



A WARHAMMER 40,000 ANTHOLOGY

THE LOST STORIES

THE MISSING BLACK LIBRARY STORIES

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WINGS OF BONE

James Swallow

AVES LIKED TO speak to Griffon. He made sure that the rest of the crew were not around when he did, lest their opinion of him sink any lower. The one occasion he'd been caught crooning to the machine, it had led - typically - to a punishment beating from Nilner. Aves thought about the hulking thug as he sat in the big gunnery officer's chair, the same knot of impotent hate he always felt for the bully tightening in his chest.

He ran an oilcloth over the triggers of the twin bolter cannons, wiping away the accumulated sweat and grease. 'Just right,' he told Griffon. 'Good enough for the Emperor himself.'

Aves took the controls in his hands and placed his feet on the pedals. He felt at home there, nestled in the cupola across the shoulders of Griffon's fuselage. To his left and right, the wings of the Marauder class bomber extended away, blunt leading edges pitched like the blades of a double-headed axe. A white design of the plane's mythic namesake was drawn there, close to a rendering of the double-headed eagle of the Imperium. The cowling of the engines made the bomber's profile more muscular at the wing roots, the massive motors silent now, but powerful enough to lift the forty-tonne flyer and a full payload into high orbit.

Aves pressed a pedal and the turret made a slow circuit; he grinned as it rotated quietly and smoothly. Staring out past the upturned barrels of the bolters, Aves watched the stubby t-shaped tail swing by, and beneath it, Stoi's posting. The albino tailgunner never told Aves if he was satisfied with the crewman's maintenance on his station, preferring to hover on the edge of things, quiet and sinister. The flight crew nicknamed Stoi 'The Ghost', but Aves was convinced he was something far more sinister: an

agent of the Inquisition, maybe. He smothered a flare of irritation, remembering Nilner's braying laughter when he had voiced this fanciful suggestion.

The turret rotated over the prow of the bomber where Captain Vought's cockpit was, with the twin lascannon turret beyond. Aves looked down at the captain's acceleration couch with barely concealed desire. He wanted so badly to settle into that chair, to feel the potency of Griffon through the flight yoke in his hands, and the need was like a guttering flame inside him, forever burning. But the daydreams that had spurred him into volunteering for duty in the Imperial Navy had not helped him qualify for aircrew status.

Aves felt a familiar mood, black and dolorous, threaten to overcome him. He'd lost count of the number of times he had tried and failed the flight status exam, and it was his own awkwardness and clumsy nature that kept him forever grounded, forced to work as a maintenance hand on the flyers that captivated him. Naval Crewman 3rd Class Bryn Aves was doomed to remain grounded.

Unbidden, his hand strayed to the breast of his tunic, where a unit patch for the 404th squadron was fixed. Aves coveted the bone white wings that flight crewmen wore, and for the thousandth time, he wondered what it would be like to wear them himself.

A glitter of light in the sky distracted him from his thoughts. Low on the horizon a flashing dart moved closer, catching a flicker of orange light from the sunset. Aves licked his lips; he was positive that no aircraft was due to arrive at the base. Griffon and her squadron had returned a few hours ago, fresh from another in a line of inconsequential attacks on the heretic forces. In a rare piece of luck they had suffered no losses, so this was not some straggler limping back. He shifted the turret toward the approaching object - much nearer now - and Aves could identify it as a Lightning, a Naval fighter.

The crewman's heart pounded as the turret's auspex brought the fighter into blurry life on a targetting screen. The Lightning turned, hopping the line of trees at the base perimeter. It was too low to be detected by scanners, skimming the ground. For an moment, the flyer was fixed in the turret's gun cues and Aves saw clearly where the Imperial aquila had been struck off its wings and daubed over by a many angled star.

'Heretic!' The word almost choked him. The crewman's mind whirled; it was clearly a suicide attacker, probably loaded with munitions, and most likely followed the 404th back from the battle to inflict some payback. On it came, and still the air raid siren did not sound. The captured Lightning powered over the runway.

Aves found his hands moving without conscious volition, instinctively flicking off the safety catches on the heavy bolters. The red glyph in the firing window appeared and Aves pulled the guns up to bead the target.

Words tumbled from his trembling lips, 'Emperor guide me, I implore you.'

If the heretic pilot saw the movement from the parked Marauder, it was of no consequence, time seemed to slow to a crawl as Aves gripped the twin triggers and squeezed. The bolters crashed into life and spat thick rounds into the air, bullets as big as candlepins cutting through the sky, shell cases arcing away in a glittering fountain of brass. The Lightning flashed over the bomber and the bolts raked its belly like predatory claws cutting into prey. Aves spun in the turret chair to see the stricken fighter flip over and smash straight into the ground. The airframe crumpled like paper under the impact, detonating in a yellow flash.

Griffon rocked on its landing gear from the shock and Aves lost his sight for a few moments, flash-blinded. He heard voices and footsteps scrambling through the bomber. Blinking, he looked up to see a huge man shape towering over him. Nilner. It seemed a miracle that the big gunner could even begin to fit his massive frame inside the cupola.

'I got him-' Aves began, fear and elation mixing in his voice.

Nilner cut him off, grabbing a fistful of his tunic and tearing him out of the chair. Before he could protest, Aves was thrown down into the hull, landing hard on his back. Breath gushed out of him and he tried to lift himself back up. In the poorly lit interior of the bomber he saw only shadows as Miner's heavy boot struck him in the ribs. The gunnery officer picked him up again and pitched the crewman out of the egress hatch. Aves tasted blood in his mouth as he fell in a heap on the black ferrocrete runway.

Aves managed to raise his head, and there he saw Captain Vought and the rest of Griffon's crew, breathless from running, framed by the burning wreckage of the heretic Lightning.

'*Sir?*' Aves managed.

Vought watched him with cold dispassion; then Nilner was there, hauling him up to his feet like a rag doll.

'Don't ever use my guns, dullard!' Nilner growled.

Aves wanted to protest, but the next punch sent him reeling and consciousness fled. The last thing he saw was Vought, expressionless as he watched Nilner take the crewman's impertinence out of his hide.

THE MEDICAL CORPSMAN gave Aves something for the swelling and told him to get lost. The infirmary had its share of real injuries and a crewman's damaged face wasn't worth more than a few seconds of care. Pressing a bandage to the cut on his cheek, Aves began the walk back to the barracks. Night had fallen, revealing a star-dappled sky. The crewman glanced up; bright dots overhead signified the positions of warships, moving slowly between the glow of stars. He liked the nights on Rocene. The planet seemed to grow more reverent and docile in the dark and he somehow felt safer there than in the brightness of day. Aves found it easier to hide at night.

He stopped at the service road to let a Chimera grumble past, following the vehicle with his gaze as it trundled toward the hangars. Beyond them, he could just make out the faint tracery of the perimeter fence; and beyond that was the horizon, lit with a faint glow.

The heretics were there. The vast mechanised army that the apostate rebels had created was rolling ever closer with each passing day, sacking towns and torching cities to the ground as they went. Aves had heard rumours from old Dolenz in the tower about how the beleaguered Imperial Guard was being forced to surrender kilometre after kilometre to the oncoming insurrectionists. The missions of the Marauder squadrons from here at Point November base were meant to support the Guardsmen's efforts, but they seemed to have little success in halting the tide of the advance. The crews were sombre and terse and the failed suicide attack would not improve matters.

Aves passed the black scar in the ground where the Lightning had crashed. Whatever remained of the turncoat fighter had been hastily concealed under tarps, all of them emblazoned with the sigils of the

Inquisition and dire warnings not to approach. He spotted Griffon's navigator, Kheed, nearby in conversation with one of the Guardsmen standing post by the wreck.

Aves made sure he did not make eye contact with him. Although he and Kheed were the same age, the arrogant young officer was everything Aves was not. A high born caste member from a hive world, the navigator looked down his nose at everyone but the captain, and strutted about Point November as if he expected a command of his own to appear by the Emperor's grace. Kheed made no secret of the fact he thought of the crewman as less than a servant. Aves hated him almost as much as he hated Nilner.

Aves walked on past the fighter he had destroyed. The momentary elation he had felt at striking a blow against Terra's enemies was gone now, it had faded like a distant memory. In its place remained only the dull pain from where Nilner had repeatedly struck him. It seemed that despite his actions, Aves still had no leniency to come after breaking the rules, and Nilner had been very clear on many occasions that Aves was not worthy to man a post aboard Griffon. The gunner seemed to have made it his life's work to victimise him, and the other junior crewmen were content to let it happen, rather than risk being the target of the officer's ire themselves. Aves kept to the shadows, hoping to avoid another confrontation with the gunner, slipping through pools of dark cast by the officers' quarters.

'-Aves.'

He froze as he heard his name spoken aloud. The voice came from Captain Vought's private quarters. Aves moved closer and recognised the deep tones of Sorda, Griffon's bombardier and Vought's second-in-command. The crewman crouched down, afraid of discovery, but equally afraid of missing something vital in the conversation.

Inside the captain's hut, Sorda was helping himself to a brackish local brandy from Vought's private store. 'You must admit he displayed quick thinking.'

Vought said nothing, and arched an aristocratic eyebrow in response. Sorda downed the drink in one jolt. In the half-light of the room, the bombardier's bald head seemed to shine, the glow of the lamp glittering off the steel on his temple and his bulbous, bionic eye.

'Crewmen are not trained to think,' Vought said, his rich core-world accent adding gravity to every word. Aves has ideas above his station. He must understand that the Emperor places his servants where they are needed, not where they want to be.'

'You would rather he had let the heretic pass unchallenged?' Sorda eyed the brandy bottle but thought better of it. 'You may be correct, but why do you let Nilner treat the poor fool as a whipping boy? Aves does his job well, yet that thug berates and abuses him at every opportunity. And you allow it to go on.'

Vexation flickered on Vought's face; he was not one to encourage the questioning of his orders. 'Sorda, there are many other captains who would see your behaviour as insubordinate. Do you know why I tolerate your familiarity?'

The bombardier was not cowed. 'Because you owe me your life twice over? Because we flew through hell together at the Tellus Marches and Ogre IV?'

Vought allowed himself the smallest of smiles. 'No, Sorda. It is because that bionic eye of yours makes you the best bombardier in the squadron. But sometimes I wonder if you see a little too much with it.'

Sorda shrugged. 'What I see is a poor wretch that the crew consider a joke of a man, a failure who lacks the spine to be a true soldier of the Emperor... And yet, when he serves the Imperium he is punished for it.'

The captain's expression went cold again. 'Griffon has the finest combat rating in the 404th, because I allow my men to do what they will as long as that battle record stays unblemished.' He poured a little of the brandy for himself. 'Nilner is a thug and a bully, but he keeps the gun crew in line. To maintain that, I'd let him beat Aves all day if need be. Only the mission matters, Sorda. If you ever lose sight of that, I'll put you off my crew.'

Outside, Aves held his breath. Sorda had never spoken anything but clipped orders to him since he had been assigned to Griffon, and it surprised him to think the officer might actually show some compassion. He was still turning this over in his mind when a strident voice cried out his name, startling him.

'What are you loitering around here for?' Aves spun on his heel to confront Weslund, Griffon's lascannon gunner. His sallow face was set with annoyance, and he gestured sharply at the crewman with his free

hand, the other gripping a volume of Ministorium doctrine. Weslund advanced menacingly, the light of zealotry flaring in his eyes. 'Spying, perhaps? Listening and skulking?'

Aves realised that the gunner must have just returned from his regular prayers at the base's tiny chapel. Weslund was extremely pious and fervent in his devotion to the Golden Throne, given to seeing the taint of heresy in every corner.

'I was just walking...!' Aves fumbled at an answer, eyes downcast.

'Lies trip off your tongue so easily!' Weslund snapped.

The door to Captain Vought's quarters opened, revealing Griffon's commander and Sorda. 'What is the meaning of this?' Vought's voice cut like an icy scalpel.

Weslund spoke before Aves could even think. 'I discovered him hiding outside your door, sir, eavesdropping.'

Vought gave Aves a hard stare. 'Is this true, crewman?'

Aves shook his head, his cheeks reddening, unable to speak.

'Nilner was too lenient with him, captain. The fool is corrupted, I'm sure of it. He should be shot as a traitor!'

'Weslund, Aves shot down a suicide flyer. He's no heretic,' Sorda said. The lasgunner's manner exasperated the bombardier.

'Perhaps. Perhaps not. He may have been trying to silence-'

'Enough of this prattle!' Vought growled. 'While I admire your zeal in searching for immorality, you will not find it among my crewmen, Mister Weslund. Understand?'

The gunner closed his mouth with an audible snap and nodded.

'As for you, crewman,' Vought flicked a glance at Sorda, 'if you were listening at my door, you'll take another hiding from Nilner in punishment.'

Aves felt the blood drain from his face, seeing Nilner in his mind's eye, the big man grinning as he laid into him.

'Captain, if I may,' Sorda broke in, tapping his bionic eye. 'If Aves had been loitering outside, I would have seen his heat trace with my optics.' He made a show of looking around. 'I saw no such trace,' Sorda lied.

Vought gave the bombardier a measuring look, then nodded. 'Very well. You men are dismissed. We have a mission at dawn and I expect you to be ready.' The captain slammed shut the door of his cabin and Weslund took

the cue to walk away, giving Aves a lingering sneer as he shouldered past him.

After a moment, Sorda addressed Aves in a quiet voice. 'You did well today, lad, but take some advice. Keep to yourself. You'll live longer.'

Aves nodded jerkily. Sorda's were the first words of encouragement he could ever remember hearing from a superior officer.

THE INTERIOR OF Point November's operations bunker was dingy and grim, an array of seated men gazing into auspex screens or buried in scanner hoods. In the centre of the room was a chart table sporting a map covering the whole of the peninsula around the base. Even from a few feet away, Aves could see that the red tide of markers denoting heretic forces was slowly consuming the Imperial held zone. A tactical officer moved a set of symbols closer to the enemy line, the tags represented the 404th's bombers.

'Aves, lad,' Dolenz beckoned him over. 'Don't stand in the way there.'

The crewman did as he was asked. Dolenz gave him a weak smile as he approached. Aves forced himself not to look below the old man's waist; where his legs should have been there were two spindly bionic replacements. Their steel exteriors made them seem like arcane metal bones grafted from an iron skeleton. The sight of Dolenz's disability always made Aves feel uncomfortable, but the old soldier seemed not to notice. He handed Dolenz a small jar of machine lubricant, secreted from the aircraft stores.

'Here you are. Enough for another few weeks.'

Dolenz took the jar with a crack-toothed smile and daubed a little of the fluid on his leg joints. 'Good boy. I'd have rusted stiff long ago if not for you.'

Aves looked around, listening to the mumbled litany of battle prayer and communications chatter. 'How goes the mission?'

Dolenz nodded at his auspex screen, the green display shimmering like a tank of stagnant water. 'Close now. Griffon is on target, with Basilisk in support.'

Aves took this in with a nod. Basilisk was Captain Marko's Marauder, a good crew with a record almost equalling Griffon's. He rubbed a hand over

his brow; it was blood-warm in the bunker and the crewman was sweating.

'I heard what you did last night,' Dolenz said. 'Terra be proud, you were sharp and no mistake.'

'I was just lucky.'

'Luck?' The old soldier's face screwed up in dismay. 'No such thing. Some say I was lucky when I got shot down and lived to tell the tale.' He tapped a finger on his metal legs. 'I don't call having these pieces of iron welded to me lucky.' Dolenz gave a heavy sigh. 'Matters little, anyway. We'll quit this piece of dirt soon enough.'

Aves gave him a quizzical look. 'What do you mean?'

'You wouldn't have heard, would you?' The sensor operator looked around to see if any officers were listening to their conversation. 'There's talk, lad. A retreat is in the offing. We'll give up this forsaken piece of turf and let the Astartes take the lead instead.'

'Space Marines? Here? But what about the base?'

Dolenz shrugged. 'Probably be abandoned. If the rumours are true, mind.'

Aves tried to assimilate this new piece of information. The sudden idea of the unknown left him with a jumble of excitement and fear.

'Here, lad, it's starting,' hissed Dolenz, as the comm channels came to life. 'They're in sight of the mark.'

