattered pincer arm. Digging into irregularities in the machine's overlapping plate armour and scrabbling with his feet, he hauled himself more securely aboard and slid his hunting knife from his belt.

The greenskin inside the machine was not about to be distracted by the surprise attack from the flank. It fired off two quick rounds at the armoured figures, determined to have blood, regardless of its own fate. But Brael's cries had done enough. Alerted, the greenskin's target group broke apart, two running to either side, the third taking to the air in a sudden rush of noise. All three of them brought their weapons to bear on the war machine, the suddenly airborne member of the group performing a mid-air pirouette to do so.

'No!' Freytha screamed and took off at a run towards the war machine. 'Don't shoot! You'll hit Brael!'

The war machine was jolting and swinging its body to left and right in an attempt to dislodge Brael, who clung tightly to the uneven, riveted surface with one hand as he held his knife in the other and worked his way towards the eye-slit and the section of the carapace that had been peeled back the way a man might peel back a fruit's skin to reach the flesh inside.

The greenskin inside the war machine must have realised this was his intention, as it threw the machine into ever more frantic jolts and jumps, made all the more irregular by the damaged knee joint. Brael felt one foot slip off the overlapped joint between two metal plates and knew he had only moments left before he was sent flying.

Pushing off with his other foot and hauling with his free hand, he swung round the curve of the machine's bodywork and plunged his knife-wielding hand elbow-deep through the split in its metal skin.

The blade struck something and bit deep. A howl erupted from within the machine as Brael pulled back his arm and struck again. The machine went into paroxysms, mirroring the pain and outrage of its pilot. The pincer arm swung wildly, cuffing Brael across the temple. This, combined with a sudden reverse in the machine's direction sent him tumbling through the air.

The first of the star gods' explosive bolts struck the war machine while Brael was still airborne. He hit the ground heavily, feeling something break as a sustained, ear-bursting volley from the gods' weapons punched into the greenskin's machine, first puncturing, then shredding its metal carapace and pulping the creature within.

Lying on his back, Brael saw one of the gods above him, dropping towards him from the sky. The closer the descending figure came, the greater the pressure Brael felt inside his head. Blood burst from his nose in a rush and his head began to pound. There came a rushing in his ears as the star god touched down, then knelt closer to him. He had holstered his pistol and hung his sword from his belt. Armoured hands reached up to release catches around his neck and he lifted the red-eyed mask from his face.

Golden eyes. Brael thought as darkness rushed in to claim him. Vika was there, with Bron. They were standing outside his farmhouse watching lights trail across the sky. The star god had golden eyes.

PART FOUR

‘...in the name of the Emperor... in the name of the Emperor... in the name of the Emperor...’

– Signal detected by Imperial Long-Range Cartographic Survey Ship Beacon of Hope. *M41,791*

In the weeks he had been there, Brael had got used to the sounds of the physic station – nurses and sawbones moving between the pallets that were arranged in rows across the floor of what had once been a tannery. His bed was on the second floor of the tall, wide old building. Beneath him was a ward for the more seriously wounded. The operating tables were on the ground floor. Sometimes, the screams were loud enough to reach his floor, where they would invade his dreams, and probably those of every other man in the ward.

The scent of old leather and the animal waste-products used to toughen the hides still clung to the walls. It seemed to seep up from the floorboards at night. This didn’t bother Brael; it reminded him of home.

The sounds of battle had faded. At first, the physic station had been a chaos of screaming wounded laid across the bare floor in pools of their own blood. Brael learned later that Costes had died here, his life seeping from his shattered knee. The sawbones and nurses could do little more than utter a prayer while applying a dressing. Whether they lived or died was in the hands of the gods.

The star gods, Brael reminded himself.

More of the crimson-armoured deities had landed, Tombek had told him during a visit. They were faster and stronger than any single man and the armour they wore was more war machine than mere protection. The awe-struck Vinaran spoke of vast flying machines that sounded like approaching thunder, spewing more and more of the gods from their bellies, along with smaller flying machines that skimmed over the rooftops, raining bolts of fire upon the greenskins in the streets. On foot, they moved through the city like a

cleansing fire, rarely uttering a word, but working together as if they had spent their whole lives dedicated to war.