'Point November base, Griffon,' Vought's voice issued out of the air. 'Commencing attack.'

CLOUDS OF FLAK thrown up from guns on the ground burst about Griffon in dark spheres of smoke, opening like deadly black poppies. Vought dismissed them, concentrating on steering the fully-laden Marauder through streams of bright red tracer, spat into the sky from Hydra anti-aircraft batteries that had been captured by heretic units. Every few moments, a brilliant white flash on the ground signalled the launch of a massive Manticore missile, prompting the captain to trigger a flare shell or chaff cylinder from a control on his yoke. Vought could see the ground as a seething carpet of armoured vehicles and enemy soldiers, all of them pouring weapons fire into the bomber's path. The air was his medium, and

he was master of it, powering the massive tonnage of the Marauder through the flak and into the kill zone.

'Griffon, Basilisk. Your three o'clock low,' Captain Marko's voice said in his ear. 'I have the lead.'

'Copy, Basilisk. We'll follow you in,' Vought replied, then switched to the Griffon's intercom channel. 'Sorda, arm the weapons. Open the bay.' A red indicator glyph on Vought's console glowed, indicating the bombardier's readiness, and across the ventral hull of the bomber, heavy metal doors yawned open revealing a tightly packed payload of ten spin-stabilised, gravity assisted bombs. Each of the warheads contained two hundred kilos of dense high explosive compound and an iridium penetrator fuse, designed to pierce through enemy armour before detonating. From the nose turret, Weslund began to sing a hymn about blood and fire, his reedy voice carrying through the fuselage.

In the weapons bay Sorda gave the bombs a smile, like a proud parent about to send a child out into the world. He had chalked a devotional message on every one of the grey cases; the closest one bore the words 'The Emperor's Might Knows no Boundaries' in his precise gothic hand. He glanced down through the open hatch, watching shot and shell flash by beneath Griffon's wings.

Vought saw a flare of power from the Basilisk's engines and the other Marauder dipped down toward the centre of the heretic army. Griffon shivered violently as a flak shell blew close by, spent shrapnel clattering off the wing. The aircraft commander sighted down over the nose, past the lascannon turret. For a moment, Vought thought his eyes had deceived him; there appeared to be a grounded starship down there in the mud, a flat expanse of hull like a beached steel whale. What he saw was the mobile command post of the heretics, a colossal land leviathan easily the size of an Imperial frigate. Great tracks and spiked wheels churned at mud and earth, labouring the vehicle forward, flattening hills and uprooting woodlands before it. And there at the very centre of it, beckoning Vought like a target on a range, was a hideous grinning skull set upon a star.

At the sight of it, Weslund spat a foul curse over the intercom and began to babble in dark, stentorian tones, breaking his litany every few moments with a discharge from his cannons.

Basilisk swooped down over the prow of the leviathan, jinking from side to side to dodge tracer spat from Hydra batteries. 'Ready. Ready,' said Marko. 'Drop-'

The bomber's commander never finished his sentence; a vibrant laser flare tore into Basilisk from the eye of the skull and cut down the middle. The aircraft's fuel reservoir tore open and exploded, instantly flashing the bomber to ash.

'Lord's blood!' Weslund gasped.

Vought set his jaw and pushed the yoke forward, mirroring Basilisk's attack run. All about him, he heard the bomber's bolter turrets chatter as Nilner and Stoi raked the enemy with punishing salvos. He would only have seconds before the leviathan would be able to recharge the massive lascannon for another shot.

'Ready. Ready,' Vought called.

Sorda made a sign of supplication to the Golden Throne and gripped the release switch, pressing his eye to the sightglass.

'Drop.' The instant the captain's command left his lips, Sorda slammed the knife switch down and with a well oiled whirr of machinery, the clamps holding the bombs in place opened in perfect order. Each of the weapons shrieked as it dropped out of the bomb bay and into the fast flowing air, the wind whistling through the fusing propeller and steering vanes. The bombs struck hard across the leviathan's hull in bright flares of flame.

Vought poured power into Griffon's engines and pulled back on the yoke, arcing the aircraft up and away from the target site. He allowed himself a sneer at the heretic's expense as the laser cannon cracked through the air where the Marauder had just been. 'Too slow,' he whispered, from behind his breather mask.

As the flyer turned outbound, Vought's concentration returned to threading the bomber through the storm of anti-aircraft fire. Almost as an afterthought, he toggled the intercom. 'Stoi, report,' he demanded from the tailgunner. 'Target status?'

When the weapons officer didn't reply straight away, Vought felt a flicker of irritation. 'Stoi, wake up! What is the status of the target?'

Every crewman on Griffon was surprised when the gunner gave a terse, single word response. 'Undamaged.'

KILOMETERS FROM THE combat, Aves and Dolenz exchanged glances. 'What does that mean?' said the crewman. 'The bombs misfired?'

Dolenz shook his head. 'Nothing like that. That great bloody tank, I'll warrant it'll take more than standard ordnance and cordite to crack it.'

Aves fell silent as Vought's commands echoed out from the faraway bomber.

THE CAPTAIN TURNED to call down into the fuselage below the cockpit. 'Kheed, get down there and confirm Stoi's sighting. I want to know if there were secondary explosions, anything.'

Without looking to see if his orders were being followed, Vought flicked to the main comm channel and relayed a warning about the leviathan's lascannon, but the remainder of the 404th were still caught in the flak, fighting to stay on course and bomb the living hell out of the heretics below them.

Kheed reached the hatch to Stoi's turret and cranked it open. The albino gunner said nothing, and handed him a pair of ageing field glasses, stabbing one bony finger at the smoke wreathed horizon below. The navigator searched for the steel deck of the land leviathan and found it. Smoke poured from massive chimneys along its spine, and tracer fire arced skyward from myriad guns along its armoured hide, but no flames or structural damage were evident, beyond a few pits and dents across the face of the grinning skull.

The navigator keyed the intercom and spoke in a flat, toneless voice. 'Target remains, captain. Confirming, status is undamaged.'

Vought's lip curled in annoyance and he pitched the Marauder round in a harsh wingover, determined to see the leviathan for himself. A force field, Kheed?' he snapped.

'Negative. Sir, they must have armour as thick as a battlecruiser to shrug off a strike like that.'

'Indeed,' Vought fumed quietly. The intelligence reports from Imperial Guard on the ground had mentioned nothing of this, and now the squadron had lost aircraft in an attack that would have failed even if the enemy crew

were blind or asleep. The captain decided that there would be harsh words spoken with his Guard counterparts on return to Point November.

'Incoming!' Nilner's rough shout cut through Vought's train of thought. 'Lightnings, coming out of the suns!'

The pilot turned the bomber hard to port and flicked a glance upward. He saw a trio of bat-winged fighters vectoring in on their position.

'Gunners, target and annihilate! Sweep the heretic scum out of the sky!'

Nilner pedalled his turret around to follow the lead fighter as it swooped down on Griffon. His big, sweaty hands enveloped the firing grips and squeezed. In answer, the heavy bolter cannons screamed death into the flashing shape of the seized Lightning. The massive bolts tore through the engine cowlings of the flyer and shattered the glass cockpit, turning the interior into a red ruin. Nilner grunted his approval and turned the turret around, looking for another kill.

The gunner had been quick to spot the trio of interceptors, and true to the training doctrine that had been drilled into him, Nilner concentrated his attention on the most immediate targets. Consequently, he never saw the fourth Lightning, hanging back from the trio, as it emerged from the brightness of Rocene's twin suns. As Griffon turned to avoid the laser trails from its surviving squadmates, the other fighter tore over the nose of the Marauder, triggering a long burst from the autocannon mounted on its chin. The first burst struck the number three engine, which blasted out a cascade of flame and broken turbine blades before choking into silence.

Vought saw nothing but a grey shadow as the heretic pilot passed by his cockpit with only a few metres to spare. Autocannon rounds crashed through the bomber's hull at point blank range, silencing Weslund's songs for the Emperor forever as they ripped him apart. Part of the captain's canopy shredded as shots grazed the air near where he sat, but left him unharmed.

Nilner fired blindly at the oncoming Lightning and tore off one of its wing-mounted engines for good measure; but in return, a hot shell from the autocannon, big enough to punch through a ceramite plate, took all of his left leg below the knee. The big gunner screamed and spat blood.

Vought swore a blistering curse that would have earned him a dozen lashes if it had been spoken in earshot of a commissar, hands rigid around the yoke as cold air howled through holes in his cockpit. He shouted into

the communicator, not knowing if his voice would be carried back to the airfield.

'Point November, this is Griffon. Mission failed. Returning to base.'

AVES WAS WAITING by the runway when the first of the Marauders emerged from the clouds. Sentinel powerlifters and Trojan crawlers fitted for firefighting details were clustered by the ramp, ready to move at a moment's notice if a bomber made a crash landing. The crewman squinted into the murky sky and his breath caught as he counted the steel grey shapes as they closed in, many of them trailing smoke in black streams. By his count, only a quarter of the squadron had returned.

Aves saw Griffon then, the watery sunlight glinting off the shattered nose turret. One of the lascannons had been completely sheared away, and the broken spars of the turret sphere looked like ragged teeth in a howling, angry mouth. As he watched, the landing skids emerged from their hatches and locked into place. With the number three engine a shredded wreck, it seemed that Captain Vought was preparing to forego the more difficult vertical touchdown and attempt a runway landing. The fire crews saw this as well, and the Trojans started up their motors, rotating in place to tear after the bomber if the need arose.

Griffon turned into the wind at the end of the runway and trembled slightly. Aves found he could not take his eyes off the wounded flyer as it descended towards the ferrocrete airstrip. At the last second, Vought chopped the Marauder's throttles and the heavy bomber touched down with an echoing scrape. The landing skids spat sparks and wisps of vaporised paint where they kissed the runway. The aircraft flashed past Aves, choking him with a lungful of smoke from the damaged engine. Two Trojans roared into life and made off after the Marauder; Aves leapt and grabbed a handhold on the second, clinging on as it rumbled toward the slowing bomber.

At the end of the runway, Griffon skidded to the right and almost left the paved airstrip, finally shuddering to a halt on the grassy abutment nearby. Guardsmen scrambled over to the flyer, wrenching open the hatchway, and Aves followed. Up close, he could see the myriad holes and scars from bolter impacts and laser burns that dotted the underside of the fuselage.

The Marauder stank of spilled fuel, and dark puddles of lubricant were already beginning to pool beneath it where conduits had been severed by shrapnel. Griffon seemed to sag beneath her own weight, bleeding fluid into the mud.

Aves heard a strangled scream and turned to see Kheed and one of the Guardsmen moving Nilner out of the hatch. The gunnery officer's uniform was slick with blood, the stark white of bone dangling from where his leg used to be; the leg he'd used to kick Aves savagely, gone now, torn to fleshy tatters. Kheed caught his eye and shouted.

'Aves, get over here! He's bleeding out and I can't stop it.' He nodded toward a small three-wheeled rover parked at the end of the runway. 'Get him to the infirmary, fast!'

The Guardsman laid Nilner down on the flatbed and strapped him in. Kheed waved a blood smeared hand at Aves. 'He's lost a lot of blood. If you don't hurry, he'll be dead, understand? So get going!'

'Yessir!' Aves replied nervously, but Kheed was already gone, rushing back to the bomber. The Trojan crews were squirting fire retardants over the wing, leaving him alone with his charge. Aves climbed into the saddle and gunned the engine, yanking the handlebars around in a tight turn. He heard Nilner wail as the rover bounced over a bump in the road.

Aves pushed down the accelerator and cut across the tracks between the runways. The direct route to the infirmary would take a few minutes, following the service road around the barracks and hangars. It would be quicker to thread through the alleys formed by the maintenance sheds. Aves made a tight turn and drove out of sight, into the shadows by the base wall.

Nilner was babbling something incoherent from the litter behind him, alternatively weeping and coughing as the trike skipped over the ferrocrete paving. Aves brought the rover skidding to a halt at a junction and hesitated.

'Aves!' the delirious gunner shouted. 'You took my leg, you little bastard!' The crewman watched Nilner thrash against the restraints. His eyes were unfocused as he raved. Aves realised that Nilner was completely unaware of his surroundings, maddened with shock and pain. 'Worthless piece of excrement! You're pathetic!'

He took his foot off the accelerator and watched Nilner silently. There was nobody around this part of the base, nobody to hear the gunner's shouts. Aves watched the crimson patch of blood soaked cloth on Nilner's litter as it grew and grew, fed by the big man's vital fluid. A cold, callous thought began to form in his mind.

'If you don't hurry, he'll be dead.' Aves spoke Kheed's words out loud. It would be so simple to just wait, he mused. So easy to stay here and watch Nilner bleed out his last in agonised delirium. He studied the gunner's tunic, the bloodstained wings on his uniform breast.

'I hate you,' Aves told him in a quiet voice. 'You make my life a misery for your own sport and now I have yours in my hands.' He leaned closer to Nilner's sweaty face and recognition glimmered in the gunner's eyes.

'Aves,' he rasped. 'Help me!'

The crewman's face twisted in anger; suddenly he wanted to make Nilner beg for his life, he wanted him to suffer. 'It's my choice now!' Aves growled. 'My choice if you live and die!'

Nilner seemed very small then, a wretched and feeble shadow of the thug that had tormented Aves for months. 'Please...' he whispered.

SORDA TAPPED AVES on the shoulder and the crewman gave a start. 'Sir! Forgive me, I was just loading parts for the repairs on Griffon-'

'I know. The captain tells me that we have a replacement engine and spares for the lascannon.' He paused. 'This is not about Griffon.'

'Sir?'

'This is about Nilner.'

Aves looked away. 'I followed my orders, bombardier.'

'Yes. Yes, you did.' Sorda gestured towards the infirmary. 'He'll live. The tech-priests will be able to give him a mechanical leg, just like Dolenz. The apothecaries told me you got him there just in time. A few minutes more, and they would not have been able to save him.'

'I followed my orders,' Aves repeated.

'And I can't imagine why you did.' Sorda stepped closer, lowering his voice. 'Do you think that he will thank you for it or be grateful? That's not his way, Aves. Nilner has no compassion in him, not a spark of it. If your places had been reversed, he would not have hesitated to let you perish.'

Aves spoke after a long pause. 'I know, sir. But I'm not him. As much as I wish I could be sometimes, I'm not like Nilner.'

The officer gave him a measuring gaze and then nodded toward the load of equipment the crewman had been assembling. 'Captain Vought has been summoned to the command post for new orders. Griffon will be airworthy before nightfall, yes?' 'With the Emperor's blessing, yes.' 'Get to it then, and we'll fly against these heretics again.'

AVES CLIMBED OUT of the bomb bay, rubbing a cloth over his hands to wipe off the grease and muck. The fuel feeds for the replacement engine were now secured, and his job was done. Griffon would fly, if the Imperium so commanded it. The crewman noticed a train of ordnance carriers snaking across the service road. Dragged by a Trojan crawler were a dozen flatbeds, each dominated by the bulk of an Atlas bomb. Aves had never seen an Atlas up close before. They were like long, distended teardrops ending in a splay of winglets, heavy and threatening. Unlike the standard bombs the Marauders usually carried, Atlas warheads were so huge that only one could be taken aboard each aircraft. Aves knew little about ordnance but everyone in the Navy knew what an Atlas looked like. Concealed inside that oblate black cowling was an atomic charge big enough to crack a mountain.

Nearby, Sorda was speaking with the remainder of the bomber's crew. 'With Weslund dead, we'll need someone to man the lascannon. Kheed, you can take that post. We won't need a navigator to find that cursed leviathan again.'

Kheed's face soured. 'A gunnery post? I don't think the captain would agree-'

'Captain Vought authorised me to issue whatever orders I saw fit,' Sorda interrupted. 'You may feel that cannon duty is beneath you, Mister Kheed, but necessity overrides your personal feelings. Man the weapon, that's an order.'

'You won't get your hands too dirty,' said Stoi sarcastically. It was possibly the longest sentence that Sorda had ever heard the tailgunner speak.

'What about you, then?' Kheed sneered. 'You'll be leaving your precious bombs to stand at Nilner's turret?'