As he listened to Tombek – and to Freytha and even to Fellick, who had survived the attack, leading a scratch company of walking wounded in the streets around the physic station he had been carried to after the attack in the mines – Brael's broken legs and ribs ached to heal faster. He learned to be let out of the ward so that he might see these wonders for himself. He wondered at night, when sleep eluded him, or during the day, when boredom hovered nearby: was this his punishment for refusing to believe in the star gods?

The greenskins had retreated from Mallax, leaving their corpses for the pit or the pyre (Mallaxian engineers were already speculating on how much energy a burning greenskin might generate) and their damaged war machines for scrap or salvage (there were already plans to create a trackless iron caravan). If not for the countless lives lost, the invasion might have been counted a windfall.

The Imperial Hawks' first wave secured several key points throughout the besieged city. Navigational beacons were placed at the most suitable locations and further units of Space Marines were despatched from their battle barge, The Carmine Talon. My party had docked with the Talon while en route to Samax IV and I was able to observe the operation from the barge's bridge chapel.

The Imperial Hawks specialise in fast attack from the air, utilising high-altitude, jump pack-assisted assaults, followed by reinforcement sorties from squadron-strength units of land-speeders, often dropped at altitude and at high-speed from Thunderhawk drop-ships. The effect upon unsuspecting enemies can be spectacular – as was the case in Mallax.

After a year of virtually unobstructed movement south along the length of Samax IV's single main landmass, the invaders had grown complacent, their discipline (always a weak point) lax. Though the defence of the besieged city had been tenacious and impressive by the standards of the native inhabitants, it had presented little real challenge to the aliens. The sudden arrival a company of Space Marines – the Imperial Hawks' Fourth Company – was enough to shock their

campaign into reverse. Less than a week after the Imperial Hawks' first assault, the invaders were in full retreat and, as I write, the Hawks are readying themselves for a series of lightning strikes behind the retreating alien line, to capitalise on their disarray and to sow more confusion.

At this juncture, it seems germane to acknowledge that a dispassionate observer might have expected the invaders to make far shorter work of the conquest of Samax IV, given the lack of technological resources and the low level of cultural sophistication on the part of the natives. This may serve to support Harkness's Theory of Orkoid Relativism (cross ref. 999/xeno-anthropology/heretical writings/Harkness, V. [excom. M41,665]) which states that the motivation and tactical sophistication exhibited by this xeno-type may be influenced by the level of resistance offered by their target species. We can assume that the invaders didn't consider the inhabitants of Samax IV much of a challenge.

It is also possible that they had expected resistance on a similar level to that found on reconquered Imperial worlds, given that, in all probability, they had picked up the same Gothic-encoded transmission (albeit using a long-obsolete cipher) as did the survey ship, Beacon of Hope. Whether the aliens detected the signal later than the survey ship, from closer proximity to the planet, will probably remain an unanswered question.

The discovery that Samax IV was unprotected, primitive and ripe for the picking is likely to have served to further encourage a complacent attitude to the inevitability of its conquest.

By this time the troop transports carrying regiments of the Ibrogan Guard had arrived in orbit, diverted at my request

from their homeward journey after the suppression of the cultist uprising on Oestragon III. The regiments were set down in the wake of the advancing Imperial Hawks and most were tasked with securing the re-conquered ground. A number of sergeants from the Ibrogan 9th were assigned the task of recruiting and training a local militia to bolster the Ibrogan effort and to act as scouts in their northward progress.

– Extract: 'Inquisitorial communiqué 747923486/aleph/Samax IV' Author: Inquisitor Selene Infantus. M41,793

'The star gods aren't alone,' Fellick told him during a visit. 'There are others. Others like us.'

Since early yesterday, Fellick reported, more of the thundering machines had dropped from the sky. Coming to rest outside the remains of the city walls, they had disgorged hundreds, maybe thousands of uniformed men and women. They bore arms similar in kind to those used by the star gods and spoke the same language – a tongue that seemed familiar, though was also very different. If you listened hard, Fellick said, it was possible to get a sense of what they were saying.