Sorda shook his head, watching the Trojan approach. 'We'll only be carrying a single munition. I have to be the one to get it on target.' But the Trojan rolled right past Griffon without stopping, taking the bombs to the other flyers on the ready line.

Aves's face creased in confusion. Was the Marauder to be given a conventional load while all the others in the squadron would carry an Atlas? His answer came as Captain Vought strode out of the lengthening shadows of evening toward the assembled crew.

'Captain,' Sorda began, 'those Atlas-'

'We are to stand down,' Vought said bluntly. A ripple of disbelief passed through Griffon's crew. 'Because of the shortage of personnel, we're to remain on base and assist with the evacuation.'

'Transport duty?' Kheed said, his voice rising. 'We're fit to be nothing more than a common shuttle now?'

Vought ignored the interruption. 'Command has ordered that Point November be abandoned and all Imperial Guard forces are to fall back. A full company of the Doom Eagles are on their way from Merron, and the remaining combat capable aircraft in the 404th will launch a final bombardment prior to their arrival.'

'Griffon is ready!' Aves blurted out. Normally, he wouldn't have dreamed of speaking out of turn, but his heart was racing and his better judgement was forgotten.

'The grease monkey's right,' snapped Kheed. 'We can fly right now, captain. Command can't brush us aside like this!'

Vought's voice was icy. 'Command can do whatever they wish, navigator. We go where the Emperor wills, and you would do well not to let your desire for glory tell you otherwise.'

'But why, captain?' Sorda pressed. 'Did we work around the clock to reach flight status just so we could ferry boxes of paperwork up to orbit?'

'I was informed by the wing commander that Griffon will not be granted battle ready status without a replacement for Nilner.' Vought was tense. He shared his crewmen's anger at being denied a chance to avenge themselves on the heretics. 'No one can be spared to take his place. The commander

felt that in such an undermanned state, Griffon would be wasted on the sortie.'

'I can take Nilner's turret, sir,' said Aves. 'I can stand his post.'

Kheed made a face as if he had smelt something bad. 'You can't be serious. You're a washout, a grounded weakling!'

Vought gave the crewman a hard stare. 'Look me in the eyes, Aves. Convince me.'

Aves did as he was ordered, a powerful wellspring of surety surging up inside him. 'It will be my honour to serve the Emperor.'

The captain felt a flicker of surprise as he saw something in Aves that he'd never seen before - a steely, unbending resolve. He gave him a brusque nod and turned to Sorda. 'Get him outfitted and have the ordnance crew load an Atlas aboard. We'll lift in fifteen.'

Aves never saw the looks of incredulity on the faces of the other men. He was elated, and it was all he could do not to whoop for joy and cry out thanks to the heavens; but then Vought was at his side and the captain was speaking in low, grave tones.

'Mark me well, lad. If you blunder up there, you'll be the death of us all, and by the Golden Throne I swear you'll die screaming before I do!'

The crewman gave a shaky nod.

'You should have been careful about what you wished for. Now you're going to learn the truth about your dreams - those fantasies you have about wearing the wings, that's all they were. The reality is enough to ruin some men for life.' He paused, turning to study the darkening sky. 'You're in it now, lad. No turning back.'

'I... I'll do my best, captain.'

'Yes. Or we'll all die.'

GRIFFON DOVE INTO the battle on spears of orange flame, knifing through the sky amid the ragged remains of the 404th. Aves felt his gut knotting in fear. The sky, the perfect night sky of Rocene that he'd admired so many times from the safety of the ground was gone now, replaced by an ominous void choked with explosions and spitting streaks of inferno. He gripped the dorsal bolter cannons tightly as the Marauder sank into a voyage through the footless hall of an airborne hell.

Off to port, he saw the eye-searing flash of a laser as it connected the ground briefly with another flyer that seemed to vanish in a cloud of ashes, disappearing like some twisted conjuring trick. Aves blinked furiously, his eyes watering as the bright beam remained imprinted as a purple stripe on his retinas. The thick air was a mix of turbulence and random thermals, hot gas and smoke rising upward from the ground where great swathes of city lay burning or Imperial forces died by the thousands in heretic fuelled death pyres.

The crewman twitched as he glanced around inside the enclosed steel turret, frantically trying to scan every inch of the horizon at once, terrified that some enemy would approach from just the direction he hadn't been looking. The triggers of the bolters were wet with sweat from his palms, and he found himself remembering the uncountable times he had wiped them down after a mission. Aves imagined Nilner, sitting where he was now, feeling the same fears, courting the same terrors.

The screeching chatter of Stoi's tail guns brought him crashing out of his reverie and Aves spun the dorsal turret around to sight down the fuselage. The albino gunner was pouring rounds into the sky behind Griffon, but Aves could not see a target; then they appeared, bursting out of the funeral black mist like two angels of death, twin Thunderbolt fighters each smeared with foul graffiti and Chaotic symbols. Stoi caught the leader with a well aimed salvo that shattered the heretic flyer. The wingman reacted quicker and executed a sharp wingover, dancing close to Aves's sights. The crewman shouted out a wordless cry and slammed the triggers home.

Bolt shells tore the flyer into ribbons and it collapsed in on itself, folding up into a burning knot of metal. Aves found himself grinning and panting as he realised he had just made his second kill.

White light flared out in the distance, casting stark, sharp edged shadows in the turret. The crackle of static over his headset confirmed that one of the bombers had dropped its Atlas, immolating untold numbers of heretic troops in an instant atomic holocaust.

Something glittered in the clouds to starboard and he turned the guns to train on it. Through his auspex, Aves saw another of Griffon's sister bombers, a Marauder Destroyer variant, spitting orange fire from ducts along the fuselage, and without warning one of the vessel's wings broke

away. Fragments of metal sliced through the air around the bomber and peppered Griffon's wings, slicing through fuel lines and fluid channels. Aves's heart leapt into his mouth as jets of combustion streamed from the engine cowlings. A large spear of broken metal clattered over his head and ricocheted off the tailplane, spiking through Stoi's turret as it passed. The tailgunner's bolters drooped and fell silent.

Griffon flew on, cutting through the sky, seemingly unaware that her lifeblood fuel was bleeding out behind her, that one of her crewmen had likely just been killed. All around him, Aves saw an inverted rain of bright fireflies lancing up into the darkness, streaking past in thin glowing trails. The bomber jinked wildly to port, slamming his head against the console, knocking sense into him.

'Tracers!' Aves trembled as cannon rounds from a massed battery of Hydras converged on the bomber. In places where the hull had been patched with thin, substandard plating, the flak cut through Griffon's fuselage and ate into her vital systems.

'Griffon, inbound to target. Terra, protect us.' Vought's voice, tight and forced, spoke from Aves's comm-set, and he heard the grinding metallic noise of the bomb bay doors opening.

Still the tracers chewed and nipped at the Marauder as she turned into the wind. Aves glanced over his shoulder toward the nose and saw smoke streaming from the lascannon turret, the cupola ravaged by a direct hit from below. First Weslund, now Kheed; the devotional icons and prayer pamphlets Weslund had decorated the inside of the turret with had not stopped the cramped metal sphere from becoming the coffin for two men.

The clouds were thinning even as the raging storm of gunfire increased. The bomber dropped into the attack slope toward the heretic's mobile base, and Aves could see where a near miss from an Atlas had run it aground. A second hit would kill the big machine once and for all, cutting out the heart of the apostate forces. Aves felt his fear wane as a cold, clinical calm came over him. The certainty, the Tightness of purpose he had felt on the runway was in him once again, and he heard Captain Vought's words echo in his mind: 'He must understand that the Emperor places his servants where they are needed.'

Aves nodded to himself. This was where he had been destined to be. Griffon was shuddering all around him, electrical arcs jumping from

component to component, the burnt tang of sizzling plastics mingling with the stink of hot metal; and then he heard the voice. A single word.

'Aves...!' The captain poured a lifetime of agony into his name.

In an instant, the crewman had vaulted out of his seat and dropped into the fuselage; he dashed past the hatch to the bomb bay, barely registering Sorda's body sprawled across the floor there, blackened shreds where his chest had been. Aves pulled himself up the ladder rungs and into the cramped cockpit. The handholds were slippery with liquid, and the crewman felt his gorge rise as he realised it was Vought's blood.

'Captain...!'

Vought held one hand pressed to his throat, fingers wet around a knife of glass embedded in his larynx. His face was bathed in red light cast from a dozen warning glyphs on the console before him. 'Boy. Listen.' He spoke in ragged gasps. 'Can't launch... Atlas... Too much damage.' Griffon bucked as a shell chewed a lump out of her wing. Vought nodded at him. 'Take over.'

Aves did not question the order, quickly unstrapping the pilot from his couch. Released, Vought slipped to the floor of the cockpit, barely breathing. Aves took the captain's place, feeling pools of vital fluid soaking into his flightsuit.

Beyond the cockpit window, the land leviathan was growing to fill the horizon, the plume of smoke emerging from its cracked hull like an arrow in its side.

Aves reached forward and flipped the arming switch for the Atlas from safe to active setting. 'Ready, sir.'

'Good lad.' With painful effort, Vought forced himself up and held out his hands. 'Take this. Quickly, now.'

The captain placed a blood-stained emblem in Aves's trembling hand, an age-yellowed skull framed with skeletal wings. The crewman ran his finger over them, caressing the careworn bone carving.

'Earn them, lad. You know what must be done,' Vought coughed. 'Wear them with honour.'

The crewman turned Griffon into the face of the gunfire, pinning the bone wings to his chest; then he reached for the throttle and pushed the Marauder's engines to the redline.

Griffon fell into the leviathan like a spear thrown by the Machine God himself, and in the glorious firestorm of her sacrifice, the heretics knew the wrath of the Imperium's most steadfast souls.



PLAGUE SHIP

Jim Alexander

BROTHER CAPTAIN TORRUS awoke as if from a shimmering dream. He crouched low, swinging his bolter around in a wide arc, watchful for danger and alert to his comrades as they materialized around him. He winced as a loud, dull boom reverberated around the tight confines of the corridor. The wall to his left seemed to quiver, as if something of tremendous power had collided with it on the other side. Torrus's heart sank. He had seen this happen once before: one of his brother Doom Eagles had teleported directly into the ship's hull.

'Abort the teleport! Confirm! Can you confirm?' Torrus had no idea if he still had vox contact with the Doom Eagles' strike cruiser, *The Mournful Passage*, from where he had teleported only seconds earlier. In his ear he could hear nothing but an insect buzz of static. Something was playing havoc with both teleporters and comms. All he could do was hope that his message got through.

He blanched at the thought of another group porting into the wrong place and being slammed out of existence. The crackle in his ear cleared slightly, he could just make out the words. 'Mess re- Messed...' Torrus filled in the blanks: Message received. No more Marines would be sent in. Torrus closed his eyes and gave silent thanks to the Emperor.

Three Marines stood around him, bolters trained down the empty, featureless corridor: Ulcaca and Vidus, and the apothecary, Makindlus. The drab interior of the Imperial Navy troop transporter, *The Deliverance*, weighed down on them.

Torrus broke the silence. 'We're on our own,' he said. 'It's not safe to send anyone else down.' He was aware that their minds would be on the fifth man in their number, whose molecules now made up part of the ship's

superstructure. It would have been a quick death, but unworthy for such a brave warrior. Torrus knew he could rely on his men not to dwell on it. They were battle seasoned, frontline troops who'd seen action at close quarters. Plenty of unmarked ork graves could testify to that.

'Sir, what about the first squad?' Ulcaca asked.

'They are on board,' Torrus replied. 'But not here. The transporter malfunctioned and vox contact is down. Our target is at least a kilometre away, possibly more. Let's get moving before every plague zombie on board realises we're here.'

DEEPER INSIDE THE ship, the second group of Doom Eagles made ready to undertake the mission. Brothers Stellus and Balbolca trained their heavy bolters down the length of a vast room and Brothers Althulca and Nibus stood to one side, the pilot lights of their heavy flamers casting a blue glow onto the grey walls. Techmarine Callinca stood behind them, taking stock of their situation. Lines of crates stretched for what seemed like forever in front of them. Their sides had been seared by las-bolts. 'Has someone been hunting for rats?' Stellus enquired dryly.

'Perhaps,' Callinca said. 'Or maybe it is evidence of the last stand of the hunted.'

It was deathly quiet and still. Stellus levered open a crate and peered inside. 'Medical supplies,' he said.

'We're in one of the holds. I'd say all of the crates in this section hold medical supplies. Another will hold provisions, and so on. All intended to follow the drop-ships down once the Imperial Guard had set up base in Cadia.' Callinca was aware of the others' restlessness. He wasn't a leader of men by choice. He preferred detail. 'We know another group of Marines ported in with us, but they aren't here, and something's blocking communications.' He paused, considering the implications of his next words. 'We're alone - for now, anyway -but we're both heading for the same location.' He looked directly upwards. 'Which is that way.'

Balbolca gripped his heavy bolter, Althulca brought his flamer to attention.

'Right,' Callinca said, checking that his bolter, knives and explosives were secure in their holsters. 'Let's find the logic array.'

TORRUS'S SQUAD HAD been slowly negotiating the cramped transporter's corridors for almost half an hour when Vidus broke formation.

'What is this?' Vidus strode over to where a black slimy substance had gathered on the ship's walls. The motors in his armour whined and clicked. They seemed very loud against the silence.

The apothecary, Makindlus, joined him and scraped some of the substance into a dish. Spindles of slime stuck to the top and bottom, lending it an unnatural elasticity. As was the case with all Doom Eagle apothecaries, Makindlus's expertise extended to disease and contaminants.

'Conjecture?' Torrus prompted.

'A taint of some kind, a dark infection,' Makindlus said, his voice betraying his distaste. At the very least it has a foothold on this ship. I would not be surprised if such forces are responsible for the disruption to our teleporter.' He dropped the dish and fired a controlled burst from his flamer at it. 'There is something on this ship that requires cleansing.' The slime bunched into a ball and began to shrivel and smoke.

'It is our appointed task to make this possible,' Torrus said. His men nodded, aware of the import of their mission. Torrus's face hardened with a grim smile. They were ready.

Vox contact had deteriorated. The crackling inside Torrus's helmet had given way to feedback, a strangulated shriek - the sound of dying. Torrus turned it off. The four of them were on their own now. He hoped the Emperor would be kind, that they would meet up with the first group and complete their mission in good time.

The Marines stalked down the corridor, leaving only silence in their wake.

CALLINCA PUT HIS finger to his lips as he halted his squad at a junction in the corridor. The other power armoured figures instantly stopped dead and, with a sixth sense earned over decades of service together, assumed a holding formation, all weapons trained to provide covering fire for their techmarine sergeant should the need arise.

The five Marines stood motionless, their enhanced senses probing for any sign of danger.

Skkkktch!

In unison the Marines' eyes all swept towards Callinca. There was an uneasy pause as the Astartes awaited further orders.

Skkkktch!

The noise was louder this time; its source was moving ominously closer to the Doom Eagles' position. With his squad's eyes still firmly transfixed on him, Callinca motioned first towards Balbolca and then towards the intersecting corridor. The heavy weapons operator gave a slight nod and, muttering a quiet prayer to the Emperor to bless his aim, sprang around the bend and trained his weapon on the target.

His brother Marines reacted and began to move into the gap vacated by Balbolca but checked themselves when the familiar report of his weapon was not forthcoming. Callinca thought for a moment that the Marine had frozen there in terror. The arch-enemy employed horrors that could strike fear into even the most faithful of the Emperor's servants.

'Rats!' Balbolca said, a grin forming on his lips as he lowered his heavy bolter. 'It was just a couple of rats.'

A palpable wave of relief washed over the squad.

'It may have just been rats this time but stay alert, brothers,' Callinca said, also bringing down his weapon.

Then the corridor roof above them gave way, spewing forth a tide of unholy abominations.

STANDING AT A doorway, Captain Torrus tried to make sense of the flickering shadows on the wall, before finally deciding that they were just that, shadows. He motioned his men forward with his plasma pistol. They followed him into a cramped cabin. Bunks were riveted onto the otherwise bare walls and blankets were strewn on the ground. A lamp lay smashed on the floor.