'It's as if we all spoke the same language once,' Fellick added. 'Only some of us forgot it and made up bits of our own. One of them showed me a map. There are other worlds like ours, too many to count. These people come from one of them.'

Brael struggled to take it in and longed to see it for himself. The itching beneath the tightly bound splints drove him to distraction, reminding him that it would still be a while before he could join one of the new companies that were being formed from those who had survived the defence of Mallax. Tombek had joined up immediately and, to his immense embarrassment, had been appointed a platoon commander. Freytha had also enlisted. She told Brael that she wanted to lead her unit into Grellax.

'Thank you for finding me there,' she said, before embracing him and kissing his cheek. 'Thank you for giving me a reason to stay alive.'

First Tombek, then Freytha. Karel the Mundaxian also came to say his goodbyes.

'Hope I have half your luck,' he said as he left.

Watching him go, Brael hadn't felt very lucky. While the others went north, to homelands they all thought were lost to the invaders forever, he had no choice but to lay on the pallet like one of the dead.

My party made planetfall aboard the drop ship assigned to the Mechanicus support unit attached to the Imperial Hawks Fourth Company and set up an Inquisitorium and Chapel of Penitence in a temple in the old quarter of the city. There the Hawks had discovered the remains of a pre-Heresy pattern vox unit, which we believe was the source of the signal detected by the Beacon of Hope. The ancient device had evidently become an object of veneration and had been maintained in weak, though working order by a cadre of priests upon whom the mark of the mutant was writ clear and unambiguously.

The priests' cyclopean disfiguration was but the first of a host of mutations, great and small that have since been uncovered and catalogued by my party and myself. If we wish to make Samax IV fit to return to the bosom of the Imperium, our work here has only just begun.

'There's one,' Brael nodded towards a figure standing at the far end of the ward, where there were no windows. A man, he was dressed from head to toe in black, which made him difficult to make out in the flickering candlelight that lit that end of the room.

'See him?' Brael asked Fellick, who had come to tell Brael that he too was to join a new company.

'They're trying to make me an officer,' he had laughed. 'Seems they're unwilling to take "No" for an answer.'

Fellick shifted on the end of the pallet casually, as if stretching a cramped back.

'I see him,' he said. 'There are others, some in black, who've been paying the new companies a visit. And there are others in red. They've moved into the manufactoria. Some who've seen them say they're actually machines that look like men. Others say they're men who are wearing machines like the greenskins wore those walking war engines. They've got bodyguards of their own and they've forbidden anyone to enter the manufactoria, even those who used to work there. Nobody in their right mind would want to get too close to them, anyway.'

'I've only seen the ones like him,' Brael said. 'They just seem to walk around. They don't talk to anybody and they don't actually do anything.'

'Probably just checking to see there aren't any malingerers,' Fellick suggested.

‘That’s what I’m hoping,’ said Brael. ‘A sawbones said the splints could come off soon – in a day or so.’

‘Now that’s good news,’ Fellick grinned. ‘Get you back up on your feet and put a rifle in your hand. Maybe I’ll have you in my company, if you’re up to it!’

They both laughed, then talked for a while about the past, about the men and women they had fought alongside – Tombek still kept an eye out for Massau – but neither of them talked seriously of the future. So much had changed in the past year and had changed again with the arrival of the star gods, the soldiers from other worlds and the unnerving strangers in black and in red.

Agra had been everything they had known, but now it was a struggle to embrace the idea that it was just one world among thousands, perhaps more. The future was a whirlpool of unguessable possibilities that, if stared into for too long, threatened to suck you down.

It was likely, his friend had told him, that there wouldn’t be time to visit again.

‘See you on the battlefield,’ Brael had said to him.

‘Not if I see you first!’ Fellick had replied. His laughter had been audible through the second and first floors.

I wish I had your faith, Vika, Brael thought of his wife, eyes closed, after Fellick had left. He felt sure that his wife would have been able to accept these changes more easily. The star gods had been part of her world all her life.