Makindlus noticed scratch marks on the floor. He stooped down and picked up a broken fingernail. 'Either somebody was dragged out,' he said, 'or something crawled out.'

They moved back out into the corridor. More black slime was forming on the walls and oozing down to form brackish puddles on the floor. Lamps flickered erratically. 'This is a ghost ship,' Vidus said. The remark was greeted with silence. He rounded a corner and halted. He held up his hand. 'Bodies.' He edged forward cautiously.

The nearest one was lying in a crumpled heap, arms outstretched. Vidus could not see its face. Makindlus moved forward while Vidus kept his bolter trained on the body. He dropped to one knee and examined it. 'Note the overalls. It's Imperial crew standard,' he said. The smell of decaying flesh sought to overwhelm the apothecary's senses. Years of training blocked it out. 'Subject has been dead for days, perhaps weeks.' He removed a scalpel from his armour. 'Let's see...'

He turned the corpse over. The face - what was left of it - was a silent scream of agony. He cut away the uniform and made an incision from below the chin, down to the chest. Thick, brown liquid leaked from the wound and the stench of death worsened. 'The body shows no sign of desiccation.' He held the scalpel over the pilot light on his flamer and placed it close to the black slick. It bubbled and popped. Makindlus turned to his comrades, letting the body fall back onto the floor.

'It's impossible-'

At his feet, the corpse rolled over and sat up, its eyes snapped open and with a chilling groan emanating from its slack jaw, it wrapped its arms around Makindlus's helmet, ragged fingers scrabbling to pull it off. Makindlus let out a cry of surprise and grabbed his attacker by the hair. It came away in his hand. He stood up and knocked the creature onto the floor. He backed away as the other Marines formed up around him.

'Plague zombie,' he said.

The undead thing turned to face Makindlus. The overalls had been torn away in the fight and its body was visible. It pulsated, and whole sections of skin burst like overactive pupae from their cocoons. The zombie was riddled with wounds which leaked mucus and pus; skin hung loose like ancient parchment. Its lips smacked open, exhaling whatever air remained in the lungs. The loud rasping sigh of the undead. It lurched forward, lopsidedly shambling towards the tight knot of Marines. Behind it, other bodies scraped and staggered into life.

BOLTER SHELLS PUNCTURED through the zombie's chest and mouth sending it crashing into a storage crate; diseased crooked fingers tried to protect an orifice that was no longer there. Techmarine Callinca stood over the creature that lay quivering at his feet, he snarled in distaste. A shot to the head and all movement ceased.

So far resistance had been light with only small groups of zombies that the squad despatched quickly. But all were mindful of the growing danger. The deeper they moved into the ship, the more likely it was that they would meet concentrated packs of zombies. After a tense, fifteen minute march they reached the end of the corridor. A lift, closed off with metal shutters stood before them. Callinca examined the door mechanism. 'Power is on standby,' he said, 'but it's on a relay. Calling the lift will open the shutters.'

The sound of scratching and tapping emanated from the other side of the doors.

'They're in the shaft,' Callinca said. 'If we call the lift the shutters may open and we run the risk of losing our sterilised environment.' There was a moment's contemplation. 'Of course, we're here to do a job.' He pressed the button. Far above, the lift platform began its slow descent, protesting all the way. A red light blinked on above the doors. 'They are on a timer. Be ready.'

The squad levelled their bolters at the door, expecting them to open at any second, unleashing whatever monstrosities lurked in the lift shaft.

The sound of the approaching lift grew louder. Callinca kept his eyes on the red light.

The tapping on the other side got heavier. The lift screeched on its runners.

There was a wet, cracking sound and the tapping ceased. The light turned green and the doors slid open. Althulca and Nibus swapped quizzical glances.

'It's not very big, is it?' said Althulca.

'Only room for two at a time,' Nibus added.

'Lack of time is the essence of the problem,' Callinca said. 'We must make do.' He motioned to the two heavy bolter Marines. 'Stellus and Balbolca, you first. Your orders are to secure the area, then clear a path to

the logic array.' Callinca hesitated as he gathered his thoughts. There was something else he wanted to say. 'Just watch each other's back.'

The two Marines nodded before stepping into the lift. It trundled noisily into life, but progress up was as painfully slow as it was down. Callinca, left behind with Stellus and Balbolca, glanced at the lights over the shutters. Still red.

Behind them a door began to shake on its hinges.

'They've found a way around,' Stellus said tonelessly. 'Let's hope the lift keeps working.'

'STEP BACK, MAKINDLUS.' Torrus, Ulcaca, and Vidus moved forward, a solid line of armour, filling the corridor width. They took aim and opened fire. 'Shoot them in the head,' Torrus ordered.

Sustained gunfire ripped into the zombies. The first to fall was the one examined by Makindlus. Shells ripped into its cheek and cranium, piercing its brain. Torrus's plasma pistol hissed wildly, puncturing the walking abominations and boiling their innards. A shot to the eye downed one in an explosion of brown mucus. The zombies advanced, ignoring the withering fire that was smashing them apart. The last was blasted to fleshy pieces barely a metre away from the bolter muzzles. Silence descended. Smoke drifted. First contact with the crew had been made.

Makindlus surveyed the bodies and broken limbs that carpeted the floor. 'Corrupted by the machinations of Abbadon's Black Crusade,' he said. 'Fallen to the Plague of Unbelief. These men were weak-minded and short of faith in the Emperor. This is their reward...' The apothecary aimed his flamer. 'They were waiting for any fresh flesh to come their way.'

'I'd say they found us a touch too fresh.' Torrus reached out and stayed Makindlus's hand. 'Don't waste your flamer on them; let's save what firepower we have.'

The corridor led Torrus and his men to the ship's canteen. Inside were a dozen crewmen, seated, heads slumped over, struck down by the contaminant without warning or prejudice. The uneaten remains of their last meals lay before them.

'Under the circumstances, I'll forego the customary inspection,' Makindlus said.

Torru raised his hand and they all fell silent. Above their heads a scratching sound broke the quiet. Torru followed the noise, gesturing for his men to spread out. It was coming from the ventilation shaft. The Marines aimed their weapons. The scratching got louder. The grate fell open and clattered onto the ground. Torru and his men trained their guns at the darkness of the opening, muscles coiled.

'If you can understand me,' Torru said, 'show yourself.'

Something was tossed out of the shaft. It landed at Torru's feet. 'A rosarius,' he said. 'Hold fire.' The Marines relaxed, all eyes on the ventilation hatch.

Torru's command was premature. All the crewmen in the room rose up as one; chairs tipped over. Two lurched towards Vidus, mouths braided with thick saliva yawned open. With hollow rasps both emptied their stomachs at him. Columns of grey projectile vomit splattered onto the Marine's chest plate. The hot steaming liquid ate into the armour. Vidus tried to wipe away the acid, his hands scrabbling furiously. Ulcaca stepped in with bolter blazing, blasting the zombies into oblivion.

More zombies descended on Makindlus. 'I'm standing my ground on this one,' he said, as great plumes of fire poured out of his flamer. The inferno stripped the little flesh from the zombies' decaying faces. It enveloped bone and organs that burst in hissing fountains.

A trio of zombies staggered towards Torru. Three plasma shots - three twitching zombies at his feet. There followed a reflex action as a gnarled hand grabbed his ankle. Torru stamped on the arm with his other leg, cracking bones.

It was over in seconds. Vidus stood in the corner, checking his armour. He looked up and nodded that he was fine; the vomit had stopped short of eating through to the skin, but he was more vulnerable now. The Imperial aquila had all but gone, and his chest plate steamed hot vapours.

A rough cough sounded from the ventilation shaft. The Marines snapped back into combat stances. 'Whoever you are, show yourself or we will open fire,' barked Torru.

'No! I'm not one of them!' a voice, raw and taut, said. 'Thank the Emperor you've found me!'

'We are Sixth Company of the Emperor's own Doom Eagles.' Torru said. 'I request you show yourself, or suffer the consequences.'

There first appeared a filthy hand, then an equally unwashed man's face. Humanity sparkled in the eyes. 'Emperor be praised, I am pleased to see you!' he said.

Ulcaca and Vidus helped the man down. He scurried towards the rosarius on the floor and picked it up, kissed it, and placed it inside his robes. Torrus's gaze never left him, studying him for any tell-tale signs. The Plague could strike at any moment.

'Who are you?' Torrus enquired.

'My name is Shota Klos, ship's chaplain,' he said. He patted his chest. 'This crest is my mark of faith,' he explained. 'I mean you no kind of harm.'

'Well, chaplain,' Torrus said, as he stood amongst the dead and disjointed plague zombies littering the canteen floor like so many puppeteers' cast-offs, 'it would seem you have lost your flock.'

The chaplain stared at a fallen zombie. A thick paste trickled down the hole in its forehead. Its eyes were as lifeless and its mouth as slack as they had been when it was on its feet. 'That it has come to this,' the chaplain sighed. 'It was two weeks ago - on our first day of transit. Some of the crew and Imperial Guard investigated a disturbance in one of the drop-ships. When they came out again they were not... themselves.'

'Something of an understatement,' Torrus remarked.

'A drop-ship, you say?' Makindlus assumed the role of chief negotiator.

The chaplain bowed his head. 'Yes,' he said gravely.

The Deliverance accommodated an entire regiment of Imperial Guard and their own drop-ships, kept in the hold. When the time came for battle, the Guardsmen would board the ships ready for ejection down onto the planet's surface. They would form an integral part of the war effort for the liberation of the Cadian system. That had been the plan, at least.

Makindlus grasped the implications. 'If this transporter continues on its course it is set to crash into the Cadian system. If it strikes an inhabited world, the zombie army would be free to infect the planet's population.'

It was the worst-case scenario, but entirely plausible. Torrus was listening intently. 'A ready-made invasion army of the Black Crusade,' he said.

Makindlus addressed the chaplain. 'That rosarius may mark you as one of the Emperor's representatives on board the ship, but are you a pious

man?'

'My faith in the Emperor is what has kept me safe in this terrible time,' the chaplain said. 'But that is not really what you are asking me, is it, apothecary?'

Makindlus got to the point. 'It would perhaps be of assistance if you could explain how, in these past weeks, you have avoided being ripped to pieces?'

The chaplain took a long, steady breath. His face seemed to change as he did so, ageing and becoming tired. 'I have seen so much atrocity. The ship's crew were like kindling to feed a raging fire, and the abominations were everywhere.' He swallowed. 'Such savagery, such terrible cruelty. I survived by hiding and playing dead when the zombies were near. I took whatever sustenance I could and used the ventilation system to move around.'

Torus held the chaplain by his shoulders. 'Chaplain - if that is who you truly are - look at me!' The captain's gaze burned into the chaplain's for several seconds. 'I am satisfied that you have not succumbed to plague. Not yet. But be warned, as Doom Eagles, our vigilance is unsurpassed. If you show any sign of contagion, we will not hesitate to eliminate you.'

Torus released the chaplain, who closed his eyes in silent prayer. 'My faith in the Emperor's eternal wisdom has never wavered. I knew help would arrive with a means to cleanse this ship of all dark taint. And now you have come!'

'We are the means to that end, but not the end in itself,' Torus said. 'The logic array is on this level but a kilometre away. We will have to negotiate the accommodation decks.'

The chaplain opened his eyes and smiled. 'There is a better way,' he said.

CALLINCA LISTENED AS the lift, far above, ground to a halt. They all waited. Nothing happened. He was about to speak when the angry bark of a bolter ricocheted down the lift shaft.

'Battle has been joined,' he whispered, punching the button to recall the lift. 'We must join our brothers as soon as we can.'

The storage lift began its torturous descent. The staccato report of repeated bolter fire continued to echo from the level above, and something

was interfering with the vox link. The banging on the door increased. The Marines looked up as one. Clearly discernable under the screech of the lift and the sound of gunfire were the war cries of Stellus and Balbolca.

In the momentary distraction the door burst open revealing a plague zombie mob. They hurled themselves at the Marines. Such was the weight of numbers that they threatened to overwhelm them. For a moment, Callinca stood transfixed, not able to keep his eyes off them. He could see Imperial Guard uniforms among the writhing, volatile mass. Rotting hands grabbed, pushed and clawed.

Behind them the lift doors ground open. Althulca and Nibus hesitated, unwilling to get in.

'Securing the level above is the only priority - you both go now!' Callinca shouted, part of him surprised at the conviction in his voice. He might become a leader of men yet. Callinca pushed them into the lift and hit the button. The doors closed.

Now very much alone, the Techmarine steeled himself for what was to come. The zombies were staggering forwards, intent on ripping him to pieces.

They were relentless. The Techmarine discharged one round after another, doing all he could to keep the horde at bay. When his gun emptied, he drove it with such strength as to skewer an oncoming zombie's gullet.

Above the noise he heard the lift reach the upper level, pause, then begin the slow journey down.

He had no choice but to handle them at close range. A zombie bared its broken teeth. Callinca pushed his bolt pistol into its mouth and squeezed the trigger. Another two drooling creatures lunged at him. The Techmarine plunged his long knife at such an angle as to impale both heads. Both twitched violently, the spasms jolting up Callinca's arm. He twisted, and a stream of slick splatter splashed onto his shoulder.

Time stood still. Another head shot, another felled zombie, but Callinca was down to his last pistol round. Flying vomit narrowly missed his visor. He could see another zombie mob heading his way. He was running out of time, and he knew it. He cursed under his breath. As a techmarine, he was the one holding the charges. A shower of acid vomit splattered onto his chest plate and helmet. He could feel the skin tighten around his

cheekbones - the acid had eaten through parts of his helmet. He was exposed. He rode the pain, primed the charges and lobbed them into the advancing rabble. The zombies in the blast radius pirouetted and separated into wet slabs.

Callinca was grabbed around the neck, he ploughed his knife through the top of the zombie's skull. It released its grip and collapsed, convulsing, to the ground. Still there were more. Screaming his defiance, knives in both hands, he sliced in wide frantic arcs to keep them at bay. His back was against the lift doors. He spread out his arms for leverage and kicked a zombie away. He heard a clang as the lift platform arrived. He backed into the lift, his scrambling fingers stretching to hit the button for the lift doors. They began to slide shut.

He drove both knives forward, which sank into the melee. A zombie's arm thrust through the gap, jamming the doors. Callinca grabbed it and wrenched it from the socket. The doors shut and Callinca began to ascend.

Exhausted, he slumped to the floor. Mindful of the risk of more vomit chunks eating through his helmet, he took it off. For a moment he wondered how close it had been to eating through to his brain. Pain bore through his face. The sound of bolter fire had stopped. Callinca lifted himself unsteadily to his feet. He had no weapons. His hand hovered over his servo arm and the one piece of equipment he had left. All he could do was brace himself for what lay in wait on the other side of the lift. Althulca and Nibus were either dead, or had managed to clear the area. Callinca stood with his back pressed against the far wall of the lift. The lift ground to a halt.

The doors opened.

'THIS VENTILATION SHAFT leads to the ship's logic array,' said the chaplain. The Marines followed him in. It was the first of two, which would lead them to the heart of the ship's guidance system. The surroundings were cramped but so far clear of the living dead. A grate at the other end was in sight. As they approached, they could hear the sound of loud chewing.

Reaching the end of the shaft, Vidus crouched down and peered out and saw a corridor with five zombies down on all fours. They were on top of

something, but he couldn't see what it was. Vidus thumped his bolter against the grate and sent it clattering to the floor. He followed it down, landing in a crouch with his gun ready.

Vidus had disturbed the zombies from their meal and they all looked in his direction. It was a recent kill. Both of the victim's arms had been gnawed off, but the uneven bites into his torso and chest were still fresh. A rib stuck out of a cavity. The corpse had no eyes and little in the way of a face, but Vidus could fit together the agonised expression of the victim - he surmised that the zombies had set about him while he was still alive.

The zombies advanced on him. Vidus remained crouched and carefully shot each of their kneecaps in rapid succession. As they collapsed onto the ruined cartilage of their knees, Vidus put a shell through their heads for good measure.

Captain Torrus and the others dropped down from the shaft. Torrus kicked a zombie corpse to the side. 'Good work,' he told Vidus.