And Bron. Brael imagined the look of wonder on his son’s face. This would have been even more exciting than watching the lights fall across the sky.

Sensing that he was being watched, he opened his eyes. A woman was looking down at him from the side of his pallet. She wore black. A single metallic icon sat high on her left breast. Her hair was straight and fell to the level of her strong jaw line. Her nose was long and straight, her eyes were dark and her gaze was direct. She showed no emotion as she stared down at him, the way Brael remembered Bron would examine a bug he had not seen before: distant, interested in what the creature might do next.

‘My lady,’ Brael attempted, without knowing if his words would make sense to his observer. ‘My name is Brael Corfe. I come from north of here.’

Still the woman looked down upon him, head cocked slightly to one side. No emotion.

‘I had a wife. A son. They died because the greenskins came. I have killed greenskins, before the star gods came, and I want to kill more.’

At this, Brael thought he saw the woman nod – the movement was so slight it was hard to be sure – then she turned and walked away. She wore a slim cloak, gathered at her shoulders by silver-trimmed epaulettes. The cloak

billowed as she walked. Brael watched her pass the other pallets without a glance and disappear through the doorway to the stairs.

> *As was to be expected, the Adeptus Mechanicus have taken possession of the city's meagre technological assets. They pay no attention to the populace, who regard them and their servitor entourage with barely disguised fear and disgust. Cornelia, my astropath, will remain alert to detect any unexpected transmissions bound for Mars, concerning their discoveries.*

> *The population of Mallax and what little human life survives beyond its walls is the sole concern of the Inquisition.*

She returned that night. She brought with her a lantern that threw out a beam of bright, pure light and cast a sphere of almost holy radiance around Brael's pallet.

She was not alone. At first, Brael thought it was a child. When it stepped fully into the light, he was shocked to see that it was probably older than him by at least a generation. Its body, however, appeared to have stopped growing after six or seven summers. Its eyes were black pebbles set in the creases and folds that enveloped their sockets.

'Brael,' the woman said. Her voice was soft, her pronunciation of his name tentative, as if she were testing it, trying to match her pronunciation to his. 'Brael Corfe.'

Hearing his name spoken thus eased the fears that had begun to creep through his mind.

'Lucky man,' she continued. Did she know more about him than just his name? 'Talk me. Tell me.'

And so Brael told her about the last year of his life. He couldn't avoid mentioning Vika and Bron, Vika's belief in the star gods and how excited Bron would have been to see them. He told her about the lights in sky, the smoke from the mountains and the rolling tide of death that rushed down from them. He told her about the war, the loss of town after town, city after city. He told her of the men and women he had fought beside: those who had died, and those few who had survived. He told her about Grellax. He told her about Mallax, about the mines, the Holy Varks and the final assault. As he did so, he felt a weight rise up from him. He felt that all that he had done, all that he had endured had been for the good. The death, the suffering had not been in vain.

The return of the star gods and their followers had given meaning to it all.

He lost track of time as he talked but the woman's expression never changed. She just let him speak until, from the corner of his eye, Brael saw the stunted ancient beckon to her. Holding up a hand for him to pause, she bent an ear to what it had to say.

The creature's voice was unnaturally high. The words that passed its lips were unintelligible, a stream of nonsense.

'Precog?' the woman repeated a pair of syllables from among the stream that the old/young creature had chattered at her. It nodded.

With that, she offered the runt a warm smile, nodded the briefest of goodbyes to Brael, who still felt there was much more he wanted to say, much more he wanted to tell her, and swept away through the ward, the globe of light causing those asleep on the pallets to stir as it passed over them.

In the dark again, Brael stared at the ceiling, purple after-images dancing before his eyes.