They looked at the t-junction at the end of the corridor forty metres away. This was where the second ventilation shaft was. 'Let's move,' Torrus said.

'What's that?' The iciness in Makindlus's voice stopped them in their tracks. They all heard a noise which sounded like a thousand fingernails scraping down metal sheets. Shota put his hands to his ears and silently mouthed a prayer.

Looming shadows, full of movement, were cast against the walls. Lured by the sound of Vidus's gunfire, abomination after abomination appeared from around both corners. Arms stretched, crooked, grotesque faces set in blood lust, twisted feet bent at the ankles scraping across the floor. All former intelligence was burned away by the plague, leaving only a mindless destructive fury in the dark void that now inhabited them.

Torrus remained unconvinced by the chaplain. Equally, he was painfully aware of the lack of numbers on his side. And Shota Klos was a better bet than the advancing hordes. 'Can you handle a weapon?' he asked him.

'In the defence of the Emperor, I can do anything,' the chaplain replied.

Torrus turned to Ulcaca. 'Then give the man a gun,' he said. A rosarius can only take you so far.'

Grunting an affirmative, Ulcaca took a laspistol from the holding brackets on his armour, which the chaplain gratefully accepted. The four

Marines and the preacher formed a line, Ulcaca and Vidus taking the flanks. 'Let the divine light of the Emperor aid us and make our aim true,' the chaplain said.

'Our route lies ahead of us.' Torrus straightened his arm, aiming his plasma pistol at the approaching rabble. 'We will not surrender any ground,' he said.

The zombies were almost on them.

Makindlus threw a small cylinder into the mob. Gaseous tendrils spouted from it. It hardened into a layer of ice, rooting the advancing front line to the spot.

'A freezing agent I picked up from the molten planet Arethar,' Makindlus explained.

'Emperor be praised!' the chaplain said.

The zombies were square in Torrus's sights. 'Know your enemy and never underestimate what they are capable of,' he said.

A zombie, both legs stuck fast, ripped one of its knees free. It wasn't a clean break. A jagged shinbone was sticking through as hot streams of crude ichor squirted from the stump.

'Fire!'

The Marines cut a swathe into the leading zombies. Shells hit heads, throats and torsos - again and again. Vidus fired round after round into dead eyes and slack flesh. A thick spray of blood, bone and vomit was obscuring his view. He moved down to midribs barely a metre away from the gun muzzle. His shots tore through a half dozen rib cages at a time, and the carnage rippled and cascaded in front of him.

Balbolca's bolter created an orgy of destruction. Meeting him head-on was a wall of pus-ridden zombies, arms darting out. In their frenzy to get at him, the ones further back gnawed and tore at those in front. The Marines' fire sliced through the mob. Bits of abomination flew in the air like mud from a spinning tyre. Shards of bone flew off, embedding into other zombies. Yet still they came on. As they fell, twitching and writhing, more took their place.

A gap opened in front of the Marines and they stepped forward to fill it. For a few vital moments Ulcaca's progress was unimpeded, then a group of zombies swarmed around him. One was despatched without ceremony, its jaw flying off from the gunfire and smashing into the face of another. Two

zombies got in close, and spewed their last meals. Hot vomit flew at him from all sides, eating into his helmet's eye visors. Blinded, Ulcaca lashed out, spinning and firing wildly. Nearby, Torrus and Makindlus ducked as they found themselves in the crossfire.

Instinctively the zombies sensed the weakness in the Marines' ranks. They all converged on Ulcaca. They pummelled, punched, bit and puked, forcing their quarry to the ground.

'Ulcaca!' Vidus cried as he ran to the mob, trying to fight his way through, grabbing and shooting zombies in the head and throwing them to the floor. But from every direction they swarmed around Ulcaca.

Torrus put his hand on Vidus's shoulder. 'Stand back,' he shouted. 'Regroup!'

Torrus, Makindlus, Vidus, and the chaplain all took a step back. The chaplain uttered a quick prayer. 'Though I walk through the realm of contaminant and disease, the Emperor will lay down my head and wash me of my wounds when my time has come...' His words were drowned out by the incessant groans of the zombie mass.

Ulcaca was lost to them. The ventilation shaft was still some feet away. 'Know your enemy and never underestimate what they are capable of.' Torrus's words came back to him. 'For Ulcaca,' he said in a low voice as the group opened fire once more.

THE FOUR MARINES stood in a tight knot. All around lay the twisted bodies of the zombies. The bolter fire of Stellus and Balbolca combined with the purifying flamers had broken the enemy. The techmarine's men had control.

The way was clear to the logic array room. 'We must hurry!' Callinca said striding forward. As he did so he stared at the burning pyres and scorched blackened shells around him with satisfaction. Then he noticed the black slime congregating on the walls. He knew, if a reminder was needed, that it was not over yet.

Inside the control room, Callinca dropped to his knees beside the array mechanism. From his servo arm he took a screwdriver and removed the array plate. Sweat from his brow leaked into his eyes and face wounds. The pain was fierce and relentless. Examining the array's insides, he could

see the prerequisite cogs, transistors and wires that relayed instructions to the engines and propelled *The Deliverance* forward.

'I'm out of explosives. I had to use the charges,' Callinca said. Stellus aimed his gun. 'No, that won't do, either.'

Suddenly the grate from the array room ventilation shaft fell with a clatter. Flamers and bolters immediately went up, aiming at the shaft. 'Kill anything that moves,' Callinca ordered.

Rather than the expected deluge of corpulent flesh, a single, small item fell to the deck. Callinca recognised it immediately.

'It's a rosarius. Hold your fire!' Callinca said.

A voice came from the grate. 'Excuse the theatrics, but with the array so close, we had to be sure.' The head of Captain Torrus appeared. The squad dropped down into the room.

Torrus watched on as Callinca stuck his hand into the array and pulled out a handful of circuitry. The logic array shorted out.

Callinca looked up to the captain. 'Consider the array out of commission. The zombies will never be able to repair it.'

'Good work,' Torrus said.

AS MAKINDLUS TENDED to Callinca's injuries, Torrus briefed the reunited squads. 'I had *The Mournful Passage* back on line, though only fleetingly, This damned interference seems to be following us around. In the prevailing conditions we cannot teleport back to the ship. The backup plan is to reach the landing bay where a Thunderhawk will pick us up. We have to cover another kilometre.'

The Marines exchanged glances. Makindlus grunted and said, 'I like a challenge.'

The chaplain stared at the spooled wires of the array, which resembled the innards of some sacrificial animal. He placed his hand on the wall nearest to him and gathered his breath. He smiled contentedly. 'I am certain of the archenemy's displeasure,' he said before contorting into a coughing fit.

Every weapon in the room instantly drew a bead on him.

'Chaplain!' Torrus barked.

'Please. All this running and fighting. I just need a little time to catch my breath. I am not becoming one of them.'

None of the Marines as much as flinched.

'Perhaps not, but all the evidence suggests that eventually you will. Why should we take the chance that when you finally succumb you take one of us with you?' Torrus stepped towards the chaplain and placed the muzzle of his bolt pistol square against his temple. In response, Klos placed his rosarius to his lips, kissed it and began to recite a litany of faith.

There was an awkward pause filled only by the clear, high Gothic enunciations of the chaplain.

Torrus imagined pulling the trigger. He knew it was the correct thing to do. No, not the correct thing, the prudent thing. Yet this man, this faithful, pious man had given him no cause to question his actions. He holstered his pistol.

'The Emperor protects,' said Torrus.

'The Emperor protects,' the chaplain repeated.

The tension in the room dissipated.

'I can lead you to the landing bay,' the chaplain said looking up at hulking, armour-clad figure of the Doom Eagle captain.

'Please proceed.'

IT TOOK TWENTY minutes for the band to reach the vast doors that led into the landing bay. Resistance on the way had been light. The squad had split up and Callinca's group were several levels up from the docking level floor where the local generator was situated. With the logic array down, the generator had to be activated manually before the hangar doors could be opened. Callinca had his damaged helmet on. The vox link was back on-line. He contacted Torrus. 'Generator on,' he said.

Torrus was standing by the doors. They were airtight so no sound could be heard from the other side. The Marines were standing back, weapons primed, ready to deal with whatever they may find on the other side.

'Understood,' he said. 'Opening the doors now.'

Callinca took a step back as the hangar doors on his level ground slowly open in front of him.

His comms link vibrated into life once more. 'We have increased zombie activity here,' Torrus shouted above the growing interference. 'I suggest you find another way down to the landing bay.' There followed a long whine of static. Callinca turned it off.

Something dripped onto Stellus's shoulder. Instinctively, he swiped at it with his hand. He looked down and saw black slime. Callinca and the others stalked onto the gantry. Ahead were metal stairs leading down to the bay floor, far below.

On either side of the landing bay there were Imperial Guard drop-ships, stacked one upon the other like giant eggs waiting to hatch. They stretched as far as the Marines could see. Callinca spotted Torrus's group below walking down a ramp towards the landing bay.

It was then that Callinca saw them. Emerging from their drop-ship mausoleums was the Imperial Guard, now surrendered to the filth spoor contagion of Chaos. An entire regiment was advancing out to meet them.

Zombies began dropping down from above, and enough were finding a hold on the gantry. Some still carried their lasrifles and they began to smash the butts onto Callinca's armour. Callinca blocked a blow with his arm before pushing two abominations off the gantry.

'Down!' screamed Balbolca as he unloaded his bolter both to his left and right. Zombies were knocked off in a shower of burst blood vessels and exploded cartilage. But more tumbled from the higher stacked drop-ships to replace them. Abominations, hands flailing, smashed repeatedly into the Marines. Callinca was doing all he could to stay on the gantry, and Stellus lost his footing.

'No!' yelled Callinca. The ends of his fingers grazed Stellus's outstretched hand, but he was too late. Stellus fell, taking a dozen scratching zombies with him. On the ground, a hundred grasping and grabbing corpulent hands stretched out in wait.

Callinca's head was forced back, he hung over the gantry, many hands gripping his helmet; the muscles in his neck were grinding, feeling immersed in fire. There was a rushing noise in his ears.

The Thunderhawk streaked into the landing bay. It pulled up and hovered below the gantry not more than twenty metres away. Callinca knew he had one chance. A zombie scrambled on top of him, a half eaten tongue trying to force its way through the holes in his helmet. He had to

dig deep, one more momentous superhuman effort. He lifted his head and looked defiantly into the pock marked face before him. He grabbed its hair and snapped its head back with sufficient force to break the neck bone and threw its lifeless husk over his head, snagging other zombies and pulling them down with it. He jumped to his feet and shattered a zombie's arm to get to its lasrifle. Next to him was a mound of putrid squirming flesh. He fired the lasrifle into the writhing bodies until there was no power left, then put his hand into the heap, and pulled out Balbolca.

'One chance, Balbolca.' The Marines stood at the edge. Zombies swarmed around them looking to drag them back. 'We're in the hands of the Emperor, now.'

They both fell, and landed on the Thunderhawk with a thud. Zombies followed them down. Both Marines scrambled towards the hatch, kicking abominations away as they went. A fellow Doom Eagle appeared from the hatch to pull them in. Diseased hands lunged for and caught Balbolca's trailing foot; he wrenched it free.

Callinca and Balbolca were safe inside. Callinca could feel the Thunderhawk turning. He ran to the pilot. 'There are more of us down there!'

A procession of zombies dropped down from the upper hangars. The pilot was struggling to keep control of the ship and he shouted above the static, which flooded his comms link. The view from the cockpit was completely obscured by a blanket of thrashing, half-crushed diseased bodies. 'They are playing havoc with our instruments,' the pilot said. 'If we land the ship, we'll never get her back up again!'

The Thunderhawk dipped. 'We have no option but to blast free while we can!'

Callinca, accepting the inevitable, closed his eyes. 'It is the Doom Eagles' way. Dead or alive, we do not leave behind our own. Let the Emperor give witness that I will be at the front of the relief force. That I will return!'

Below, Torrus and his group had formed a tight circle. The flamers had kept the hordes at bay, but there were thousands of zombies pushing in, more than enough to snuff out even their brand of firepower. 'Arm and make ready,' Torrus told his men. 'Ammo is low, so choose your targets well. Cleanse as many of the abominations as we can.'

The chaplain mouthed a silent prayer. He'd fought alongside the Marines with great courage. He was the only one out of a hundred thousand personnel on *The Deliverance* who did not succumb to the plague.

'I should never have doubted you,' Torrus told him.

'I remember no doubt,' the chaplain said. 'Only a selfless devotion to the Emperor.'

'The Emperor have mercy on us.'

The Thunderhawk came into view. It was barely thirty metres above them. Plague zombies, caught in the engines, fell, engulfed in fire. But still the horde continued to pile on, trying to drag the flyer down. It was an awesome demonstration of strength in numbers. The Marines were being smothered on the ground and above.

Torrus willed the flyer on. It didn't matter if vox contact was down, he yelled into his comms link anyway, 'Go! For pity's sake, go!'

As if in answer, the Thunderhawk roared its thrusters, and was gone.

THE FORCE OF the blast from the Thunderhawk's thrusters swept the writhing mass of zombies from the ramp. Torrus saw the opportunity.

'Fall back! Head for the ramp!' he yelled.

With Torrus laying down a screen of covering fire, his battle-brothers and the chaplain darted across to the base of the ramp, all five figures slipping and skidding in the thick layer of gore that now coated the hangar floor. Once they had disappeared from view through the doorway at the top of the ramp, Torrus himself made his way to join them, still blasting away with his bolter as he did so. Two zombies dropped down from the gantry above, impeding his progress. The first he shot through the face, the second -realising that his bolt pistol was now out of ammo - he despatched with a swift motion of his left arm. The zombie's head rolled satisfyingly down the ramp.

'Problems?' Nibus said as his captain emerged through the doorway into a hold stacked from floor to ceiling with crates. All of them bore the mark of the Imperial eagle.

'Nothing I couldn't deal with. I am out of ammo though,' Torrus said somewhat dejectedly, wiping pieces of zombie from his armour.

'I don't think we need to worry too much about that,' said Klos. Torrus turned to face the chaplain who was now standing before him with a gleaming lasrifle in his hands. This is a holding area where the arms and munitions are stored before loading onto the drop-pods.' The chaplain thrust a power cell into the rifle and handed it to the Doom Eagle.

'The Emperor truly protects.' Torrus said, the hint of a smile appearing at the corners of his mouth. 'It will be at least a week until our comrades arrive in sufficient numbers to cleanse this transporter. There must be a thousand crates in here. A thousand last stands.'

The chaplain kissed his rosarius before placing it in his side pocket. 'Then we must give a thousand thanks to the Emperor.'

A mob of plague zombies hove into view. A thrashing mob of rifle butts, vomit, teeth and nails swayed towards them. Long days and nights lay ahead. Not all, if any, would survive the relentless onslaught. Still, they - the chaplain, Brothers Vidus, Althulca and Nibus and Makindlus - aimed and waited for the order. Captain Torrus breathed deeply.

He gave the command. 'Fire!'

Two weeks later

REINFORCEMENTS HAD ARRIVED. The cleansing and quarantine of *The Deliverance* had begun in earnest. Squads of Doom Eagles and Imperial Guardsmen moved in stages through the ship burning it clean of zombies and Chaos slime. All squads advanced on the landing bay for the final reckoning. There they would find Plague Zombies disorientated and ineffective as a fighting force. This tactic of methodically hacking away at the influence of Chaos throughout the ship was having the desired result.

True to his vow Callinca was a prominent part of operations in the storage sectors. His familiarity with the area was proving invaluable, but there was another reason he was there. He would be the first to be informed if and when the bodies of Torrus and the others were found. This was his anointed responsibility, earned through fighting with them side by side, to ensure that the correct protocols were followed to guarantee his dead comrades full heroes honours back on their home planet of Gathis II. It was the Doom Eagles way. It was Callinca's way.

All was quiet. Callinca's squad walked past the personnel lift in the medical storage area. Imagery, both vivid and dark, came flooding back to the techmarine. There was the debris caused by the charges, the scattered zombie parts, but that which remained of the zombie mob that besieged him had moved on.