> *To facilitate swift linguistic assimilation, my acolytes moved among the populace, recording speech patterns, grammatical deviations from standard Gothic and the most prominent dialectical idiosyncrasies. The codiciers in my party began analysing and cataloguing the volumes kept in surprisingly good condition in the city librarium. It is evidence of the Emperor's blessing that the last surviving human city on Samax IV should be Mallax – the city that clung most securely to its distant Imperial roots.*

> *Alert for evidence of remaining xeno-trace or mutant gene-taint, every rumour was investigated, either by formal interview or by psychic scan.*

> *[NOTE: Though some among our ordo frown upon the tolerance and use of sanctioned psykers, such as Gabriella, I have, on many occasions found the insights she gained from subjects, without their knowledge, and therefore without any attempt on their part to disguise the truth, to be invaluable. The initial survey of this world was no different.]*

The splints came off the next day. Delighted, Brael was anxious to join a new company.

‘First you’d better learn how to walk,’ counselled the sawbones who had cut away the bindings and run his hands down Brael’s legs. The nurse who attended him passed Brael a pair of miss-matched crutches.

So Brael pounded his way around the ward, circuit after circuit. There were fewer people on the pallets now, the sawbones and nurses had more time to stand and joke with each other and with Brael as he passed them for the hundredth time. The black-garbed strangers also seemed to have moved on – the cause of some relief among the medical staff, Brael gathered. They had asked strange questions in their odd, stilted way of speaking.

There were no more visits from Fellick, Tombek or Freytha, so Brael just kept walking, cursing whenever he tripped, refusing assistance whenever he fell.

He discarded the crutches for a pair of battered sticks after four days. He was walking unaided after seven.

On the eighth day, they came for him: two men, wearing mirrored masks over their faces and a black uniform similar in design to that worn by the woman who had visited him.

‘Come,’ one of them said, his voice muffled slightly by the mask. Brael found it disconcerting to see his own face reflected back at him so perfectly from where the stranger’s face should have been.

Brael stood.

‘Your things,’ said the other stranger. ‘Possessions.’

‘I have none,’ Brael replied. ‘I have nothing after the greenskins. All I want to do is get back to fighting them.’

‘Come,’ repeated the first of the strangers to speak.

Even though he had discarded the walking sticks, Brael found negotiating the stairs an ordeal. Once at ground level, he was led out of the physic station for the first time in weeks.

Mallax was a ruin, but it was alive. There were people in the streets – Agrans mainly, but many groups of strangely attired men and women passed by. The first time he heard an engine, he tensed, expecting a greenskin war wagon to round the next corner. A short way from the physic station sat a different kind of wagon. The back of the wagon was open and two of the newcomers sat in a covered cab at the front of the horseless vehicle. A uniform, dull grey in colour, on its metal sides it bore the two-headed eagle of the star gods’ followers – an icon that had been erected outside the buildings the newcomers had taken for their own offices and workshops. It had also been daubed on walls by grateful Mallaxians.

Brael’s escort indicated that he should climb into the back of the wagon. Brael was surprised to find that he wasn’t entirely willing to go near it, for it

reminded him too strongly of the invaders' engine-driven war machines. Steeling himself, he gripped the side of the vehicle. He felt the vibration of its hidden engine and thought of the much weaker pulse of the Varks in the dimly lit temple.

Setting one foot in a rigid metal stirrup fixed beneath the lip of the wagon's rear edge, Brael climbed aboard with some difficulty, though he again refused any aid. He wanted the newcomers to see that he was fit to return to the militia.

As the wagon rumbled through the streets, a much sleeker machine passed, travelling in the opposite direction, carrying men in ornately-braided uniforms. Brael smiled and waved. They did not return his greeting. Brael promised himself that he would learn how men saluted each other in the new companies.

The wagon stopped in the shadows of the shattered eastern wall. Seeing the vast breaches in the ancient stone and metal, Brael thought back to the first waves of the greenskins' attack. A high fence that appeared to have been woven out of impossibly thin metal wire had been erected around an old warehouse. Two more of the mirror-faced strangers stood at the gate that led into the compound. At a word that Brael did not understand, the gate was opened and he and his escort passed through.

At first, Brael thought that he had been brought to another physic station. The warehouse contained rows of pallets, half of which were occupied, men on the ground floor, women on the floor above.

Nobody was sure why they had been brought here. They had all, Brael learned, been delivered to the compound by a pair of the mirror-faced strangers. Some – those who had been here the longest – were beginning to take a pessimistic view of their situation. Others still talked of this being a staging post, from which they would be transported to join new companies that had already left Mallax for the front.