Sound rang in Callinca's ears. The rattle of las-fire resonating desperation, a last stand against impossible odds. Perhaps too vivid a flashback, Callinca thought to himself. Then, the register of shock and a glimmer of hope etched on Callinca's chiselled face as he recognised the sound of battle as real and in the distance.

Callinca's squad followed him as he ran past the opened shutters into the next storage area. There were crates that had been kicked over, with munitions inside. Thoughts raced through Callinca's mind. There were no other squads down here and the zombies didn't have the nous to fire a lasrifle. Callinca followed a trail of dead zombies and open crates. Surely, it could only mean one thing...

At the far wall their backs to Callinca's squad - a mob of very much alive zombies. From the other side, there was definite gunfire.

'Take them down,' Callinca said. The squad's flamers combined to unleash a fireball that engulfed the zombie mob. Those that turned around were picked off with consummate ease. The zombies combusted and peeled away to reveal a group of crates used as cover. Behind the crates were Torrus, Makindlus and Balbolca. All of them were badly beaten, with burns and missing fingers. Makindlus had lost most of his right arm.

He fell to his knees with exhaustion. The apothecary from Callinca's squad ran to his aid. 'From one apothecary to another,' Makindlus said, 'if I prove to be a bad patient, you have my permission to shoot me.'

'I wasn't planning on asking your permission,' the apothecary said. Makindlus smiled at this, his eyes flickering, turned heavy. He allowed the notion of sleep to flood his thoughts for the first in a very long time.

'You are the only survivors?' Callinca asked Torrus as he helped the captain to his feet.

'When it left the landing bay, the blast from the Thunderhawk's thrusters cleared a lot of the zombies from around us,' Torrus told him. 'With the Thunderhawk gone, we escaped back up the ramp and set base here. Long

days and nights. We'd fight them off, change position, emptying crates of lasrifles and power packs.'

'And the chaplain...?' Callinca asked.

Torrus stared into Callinca's eyes. There was still defiance in Torrus's gaze; there was still fight. 'It was several hours ago. The zombies had outflanked us. The chaplain, lasrifle blazing, took them head on, punching a hole through enemy lines, but it left him isolated. Cut off from the rest of us.' Torrus looked away in case his eyes betrayed another emotion. 'He gave us the chance to regroup and rescue the situation. He sacrificed himself.'

'Just moments before, he passed something to me,' Torrus continued. The captain was holding tight an object in his three-fingered hand. 'He fought alongside us with the courage of a Doom Eagle. The only one out of a hundred thousand personnel on this transporter ship who did not succumb to the plague.'

Callinca saw what Torrus had in his grip and understood. They had all been party to it. It was more than a fight for survival; it was all about faith.

'We had to survive,' Torrus said. 'Our obligation, his legacy.' It was the chaplain's rosarius that Torrus held in his hand.



RELICS

James Swallow

BROTHER DORAMACA LET off another trio of bolter rounds and ducked down behind the broken stone, feeling the heavy boots of his power armour sink into the dark basalt sands. His breathing seemed impossibly loud inside the confines of his helmet, echoing with each heavy exhalation. Warning runes blinked back at him from the corners of his sight; a new salvo of incoming fire registered as bright traces on the visor display and his enhanced senses caught the dull smacks of impact noise as the enemy shots struck his cover.

He felt the sickly sensation of his skin crawling on his right arm, and glanced down at the limb. Despite the fact that his flesh ended at the stump of his elbow and his forearm was a construct of dulled steel, the Space Marine could still feel the phantom response as if the organic matter were still there. He'd lost the arm in a training accident, the bones and muscle crushed flat under the treads of a Predator, but part of his mind would not let go of it. The metallic replacement twitched around the grip of his bolter, clicking against his armour. Doramaca sucked in a breath and braced himself, bringing the gun to a ready stance. More Shots keened over his head, the sound of their passage barely audible in the thin, gauzy atmosphere. The Marine chose his moment and vaulted up and over, pacing a pair of bursts toward his attacker. The shots were too wide of the mark for anything other than a lucky hit and were intended to make the foe keep his head down. Doramaca sprinted across the black sand towards a large dune; it would be a better vantage point and less exposed than his previous position.

Bolt shells snapped at his ankles, excavating small craters in the drifts around him. Puffs of dark ejecta flew head-high in lazy, low-gravity

clumps, rattling off his wargear and dirtying the gunmetal silver of his armour. He launched himself over the edge of the dune and rolled behind it. A brief moment of elation ran through him; but then it fled just as quickly as his legs lost purchase and he tumbled head over heels, the basalt sand sucking at him, dragging him to his knees. He cursed as his bolter was knocked from his fingers, desperately trying to stagger to his feet. The planet's damnable gravity was so much lighter than that of his native Gathis and, despite all his attempts, Doramaca had still not adjusted to it. This fact cost him the engagement. Teetering, he was blindsided by a point-blank bolter shot that hit him in the back of the head, and Doramaca unceremoniously fell face first into the black grit.

His adversary approached with a casual gait that made Doramaca's headlong rush seem manic in comparison. The other figure used the barrel of his bolter to nudge the young Space Marine and turn him over. 'Poor,' said his opponent. 'Very poor.'

Concealed behind his helmet, Doramaca's face flushed hot with anger and abashment. He reached up to wipe away the sticky patina of marker fluid that coated his visor, deposited there by the harmless impact of the frangible training ammunition. 'I... lost my footing,' he offered lamely.

'I can see that, lad. But you'll lose your head if you put yourself in an enemy's sights like that.' The other man took the Marine's bionic arm and hauled him to his feet. 'You became careless. You had avoided my detection for almost nine hours, but you let your eagerness overrule your better judgement. Now, collect your weapon and stand down.'

'Sergeant, I-' Doramaca began to protest, desperate to explain his mistake.

The other Marine, his armour identical but for a set of sergeant's insignia, silenced him with a gesture. 'No recriminations. No excuses. I expect my men to fight at the highest standard, and this is why we come to Serek to train. You failed today, but you will not fail tomorrow, understand?' The elder warrior did not wait for an answer and he nodded at the desolate landscape around them. 'Here, you get a second chance, but on a real battlefield you'll have no such luxury.' He tapped the winged skull sigil engraved on his shoulder pad. 'Death comes to a Doom Eagle soon enough, lad. Don't meet him halfway.'

Doramaca gave a sullen nod. 'Yes, Sergeant Tarikus.'

Tarikus's lip curled in a slight smile and he pointed. 'Join Colius. You two can continue the patrol alone.'

The sergeant watched the youth stride away to meet the other novice. The Marine was cocksure and arrogant, even for a member of the Adeptus Astartes and, as loathe as he might be to admit it to anyone else, Doramaca reminded Tarikus of himself in his younger years, before his potential had been harnessed and tempered. It was the sergeant's duty to mould the whelp into a battle brother truly worthy of the name, along with a handful of other junior Marines recently promoted up to full Doom Eagle rank. Tarikus had never really considered himself a teacher, but as the decades had gone by, he found more and more that he had a knack for it; he had developed a mentor's eye for the men around him, an ability to pick out the nascent skills in them and direct them for the good of the Chapter. And so, that role had brought him here again, returning for another sortie to the barren plains of Serek, where nothing dwelled except sand and rock and thin, razor-edged winds.

It was a planet bled dry of colour, a monochrome wilderness in shades of grey and black that extended from dark horizon to dark horizon. A patchwork world of stony foothills and monolith mountains, ebon sandscapes and endless bleak vistas where no life claimed dominion, not the smallest of hardy plants, not even bacteria. Here, to this place that was the very definition of the word barren, the Doom Eagles sent their troops to make pilgrimage and to drill and train in the featureless wastes.

Tarikus found himself glad that his Chapter bore darts of red trim on their weapons and armour; Serek's colourless environment was so stark that it could convince a man that he had lost the ability to see anything but black and white.

The shifting sands played hoaxes on the eyes of the unwary, moving in slow ripples like a languid ocean. It was common for new arrivals to believe that unseen things lurked beneath the surface of the glassy deserts, as tricks of the light from Serek's white sun glittered off the basalt grains. Experience had taught him that Serek was as dead as the sacred relics gathered in the Doom Eagles Holy Reclusium.

Little evidence remained of the planet's previous occupants save the sad remnants of cities given up to the inexorable weight of the sands and the hard radiation of the sun. As Tarikus recalled, the Imperium's historians

recorded evidence that Serek's populace had destroyed themselves in the last centuries of the Dark Age of Technology; they had stripped away most of their atmosphere in a single act of war, a vast nuclear conflagration the cause of which was lost to antiquity. They had died in their billions, and now nothing remained of them save the endless sands and stones that stood in mute contemplation of a dead world, no more than a grave marker for a forgotten, murdered people.

The air was so thin here that an unprotected human would quickly suffocate in it, but a Space Marine could go bare-headed with some effort, if circumstances demanded. Sometimes, Tarikus would remove his helmet and listen to the mournful winds, drinking in the despair and the terrible melancholy of the place. If I possessed the eye of a psyker, the sergeant considered, what would I see here? A landscape of ghosts from hill to valley? For the Doom Eagles, Serek was a keyhole glimpse into the landscape beyond death and, for Tarikus, a sobering reminder of his mortality. Little wonder that the Chapter master had chosen this place as a training ground; if the neophytes who came here were as struck by it as Tarikus was, then Serek served its purpose well.

Presently, he crested a hill and from the mouth of a shallow cavern came the blink of light on silver as Brother Mykilus saluted. 'Ho, sergeant,' he called, 'What of our new recruit? Did he beat my score?'

Tarikus gave him a sideways look. 'Afraid he might outpace you?'

Mykilus made a gruff chug of amusement. 'Perhaps I made a wager on his performance.'

He gave Mykilus a hard look. 'You may compare your prowess when we are home on Gathis. For now, I require your most serious mind.'

The Marine replied with a terse nod, and they slipped into the cavern, pulling a camo-tarp over the entrance.

Nearby, a patch of sand shifted and sank as if pressed by an invisible footfall.

BROTHER DORAMACA GLANCED at Colius, another of the novices assigned to the sortie. Where Doramaca was whipcord-strong and broad across the chest, Colius was stocky and thick around his muscles, short for

a Space Marine but bold and fast on his feet. They moved quickly and silently, the cold starlight casting their weak shadows over the ground.

'How did you fare?' Colius asked after a while.

Doramaca spared him a look. 'We should be mindful of our patrol, brother.'

Colius frowned. 'Our instructors are not here now, Doramaca. We may speak freely for the moment.' He made a show of looking around the dark landscape. 'Besides, I'll warrant that we two are the only living things hereabouts.'

The other Marine replied with a cautious nod. Colius spoke the truth but it wasn't unknown for the veterans to place the odd target drone in the path of a trainee to see how they would deal with it. Or worse: deliberately give them a patrol pattern that strayed into a minefield.

'Well?' Colius pressed. 'Speak.'

'Tarikus located me and I was dispatched with a single shot.' The words tumbled out of Doramaca's mouth in a rush. 'I failed.'

'You're too hard on yourself, brother. I too was caught out by the caldera. Brother Korica laid a trap for me with tripwire.'

Doramaca shook his head. 'We are supposed to be the best, yet Tarikus and his men find it effortless to beat us. How can either of us hope to bring honour to the Chapter if we cannot outdo them?'

Colius smiled, 'Only the best come to train on Serek and we are meant to lose in these engagements. How else can Tarikus know the measure of our strengths and skills?' He shook his head. 'Our instruction did not end when we left the Eyrie. As the Emperor wills, we must strive to better ourselves for as long as we serve...'

When the other Marine did not answer, Colius paused in mid-stride and turned. Doramaca had halted a dozen paces behind him and was staring at the dark sands intently. 'What is it?' Colius asked.

'The sand,' Doramaca whispered.

Colius relaxed a little. 'Our passage disturbed it, nothing more.'

In reply, the youth drew out his auspex, examining the glyphs on its display. Colius saw the dim glow of the device as it blinked over Doramaca's faceplate. After a few moments, he grew impatient and beckoned his battle brother. 'Come now, Doramaca. You are allowing your ill humour to prey on your mind. We are alone out here.'

'Perhaps.' The other Marine did not sound convinced, but he put the sensor away and stepped onward.

Colius watched him approach, and he heard Doramaca's grunt of annoyance when his right boot sank to the knee, as a patch of sand slipped away underneath him. 'The Warp take this place,' the Marine snapped. 'Is there any solid ground on this Light-forsaken dustball?' Doramaca's words were cut short with a gasp of pain as he stumbled, slipping to his haunches.

Colius took a step forward, extending a hand to help his comrade. Doramaca threw back his head and bit out an animal yelp of agony. 'My leg!'

Without warning, the sands around Doramaca's feet began to writhe, moving and shifting like storm-tossed waters. For one split second, Colius thought he caught a glimpse of something mirror-bright and shiny beneath the surface of the rolling grit, then it was gone. Doramaca discarded his bolter and pulled at his greaves, tugging on his leg as if it were caught in a mantrap. There was a cracking sound, muffled by the dust; the distinctive bone-snap noise of fracturing ceramite.

Colius hesitated, his bolter in his hands. Was this some sort of test? He spun around in place, scanning the horizon, searching for the bulky shapes of other Adeptus Astartes in power armour.

'Brother!' Doramaca's voice was high with pain and effort. 'Something... I can feel it inside my boot! Spines... Needle-' The Marine's words ran into one another, turning into a thin shriek. Colius crossed the distance to him, leading with his bolter. The tips of their gauntlets touched and then, with a sudden shock of motion, Doramaca shrank into the grip of the sand. One moment he was there, the next his torso was disappearing under the shifting black matter, arms flailing like those of a drowning man.

Brother Colius almost tripped over in surprise, but then all thoughts of rescuing Doramaca fled as the rippling, hissing sands spread out around him, the shuddering dust moving to rise in a wave. Acting on instinct, he let fly with a brace of shells, watching gouts of alluvium burst upward. The bolt shells were ineffective, cutting into the grit but doing little else to slow its whispering advance. Again, he saw the brief glimmer of starlight on something polished and silvery as it rushed toward him. Unwilling to follow Doramaca to his fate, Colius leapt clear of the shifting sands and

ran for an outcropping of grey stone and, impossibly, the sinkhole came after him, licking at his heels.

With a cry of effort, Colius landed on the island of rock and threw himself flat. All around the edges of the outcrop, the black sand bubbled like boiling water.

Colius pressed his free hand to his helmet and called out, ignoring the strict protocol for radio silence that was part of the exercise. 'To arms! There's something in the sands! It took Doramaca!'

IN THE CAVERN, TARIKUS silenced the rest of the squad with a throat-cutting gesture. In other circumstances he might have doubted Colius's words, but the panicked tone of the youth's voice was unmistakable.

'What idiocy is this?' grated Korica, 'The whelp has fallen into a sinkhole?'

Tarikus ignored the comment. 'Colius, you are mistaken. This planet is devoid of life-'

'No!' The young Marine's words crackled through the ear-beads of every assembled man in the camp. 'I saw it! A living thing, silver blades, under the sand!'

'Hold your position, lad,' Tarikus replied. 'We'll come to you.' The sergeant exchanged glances with Korica. 'You remain here with the other trainees. I'll take Mykilus and Petius to investigate.'

Korica frowned. 'Lord, this is some fool's errand.'

Brother Petius paused in gathering up his apothecary gear. 'What if it is not?'

The tiny motors in Korica's bulbous bionic eyes whined as they mimicked a narrow stare. 'Serek is nought but sterile rock, brother. Those pups are overreacting.'

'Can you be sure?' Petius insisted. 'Certainly, in all the centuries that our chapter has come here, no life has been found. But what if it simply did not want to be discovered?' Petius replied.

Tarikus quickly loaded his bolter. 'Indeed. We are new to this sector of the planet, Korica. There may be dangers here we are not aware of.'

Korica accepted this with a shrug, and said no more. He was not convinced.

The sergeant pulled open the camo-cloak, pausing at the cavern's threshold. 'For now, it is my order that all training ammunition loads be replaced with warshot. If some xenos threat is out there, we must be prepared to kill it.'

Korica watched them go and, after a long moment, he reloaded his bolter.

WITH TARIKUS GONE, the Doom Eagles in the cave became muted and introspective. To keep their minds on their duties, Korica ordered the trainees to douse the bioluminescences and suit lamps and work in the near-darkness. They field-stripped their weapons in rotation to clean out the thick slurry of sand that gathered around the mechanisms of their bolters. Their implanted oculobes gave them vision far better than that of any low-light sensor, but still the cavern's thick gloom reduced the effective range of their eyesight. Korica irritably ordered one of the junior troopers to stand watch and let himself drift into a shallow trance; the Catalepsean Node in his brain took over and gently rested him, dropping his right cerebral hemisphere into a sleep while the left floated on the edge of wakefulness.

It had been so long since the Marine had slept in the manner as men understood it that the sensation was foreign to him. To utterly surrender oneself to temporary unconsciousness was unthinkable for an Astartes. Slow glaciers of thought wandered through Korica's mind as he became still; he felt a fuzzy, unfocussed disdain for Colius, a vague mental sneer at the youth's manner. Korica had considered Colius unworthy of promotion to Battle Brother status, but Captain Consultus had thought otherwise. Perhaps that might change if the boy was showing his true colours now, panicking at nothing out there on the dark desert.

The trainees seemed to flash past in blurs. In the semi-sleep state, Korica's time sense was distorted as hours moved by him in what seemed like minutes. Dimly, he was aware of a faint haze of white light peeking through the camo-cloak. Serek's harsh sun was on the rise and with it came the curtain of radiation that would render all but short-range communications useless. Had Colius sent his call for help now, Korica mused, it would have been drowned in a sea of interference.

He heard the voices of the trainees then high-pitched yelps followed by quick, flat chugs of noise that could only be bolter fire. Suddenly, he was coming up from the depths of the Node's embrace, the silver blurs and flicks of firelight around him slowing and slowing until they resolved into Doom Eagles back-lit by the discharges from their weapons.

'Report.' The word stretched like tallow.

'In the walls!' One of the trainees shot back at him, as Korica bounced to his feet. 'Can't count them all-'

He dismissed the novice with gesture and jogged deeper into the cave, down toward the noise of the fighting. Along the way, his boot crunched over something metallic, but he did not pause to study it. Korica halted, fingering a shattered biolumine hanging from the wall. He narrowed his eyes, straining to see, as more gun-flashes lit the dark.

The images came like static pict-prints on a slate, strobing off silver and black armour. Korica saw one young disciple clawing at his face as something like a dismembered steel hand clung to his throat, a single green eye hissing hot against his flesh. Another novice seemed to be missing an arm and more of the metal things were biting into his leg with bright sparks where razor mandibles chopped through ceramite. In the dimness, the cavern floor was writhing, a mass of cyclopean emerald glitters moving and crawling over one another. Korica found himself revising his opinion of Colius's call for help as he unleashed the fury of his bolter rifle into the shifting flood of arthropod forms. Some of them clattered and broke where his rounds hit, but most of them just slid away from the blasts, turning and racing toward him in a tide. The armless novice collapsed and died against the cavern wall, and as Korica backed away he saw the beetle-things snatching at the fallen youth's armour, ripping components out of it and racing away with them clasped in their forelegs.

'Fall back!' he shouted over the general com channel. 'To the cave mouth!'

Then the walls popped like boils and hundreds more of the machines came at Korica from every side, emerging from cracks in the black sandstone in seething profusion. Bladed teeth with edges made of fractals sank into the Doom Eagle's shoulder and suddenly his gun arm, bolter and all, was lying on the floor, trailing streams of pink fluid. Korica did not

even register the event until his nerves misfired and he roared with animal agony. The engineered Larraman cells in his blood went into overdrive, clogging the severed arteries and triggering endorphins to smother the incredible pain. Korica drove his fist into a beetle-thing that leapt across his chest and then ran heedlessly toward the cavern mouth. Behind him, he did not see the machines carefully remove the power armour from his severed limb, then discard the useless flesh.

Korica burst through the ragged, flapping orifice of the camo-cloak and stumbled to his knees. He caught sight of three more novices standing around him. Three, out of nine men.

The things would be only seconds behind him; they had come out of the walls, out of the sands and if Korica did not kill them now, then the four of them would die as well. 'Grenades!' he bellowed, tugging a quartet of krak munitions from his belt. Ignoring his pain, he chain-linked the detonators and then threw them with his remaining hand. The trainees followed suit and sent a dozen more gunmetal spheres looping into the maw of the cave. Korica saw the glint of hundreds of green eyes in there, but then the grenades blew all at once and the cavern entrance turned into a heap of broken, jagged rocks.

THEY FOUND COLIUS perched like a raptor on the prow of his stone island at sunrise, and he made no move to approach them as they came across the black sand, unaware that they were walking over the spot where Doramaca had been dragged away.

'Ho, brother.' Sergeant Tarikus waved at him. 'Report.'

The novice took a long time to answer. He pointed at the ground under Tarikus's feet. 'They took him. Gone in seconds. Like a sinkhole.'

Petius studied the youth. 'There are many points of subsidence on Serek-

'A sinkhole with teeth,' Colius continued as if Petius had not spoken. 'Sinkholes don't have teeth.'

Tarikus drew himself up on to the stony outcropping. 'You found yourself some cover, then?' His voice was neutral. 'The... It couldn't get you up here, eh?'

Colius shook his head. 'They'll be back. They got what they wanted for now. They've already looted this place.'

Mykilus made a face. 'You're talking in riddles, boy. Explain yourself.' 'Already looted.' Colius repeated, and he knelt on the stone. 'See?'

Tarikus studied the patch of granite where the novice was pointing and his eyes narrowed. Cut into the stone were crude glyphs of grinning faces and toothed mouths. 'Ork runes,' he said quietly. 'But how can that be?'

'Saints of Terra,' Mykilus breathed. 'My lord, do you know what this is?' He pointed at the outcropping. 'This stone isn't native to Serek. It's heat-smoothed by orbital passage.'

A meteorite?' said Petius.

'No,' Colius replied, and with a flourish he pressed his fingers into a narrow crack. Black sand puffed into the air and the stone outcrop grew a hatch that opened into a hollow interior. 'It's an ork rok. A greenskin ship, hidden here in the desert like an iceberg under the ocean.'

Tarikus peered into the dark below. 'What did you mean when you said "looted", lad?'

Colius's face was grim. 'Come see, sergeant.'

TARIKUS LEFT MYKILUS and Petius on the tip of the rok and followed Colius into the void within. The trainee explained as they descended through ragged tubular corridors and jerry-built spaces daubed with aged orkish graffiti that in his alarm after Doramaca's abduction, he had scrambled on to the stone, thinking it a safe location, but all too quickly he had triggered the hatch and discovered that what he thought was solid ground was nothing more than an eggshell between him and the writhing things in the sands. Colius had not dared to venture in too far, lest the hidden predators swarm in through the numerous rents and gaps in the rok's patchwork hull. As he told his story, Tarikus stepped cautiously over the places where black sand pooled in the ork ship's interior.

It was impossible to tell how long the xenos vessel had been on Serek, certainly something in the order of hundreds of years, Tarikus guessed, no doubt long before the Doom Eagles had come to use the world for their purposes and long enough ago for the craft to have become buried in the sand. The impact crater it left had filled in and smoothed away. The

manner of the rok's arrival was of no importance, however - the orks aboard it were clearly all dead and so the question of any possible greenskin presence was moot. The vile creatures were ill-suited for an environment such as Serek's poisoned landscape, and if some had survived, the sunlight would have riddled them with cancers within months if they hadn't starved first. But it was not the manner of the rok crew's death that tugged at Tarikus but rather it was the state of their remains. Ork klans were notorious for self-mutilation and the commonplace use of clumsy bionics, even steel peg-legs and hooks for hands, but these ork bones, bleached white and crumbling to powder, had no metal attachments upon them. The Sergeant noted several skeletons with clear screw holes where iron teeth or metal limbs had once been attached, now vacant. Similarly, there were many spots inside the ship where the vessel's vital components had been torn out, gouged from the rock by the action of tiny claws.

'Scavengers,' said Tarikus quietly 'All the dense and refined metals have been taken away.'

'Pillaged,' Colius nodded. 'Like a battlefield looter pulling gold teeth from men's skulls. It's why they took Doramaca. It's why they'll want to take us all.'

Tarikus let the youth's dispirited words pass without comment, concentrating instead on a huge rent in the side of the rok's ragged fuselage. 'Did you venture down this far before we arrived?'

'No, sergeant.'

The sergeant stepped up to the gaping hole, a space large enough to drive a Rhino through, and peered out. 'Do you see this? Perhaps these greenskin fools were the first to fall victim to whatever took our brother.' He gestured into the dark. 'Look here.'

Colius did as he was ordered and gingerly stepped up to Tarikus's shoulder. Beyond the exterior of the ork rok was an open cavern with walls lost in the darkness. It was ancient, a vast basalt-walled sphere formed millions of years earlier by expanding bubbles of molten magma. When it had crash-landed, the rok had penetrated the surface of the void and lodged there like a dart piercing an apple.

'There is a structure there,' the young Marine pointed at a shape in the far wall. 'Not orkish design.'

'No.' Tarikus studied the smooth archway through his helmet's optics. 'Human, perhaps, but I'll warrant it is nothing from the Imperial era.'

Colius fought to keep a tremor from his voice. 'What should we do, sergeant?'

Tarikus studied the arch. 'Investigate.'

THERE WERE ANGRY voices out on the sands and Tarikus emerged from inside the rok to find four more Doom Eagles clustered around the stone outcropping, one of them engaged in a spitting curse-fight with Petius. The sergeant recognised the configuration of Brother Korica's armour, but with a start he registered that the Marine was missing an arm. The three novices with him shifted uneasily, their hands never leaving the triggers of their bolters.

Petius removed an injector from Korica's stump and the Doom Eagle shook his head, as if that would banish the pain from him. He caught sight of Tarikus and made eye contact with him. 'Sergeant, I bring grave news.'

The tone of his voice told the tale. 'How many dead, Korica?'

Korica spread his good hand and his stump twitched; the medicine Petius had dosed him with made him slur a little. 'Only we remain.'

'He talked about steel beetles, sir,' Mykilus broke in, making a shape in the air with his fingers. 'Six-legged things with green eyes.'

Tarikus studied the horizon. 'It is well you located us, Korica. By night, you may not have found us out here.'

The other Marine jutted his chin at a rod-shaped device on Tarikus's belt. 'The teleport beacon, brother-sergeant. I had the trainees scan for its signals with their auspexes. Even Serek's star cannot mask those transmissions.'

'Indeed.' Tarikus took the device in his hand and considered it for a moment.

'We should leave this place,' Colius said in a low voice. 'Can you not activate the beacon and have us returned to our ship?'

The sergeant eyed the young Marine. 'Curb your fears, lad. We are the Adeptus Astartes and we do not flee from a bleeding.'

Mykilus made an off-hand gesture at the sky. 'It would not matter even if we did send the signal. Our ship is out of range... If we began the

teleport recovery incantations now, our bodies would never reach the vessel. We would be scattered and lost, the very matter of us never to be reconstituted.'

'How long until the ship is close?' said one of the other novices.

'Not soon enough,' retorted Korica.

Tarikus returned the beacon homer to his belt and gave his assembled men a hard stare. 'Something inhuman lives on this world and by the Emperor, for every moment it draws breath it is an affront to the his divine will. These... machines crave iron and steel like a man does food and they will surely come for us if we do not search for them.' He tapped the breastplate of his armour for emphasis.

Korica was nodding his agreement. 'I saw them stripping a novice of every piece of wargear he wore. Filthy little despoilers, they took my arm just for the ceramite that cocooned it.'

'For what purpose?' Petius asked. 'What reasoning could there be to gather these scraps, like the pieces of some grotesque puzzle?'

'We shall endeavour to find out,' Tarikus grated. 'Pool your weapons and ensure that every man has equal ammunition and stores.'

Colius knew the answer to his question before he even asked it. 'What do you intend, Sergeant?'

'We'll take the Emperor's Light to these mech-beasts and burn them from their lair.'

THE SERGEANT LED the survivors down through the canted decks of the broken rok until they reached the magma chamber. Tarikus did not pause or tarry to see if the novices were at his heels, he simply pressed onward, with Korica to his right and Brother Mykilus to the rear of the column. To his credit, Colius kept his own counsel as they descended, although it was clear to all of them that the young Marine's nerves were worn through. Glancing at him through the slit visor of his helmet, the apothecary, Petius, wondered what fate might befall Colius when they returned to Gathis. Tarikus was a fair commander, but he was an unforgiving taskmaster and the novice's behaviour would likely warrant some sort of negative citation at best. At worst, Colius might find himself reduced in rank or dismissed from line service.

The Doom Eagle's thoughts were interrupted as they reached the huge archway in the magma cavern's wall. Mykilus examined the stone, fingering the shallow cuts of runes in its surface. 'Some form of Low Gothic?' he said aloud.

Korica knelt, still a little unsteady from the cocktail of anti-shock potions coursing through his bloodstream, and picked at the rocky floor. 'There are tracks in the stone here, a finger deep. Lines of them, following the tunnels beyond the arch.'

'I've seen similar,' said one of the trainees. 'On Phaedra, in the outzones. They serve as guides for ore trucks between the mines and the smelter-cities.'

'Like a hive-world's pneu-trains,' Tarikus nodded. 'Yes, the lad has something there. This arch leads into transport arteries, the remains of some rail system created before the holocaust.'

'We go on, then?' said Petius.

'Need you ask?' Tarikus called over his shoulder, leading the way.

The tunnels spread out like the roots of a tree, a thick main line of six tracks that snaked down at a shallow angle, branching at intervals into tributaries that looped away toward unknown destinations. They passed the remains of massive stone surge doors that had been dropped to block the passage from the outside world, but the thick granite slabs were broken jagged teeth now, rent by a force so strong, so elemental in its fierceness that even stone had been burnt by it. Tarikus examined the walls - there were more runes and the construction style had altered slightly. This part of the caverns had been built with defence in mind, with an eye towards military strength.

'Tunnels again,' Korica murmured, his surviving hand wandering to his bionic eyes. 'Always tunnels.'

'Look sharp,' snapped Tarikus, drawing him back to the moment at hand. Soon the pain from his wounds would return to the Marine, and the sergeant wanted to keep him focussed, not nursing the memories of old hurts inflicted in similar places.

It was Mykilus who found the body. He almost walked right past it and it was only the subtle shift of his bioluminescence's light that alerted him. The dull glow from the lamp reflected off a flat, fish-belly white hummock of meat cast aside at the mouth of a drain trough. The Doom Eagle held up a hand

to halt the rest of the unit and approached the thing. His voice cut through the still, blood-warm air. 'It's Brother Doramaca. What's left of him.'

Tarikus approached. 'His skin has been ruptured...'

Mykilus nodded. 'The scavengers stripped him naked and stole everything he carried.'

And not just that,' Tarikus pointed to the corpse. 'Look there: his bionics have been torn out, and the sub-dermal armour carapace removed from beneath his flesh.'

The Marine knelt by the body, studying the precise razor-cut slashes in the dead soldier's integument. 'Whatever killed him did it without passion. This is the work of a cold and calculating mind.'

AND WHEN IT was sure that the eight abhumans were fully occupied with the matter of their dead comrade, the calculating mind that had directed the death of Doramaca bid the larger of its servants to return to wakefulness and harvest the men. Colius heard a skittering noise from overhead as hinged leg-flaps moved against the black stone roof. He looked up to see a faceless block of machined metal staring back at him, lit by a clump of luminous emerald optical sensors.

THE STEEL THING released its grip from the ancient bricks and dropped on him, cutting in a gravitic pulse just feet from the ground to soft-land. The throb of the null-field knocked Colius on to his rear. He saw two more of the shield-shaped insect forms dropping into the midst of the other Doom Eagles just seconds before the roar of bolters echoed down the tunnel. The novice aimed at where he thought the massive beetle machine was and opened fire. The six-legged mechanoid skipped sideways, its claw-feet flicking up sparks, and it snapped at one of the other Marines. With smooth, economical movements the insectile robot cut him in two with scythelike talons and moved on to seek out another target, disgorging a couple of its smaller scarab-shaped brethren to set to work on the corpse. Colius shot at it again, a grin popping into life on his face as his rounds found the thing's silvery hide.