'I hope they take us in one of their flying machines,' a boy of nineteen summers told Brael. 'To see the world from the air, like a bird,' he marvelled. 'Such wonders!'

Brael's biggest surprise came when he saw a familiar face across the room.

'Massau?' Brael didn't know whether to greet the slippery guildsman warmly or grab him by the throat. In any case, Massau avoided his gaze and continued to do so for the next three days.

Brael settled down on one of the vacant pallets; there was nothing to do but try to shut out the rumours that circulated through the warehouse, eat the food that arrived three times a day and continue walking to strengthen his legs.

On the fourth day, the warehouse doors were opened and the men and women within were ushered out. There were several wagons in the compound, motors idling. Unlike the open-topped vehicle in which Brael had

been driven to the compound, these wagons had metal roofs and windowless metal sides.

Before climbing up into the rear of one of the wagons, Brael turned to the black-uniformed stranger who stood beside the wagon's heavy metal door.

'Are we going to join the new companies?' Brael asked. His reflection opened and closed its mouth in time with his words, but the person behind the mask merely jabbed a finger towards the open wagon doorway. Brael noticed the stranger's other hand move closer to the butt of a pistol holstered on his hip. Brael climbed aboard.

The ride was far shorter than Brael had expected. When the wagon's rear door clanged open, he stepped down into a space outside the city wall that had been blasted by the greenskin artillery and had since been completely levelled by the newcomers. They had created a vast flat expanse of ground, upon which rested a collection of flying machines, the like of which neither Brael nor any of his companions could have imagined. There were craft of the kind Fellick had described to him, the kind that carried hundreds of men in their bellies. But there were others, much larger, from which trundled vehicles twice the size and weight of the wagons from which they had just dismounted. These flying machines were spiked with what Brael took to be weapons, as were the vehicles that rumbled down the ramps from their innards.

Having delivered its cargo, one of the flying machines took to the air and the noise was indescribable. Brael and his companions clapped their hands to their ears, some uttered prayers, one man just dropped to his knees, eyes following the machine as it rose swiftly into the sky, jaw slack with wonder and terror.

Off to one side of the flat expanse sat a jet-black craft that bore no external markings. A line of people could be seen filing up the ramp into its belly. Brael's party was directed to join the line.

'Where are you taking us?' Brael demanded of the mirrorface who pointed towards the squat machine. Brael thought it looked more like an overgrown beetle than anything man-made. When the newcomer didn't answer, Brael repeated his question, louder and in a manner of which he was used to his men taking notice.

In one hand, the mirrorface held a long stick. In a swift, smooth movement, he brought the stick down on Brael's left knee. Still weak, it gave way and dropped him in the dirt. Seeing this, others stopped, looking down at Brael, then up at the mirrored guard.

Several other black-garbed guards moved up to support their fellow, sticks now held ready. The crowd moved back into line. Refusing an offer of a hand, Brael got painfully to his feet and followed suit. Even though the mirrorface had struck his knee, he felt a sick ache beginning to bloom behind his eyes.

The interior of the insect-like machine was almost as black as its outer skin. Long glowing strips buzzed and threw out a meagre light. Eyes adjusting to the gloom, Brael saw that he stood in a vast space, filled with rank upon rank of beds stacked three high. The ceiling was low. There were perhaps five hundred people crammed into this space. A murmur of fear, suspicion and anger began to circulate.

A dull clang reverberated through the metal walls and floor – doors shutting – followed by a hiss and a pressure building in their ears as if they were swimming down through deep water. Then other sounds, the rising tone of engines. The floor bucked and swayed gently. Had the beetle-ship left the ground already?

All I have suffered. All I have done. For this? Brael asked himself. The ache in his head had resolved itself. He knew that he would never see his home – his world – again.

'Why?' he asked, unaware that he had spoken his question out loud. The only answer he received was the cacophony of cries and shouts, wails of terror and despair that grew and resounded around the blank metal walls.

The absence of Imperial rigour on this world since the Age of Apostasy has allowed rogue nature to run unchecked, producing deviant gene-strains, among which exists a significant percentile of latent psychic ability. In some cases, this deviation has passed from the merely latent to the actual and manifest.

The process of tracing all latent and manifest psykers is ongoing, as is the process of separating them from the general population, and of mining their twisted psyches for the Imperium's benefit and for the salvation of their souls. The untapped energies within them will feed the Golden Throne and maintain the light of the Emperor that shines out across the Immaterium.

The first of the black ships left orbit today, en route for Holy Terra.

The ends always justify the means.

In the Emperor's name.

– Conclusion: 'Inquisitorial communiqué 747923486/aleph/Samax IV' Author: Inquisitor Selene Infantus. M41,793

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

DAN ABNETT

Dan Abnett is a novelist and award-winning comic book writer. He has written almost forty novels, including the acclaimed Gaunt's Ghosts series, and the Eisenhorn and Ravenor trilogies. His latest Horus Heresy novel *Prospero Burns* was a New York Times bestseller, and topped the SF charts in the UK and the US. In addition to writing for Black Library, Dan is highly regarded in the comics industry for his work for both Marvel and DC, and has written a number of other bestselling novels, including *Torchwood: Border Princes*, *Doctor Who: The Story of Martha*, *Triumff* and *Embedded*. He lives and works in Maidstone, Kent.

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A legend amongst Black Library fans, the first of William King's sixteen novels for the Black Library was published in 1999. He is the creator of the much-loved Gotrek & Felix series and the Space Wolf novels starring Ragnar Blackmane. His English language novel sales for Black Library total over

750,000 copies and his books have been translated into 9 languages. After 8 years away writing a trilogy of novels based in a world of his own creation, William King's much anticipated return to the worlds of Warhammer has brought to life some of the seminal characters from the Warhammer background, such as the twin brothers Tyrion, greatest living elven warrior and Teclis, mightiest mage of his era, and the heroic Imperial Guard general Lord Macharius.

GRAHAM MCNEILL

Hailing from Scotland, Graham McNeill worked for over six years as a Games Developer in Games Workshop's Design Studio before taking the plunge to become a full-time writer. Graham's written a host of SF and Fantasy novels and comics, as well as a number of side projects that keep him busy and (mostly) out of trouble. His Horus Heresy novel, *A Thousand Sons*, was a New York Times bestseller and his Time of Legends novel, *Empire*, won the 2010 David Gemmell Legend Award. Graham lives and works in Nottingham and you can keep up to date with where he'll be and what he's working on by visiting his website.

Join the ranks of the 4th Company at www.graham-mcneill.com

BEN COUNTER

Ben Counter is the author of the Soul Drinkers and Grey Knights series and one of Black Library's most popular Warhammer 40,000 authors. He has written RPG supplements and comic books as well as novels. He is a fanatical painter of miniatures, a pursuit which has won him his most prized

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Mitchel Scanlon is a full-time novelist and comics writer. His previous credits for the Black Library include the Horus Heresy novel *Descent of Angels*, *Fifteen Hours*, the background book *The Loathsome Ratmen*, and the comics series *Tales of Hellbrandt Grimm*.

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Paul Kearney studied at Lincoln College, Oxford where he read Anglo-Saxon, Old Norse and Middle English and was a keen member of the Mountaineering Society and the Officer Training Corps. He has published several titles including the *Sea Beggars* to critical acclaim, being long-listed for the British Fantasy Award.

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Braden Campbell is a classical actor and playwright, currently living in Milton, Ontario. His theatrical work has seen him perform across not only across Canada, but in England and New York City. For the past five years he has also worked as a freelance writer, particularly in the field of role playing games. Braden has enjoyed Warhammer 40,000 for nearly a decade, and remains fiercely dedicated to his dark eldar.

STEVE PARKER

Steve Parker was born and raised in Edinburgh. Scotland, and now lives and works in Tokyo, Japan. As a video-game writer/designer, he has worked ontitles for various platforms. In 2005, his short fiction started appearing in American SF/Fantasy/Horror Magazines. In 2006, his story *The Falls of Marakross* was published in the Black Library's *Tales from the Dark Millennium* anthology. His first novel, *Rebel Winter,* was published in 2007 and his latest book, *Rynn's World*, is the first book in the Space Marine Battles series.

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Chris Wraight is a writer of fantasy and science fiction, whose first novel was published in 2008. Since then, he's published

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Mike Lee was the principal creator and developer for White Wolf Game Studio's *Demon: The Fallen*. Over the last eight years he has contributed to almost two dozen role-playing games and supplements. His credits for the Black Library include the Horus Heresy title *Fallen Angels* and 'The Rise of Nagash' trilogy for Time of Legends, as well as writing the Malus Darkblade series with Dan Abnett.

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By day, David Annandale dons an academic disguise and lectures at a Canadian university on subjects ranging from English literature to horror films and video games, shaping his students into an army of servitors awaiting his signal to rise. He is the author of several thriller and horror novels and the acclaimed short story 'Carrion Anthem' for Black Library. He lives with his wife and family and a daemon in the shape of a cat, and is working on several new projects set in the grim darkness of the far future. Visit him at

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Sarah Cawkwell is a north-east England based freelance writer. Married, with a son (who is the grown up in the house) and two intellectually challenged cats, she's been a determined and prolific writer for many years. Her first novel, *The Gildar Rift*, was published in 2011. When not slaving away over a hot keyboard, Sarah's hobbies include reading everything and anything, running around in fields with swords screaming incomprehensibly and having her soul slowly sucked dry by online games.

SIMON SPURRIER

Simon Spurrier has been writing since an early age, successfully having his work published first in the form of comics and latterly in prose fiction. Since earning a degree in Film Production and a bursary to attend the inaugural Screenwriting class of the National Academy of Writing, he has become a frequent contributor to titles such as 2000AD, the Warhammer Comic and the Megazine. His prose work includes several short stories for Inferno! magazine and, to date, three novels.

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Nick Kyme is a writer and editor. He lives in Nottingham where he began a career at Games Workshop on White Dwarf magazine. Nick's writing credits include the Warhammer 40,000 Tome of Fire trilogy featuring the Salamanders, *Fall of Damnos*, the Space Marine Battles novel and his Warhammer Fantasy-based dwarf novels and several short stories.

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Sandy Mitchell is a pseudonym of Alex Stewart, who has been writing successfully under both names since the mid 1980s. As Sandy, he's best known for his work for the Black Library, particularly the Ciaphas Cain series. He's recently completed an MA in Screenwriting at the London College of Communication, which left far less time than usual for having fun in the 41st Millennium, and is looking forward to spending more time in the Emperor's service now that it has concluded.

GAV THORPE

Gav Thorpe has been rampaging across the worlds of Warhammer and Warhammer 40,000 for many years as both an author and games developer. He hails from the den of scurvy outlaws called Nottingham and makes regular sorties to unleash bloodshed and mayhem. He shares his hideout with Dennis, a mechanical hamster sworn to enslave mankind. At the moment Dennis is under house arrest for attempting to use Skype to hack the world's nuclear arsenals. Gav's previous Black Libary novels include fan-favourite *Angels of Darkness* and the epic Sundering trilogy, amongst many others. You can find his website at: www.gavthorpe.co.uk

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Richard Williams was born in Nottingham, UK and was first published in 2000. He has written fiction for publications ranging from *Inferno*! to the Oxford & Cambridge May Anthologies, on topics as diverse as gang initiation, medieval highwaymen and arcane religions. In his spare time he is a theatre director and actor. *Relentless* was his first full-length novel and his latest book is *Reiksguard*.

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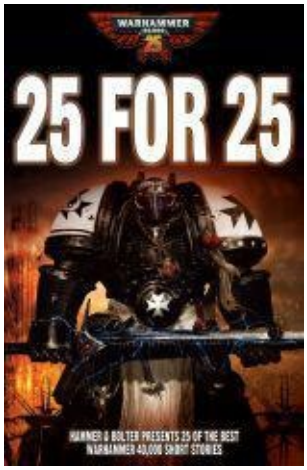
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