In the midst of the ambush proper, Korica braced his bolter as best he could and unloaded the a clip into another one of the machines. He swore at it for daring to take his arm from him and challenged it to try and take the rest. The mechanoid's blocky head bobbed in some analogue of quizzical consideration and then the creature surged forward. Korica's gun ran dry in the instant the enemy swatted it from his hand and he back-pedalled, fingers finding his combat knife without any conscious orders from his mind. The spidery machine paused, rearing up to present its claws, and that was enough for Korica to leap back at it. He buried the blade up to the hilt in the robot's braincase and the Marine's action was rewarded with a hissing gout of sickly green sparks. Petius came to his aid, tossing Korica a reload with one hand and emptying his bolter into the wounded target with the other. The machine shivered and.

'Doom Eagles! To me!' Tarikus roared out the order and the Marines shifted to regroup around the veteran's position, laying down streaks of enfilading fire. Mykilus dropped to one knee, unlimbering the multiple shot missile launcher on his shoulder to a firing position. Back along the tunnel in the direction from which they had come, he could clearly see "more shapes skittering down the walls in jerks of movement and the Marine felt his gut tighten. They had walked right beneath these machines as they waited dormant above them and not a single one of their auspexes had detected the hulking things lying there. Mykilus shuttered the thought away and spoke a litany under his breath as he turned the launcher from safe mode to a firing state.

Tarikus placed a heavy hand on his shoulder and jerked his head at the roof. 'Too many of them coming, lad. You know what to do, eh?

The Doom Eagle brought the weapon up to his shoulder and the sighting lens dropped into place over his left eye. Through the optic he caught the flash-frame sight of one of the novices bifurcating under enemy claws. He squeezed the trigger and fired.

A cluster warhead looped out of the launcher tube and spat orange fire across the tunnel. The machines paused to watch it pass over them and it struck the cavern roof, filling the air with tumbling rocks. Mykilus felt friendly hands dragging him back as a curtain of obsidian dust rolled forward. Black grit clouded his visor.

It seemed like an eternity, but when the rumbling stopped, he cleaned the sand away and found that a new wall had grown up between the Marines and the machines. Colius helped him to his feet and gestured toward a square of pale yellow light - a hatchway in the distance. Without waiting to see if anything was still moving under the curtain of stones, he followed the novice with a wordless nod.

'IT'S A CONTROL BUNKER,' Tarikus was saying as the last of the Doom Eagles caught up with him. 'As I suspected, this part of the tunnels was not built for civilian use.' The bunker's door lay fallen behind him, dislodged by the shockwave from the cave-in.

Petius looked around the vast, shallow room. Banks and banks of silent machinery lined the walls, thick with dust. Incredibly, a few of them still glowed with faint light. Mykilus joined him as they peered at one screen that showed a flickering map of Serek's surface.

"These lines about the planet,' Petius noted, 'more tunnels, perhaps?'

Mykilus shook his head. 'No, brother, see here.' He pointed at a jagged set of symbols. 'These are the edges of the planet's tectonic plates. Fault lines.'

'Touch nothing,' Tarikus said sharply. 'There may be booby-traps.'

Colius beckoned the sergeant to one of the other consoles. 'This one shows a human. It could be a log of some kind.'

Tarikus removed his helmet and leaned close to the blurry panel. True to Colius's words, the pale face of a terrified man glimmered there, his mouth frozen in the midst of a cry for help. The Marine touched a single glowing glyph on the screen and in a rush the display threw up a procession of jarring, disconnected images.

He saw pictures of majestic cities reaching into skies that were raining green fire; dark pyramid obelisks shimmering into solidity in the midst of screaming civilians, carpets of silver scarabs rushing like floodwaters, rending and tearing, skeletal figures advancing over broken bodies and symbols, lines and circles in complex patterns. The garbled speech of the man sputtered from the console's speaker, an incoherent stream of thick sibilants punctuated with one recurring word.

'Necrontyr.' Tarikus repeated the name, and it felt alien on his tongue.

Now the man was showing a console like the one where Petius stood and, with a grim, grey face, he activated the controls. The display showed death-black clouds emerging across the sky, humans and machines alike cooking in murderous firestorms; but something was wrong, and the man slumped to his feet, weeping over a display of blinking red icons. Tarikus has seen the same thing in battle, the man's nerve had failed him and for that his whole world had suffered. As the replay ended, he looked down and realised that he was standing in a patch of dull powder: the dusty remains of the messenger.

'I understand this,' Mykilus said, after a moment. 'The people here, they attempted to detonate geo-nuclear charges. They intended to destroy their world rather than let those machines take it.'

Tarikus nodded. 'But our friend here could not complete his orders. The weapons did not all detonate, so only the atmosphere was scourged.'

The other Marine examined the trigger console. 'This control is still live. The charges below remain in ready mode, even after millennia.'

The sergeant was about to speak, but a shout cut him off.

'Sergeant!' One of the novices called from his post at the hatchway. 'Something approaches!'

All eyes saw the novice die, from outside the room a wreath of green flame enveloped the youth and it flayed him. Ceramite, flesh and bone were seared from him in screaming flickers of light, turning the Marine into twists of blackened matter barely identifiable as human. Before his remains had settled, the open doorway disgorged a swarm of scarabs and the larger forms of the spider-machines. They surged into the bunker chamber, flowing up over the walls like fast-growing fungus.

No orders were needed. The Doom Eagles opened fire as one and channelled every ounce of their battle prowess into killing the mechanoids.

Tarikus cursed himself. He had unwittingly lead his men into a trap, bottling them up here inside the control room, and now these necron things would have them all as trophies. The sergeant clasped the teleport homer. This deep below ground, he had no way of knowing if the strike cruiser orbiting the planet was in range, or even if the matter transporter would be able to recover them if he activated it. Tarikus weighed the device in his grip and thumbed the activation stud regardless. In seconds, it would be

fully charged - and he would decided what to do when that moment came, and before.

Then something else entered the room. Perhaps if someone who had never seen a human skeleton had been asked to build one from a second-hand description, then this is what they would have made. It seemed to shimmer and move in blinks of motion, one moment here, the next over there, impossibly travelling without moving. The skeleton-thing walked through its insectile army with the surety of a warlord among helots, glistening bright metals showing across it like polished jewels. Weapons fire seemed to slide off the necron lord, vanishing into the arcs of electric energy that webbed the air around it.

Colius shot it in the head, and Tarikus clearly saw the bolt shells pass through the mechanoid's skull as the steel briefly became insubstantial. With cold light glittering in its eye-sockets, the lord turned its terrible visage on the youth. Hot streaks of energy licked out of its vision slot and flensed him apart before he could conjure a scream. The necron drifted over Colius's body toward Tarikus, claws like a bouquet of butcher knives extending out toward him. Like all its minions, it was utterly silent in its purpose.

The homing beacon went hot in the sergeant's hands and he made a sudden, terrible decision. 'Mykilus!' he shouted, ' Detonate the geo-charges!'

The Marine hesitated, but only for a moment. Aye!' he replied, dropping to his knees in cover behind the trigger console. Tarikus drew back from the advancing necron, closing the distance between himself and the rest of his men.

Korica was yelling challenges to the machines as they clustered around them, slowly and inexorably. 'Come, take me if you can, xenos! I defy you!'

Tarikus gripped the beacon and held it up, locking gazes with the lord. He could see it clearly now, the full shape of the man-form illuminated by the witch-fire that danced about it. It was a patchwork of metals, limbs and parts of its framework clearly forged from the scavenged pieces that the scarabs had gathered. A segment of the humanoid's gunmetal ribcage glinted and Tarikus felt a cold fury. The thing had stolen parts of Doom

Eagle armour to rebuild itself and to see his chapter's wargear in so corrupted a form filled the Marine with righteous hate.

For a moment, he fancied that the necron understood what he intended to do next, but he would never know for sure.

'Ready!' Mykilus called, a nest of wires trailing from his auspex to the blinking control panel. 'By your command!'

'Stand to!' Tarikus shouted, and the survivors closed ranks. 'Now!'

Deep beneath the surface of Serek, a command that had been delayed for untold centuries now came, and the patient engines of destruction that lurked in the abyssal depths of the planet were finally, irrevocably unleashed. In the bunker, the necrons were held back as a globe of coruscating energy enveloped the Space Marines, the edge searing off the tips of the piecemeal warlord's razor fingers.

As Serek tore itself apart around them, Tarikus saw the Necrontyr machine's face shift and melt as the teleport cycle began, every atom in his body singing as the arcane technology reduced him to pure energy. With the last ounce of his will, he cursed the necron lord with the wrath of the Emperor, Aquila, and the Doom Eagles.



INCIDENT AT STRANIVAR

A tale from His Divine Majesty's Ship the *Lord Solar Macharius*

by

Gordon Rennie

'A GOOD SHIP, the *Macharius*. Not the fastest ship in Gothic Sector, nor the most powerful, but a good ship nevertheless.'

The words of Admiral Haasen ran through the mind of Leoten Semper as he stepped for the first time onto the command deck of the *Macharius*.

'Present salute!' bellowed a bosun. 'Captain on deck!'

Semper paused, savouring the moment. Captain on deck. How many times had he himself snapped to attention at those words, first as a young cadet officer and latterly as Flag Lieutenant to Admiral Haasen aboard the squadron flagship *Czar Nevsky*?

The officers and crew of the command deck stood to attention all around him, the low lighting of the command deck reflecting dimly off the shining buttons and gold braiding of their dress uniforms. Only the half-human, half-mechanical servitors, hardwired into the electronic pulse of the ship's operating systems, did not acknowledge the presence on deck of the *Macharius*' new captain.

'At ease,' Semper ordered, returning the salute of an aristocratic-looking young officer who stepped smartly forward to meet him.

'Captain Semper. First Officer Hito Ulanti reporting, sir. Welcome aboard. Vessel and crew awaiting your orders.'

'Status?' Semper asked, noting with surprise the characteristic clipped tone of Necromundan Upper Hive nobility in the accent of his new second-in-command.

'We have completed our maintenance checks and restock of munitions and supplies three days ahead of schedule,' reported the young officer, with more than a hint of pride, 'We are on spacedock stand-down orders awaiting the rest of the squadron's final resupplying. All senior officers are aboard with the exception of Commissar Kyogen, whose shuttle has been delayed by an ion storm on Stranivar.'

No Commissar watchdog to keep an eye on me thought Semper, staring out at the eerily hypnotic cloud patterns of the planet that dominated the scene through the command deck's arched viewing ports. For the first and probably last time.

I really am master of my own ship. I should take full advantage of this opportunity while I still have it... He turned to the waiting First Officer, issuing his first captain's order. 'All crew to duty stations, mister Ulant. Power up engines and weapons systems. Let's take her out and see what damage a few weeks in spacedock has done to us!'

Officers and crew scurried to carry out his orders. Semper stood on the bridge of the command deck, feeling the comforting rumble from deep within the bowels of the ship as powerful plasma reactors flared into life. He closed his eyes, imagining the frantic activity now happening below decks. Petty officers storming through crowded crew quarters, screaming orders and lashing out at any crewman not moving fast enough to get to his station. Sweating gunnery crews toiling to load the huge macro-shells hoisted up by elevator from the ship's arsenal. Tech-priests and engineering officers intoning the proper rites of protection as they monitored the enormous energy levels now flowing through the waking ship's power systems.

'Manoeuvring thrusters activated. Umbilicus disengaged. We are now leaving spacedock,' reported Ulant as Semper felt the lurch of the cruiser sliding away from its orbital berth. Glancing through the port viewing bay, he could see the familiar shape of the *Nevsky* still

cradled in the latticework of its own spacedock. Even from this distance - about fifty kilometres, Semper estimated with a practised spaceman's eye - the venerable old battleship looked enormous, and the swarm of maintenance ships and supply shuttles buzzing about the spires of its superstructure only added to the impression of a bloated insect queen being fed and pampered by minion drones. Beyond, he could see a long series of other spacedocks and orbital defence platforms; the home base of Battlegroup Stranivar, strung out like a long necklace of pearls around the world and its triple moons.

Semper frowned, noticing how many of the spacedocks were still occupied. We should have more ships out on patrol he thought.

'Signal from the *Nevksy*. sir,' relayed a communications officer. 'Attention, *Macharius*. You are in breach of orders. You are either a traitor trying to steal one of the Emperor's warships or another hotshot captain keen to earn his spurs.'

Semper smiled, recognising the distinctive humour of his old mentor. Despite their differences, Haasen had not hesitated to recommend him for the captaincy of the *Macharius*.

'Captain!' Semper turned at the urgent tone in the voice of one of his tech Officers. 'Surveyors have detected multiple incoming engine signatures! We have unauthorised vessels within strike range of Stranivar!'

'It's an attack!' bellowed Semper, seeing the starfield ahead of the *Macharius* pinpricked with the flares of rapidly closing plasma engines. 'Void shields to maximum. Go to battle stations. Stranivar Base is under attack!' At his signal, the communications officer opened up an internal comms channel. 'Captain to all gunnery decks. Target of opportunity fire - if it doesn't carry an eagle emblem, vaporise it!'

Emperor's oath, there's so many of them and they've caught us unprepared! thought Semper as he saw the baroque outlines of the first wave of Chaos vessels highlighted by the harsh light of Stranivar's star. The ship shuddered under the impact of the blasts detonating against its void shields. Semper looked to Ulanti for confirmation of what he already knew.

'Stray shots,' nodded the First Officer. 'They're going after the *Nevsky* and we just happen to be in the line of fire!'

'Bring us about! We'll protect the flagship with our own guns until it has cleared spacedock,' Semper ordered, already recognising the futility of this manoeuvre. The *Nevsky* could not engage its void shields while in spacedock and a ship of that size and age needed time - too much time - to power up its engines and weapons batteries. *Czar Nevsky* was a sitting target, and everyone on the command deck knew it.

Semper held on to a deck rail as the long bulk of the *Macharius* swung ponderously round in space, bringing the scene in orbit around Stranivar into sharp focus. Explosions and energy beams filled the void as the Chaos ships - all fast escorts, Semper saw - savaged Battlegroup Stranivar. He saw one Lunar class cruiser explode, falling to the incandescent fury of several plasma torpedo hits midships as it struggled to clear spacedock. One of its sister ships avoided a similar fate by going to full thrusters and smashing its way out of spacedock, violently severing its still-attached umbilicus. In the light of the explosions, Semper could see a cloud of debris spreading from the fractured accessway, and he knew it was those trapped inside the umbilicus spilling out into hard vacuum. Elsewhere, a munitions platform disintegrated in a spectacular fireball, the blast annihilating everything around it. And then there was, the *Nevsky*, caught helpless in spacedock as deadly energy lances punched deep wounds into its hull.

Suddenly, he saw a group of three Chaos Raiders racing alongside the *Macharius*, heading for the stricken flagship. At his command, the weapons of the *Macharius* opened fire as one. The lead Raider exploded in a hail of macro-shells and lasblasts. As they passed across the prow, the other two were forced to break off their attack and evade sharply as the *Macharius* sent a spread of torpedoes rocketing towards them. Semper allowed himself a grim smile of satisfaction as he saw one of the missiles erupt into smaller warheads, catching one of the targets in a storm of fiery detonations. A shout from Ulanti brought him back to his duties.

'The *Nevsky*, sir! She's dying!'

The sight was both awesome and terrifying: the *Nevsky* in its death-throes as a long series of internal explosions ripped through her hull. Semper saw its port side split open and a long plume of white-hot plasma erupt out into space. He knew then that he only had seconds to save his own vessel. 'Core breach!' he screamed at his ashen-faced command crew. 'Hard to starboard and divert all power to void shields!'

First came the light, brilliant and searing, and then the darkness as the photochromatic filters of the command deck's viewing ports turned pure black to protect the crew inside. After that came the blast wave, overloading the void shields and lashing against the hull of the ship. Semper picked himself up from the deck, wondering why he didn't hide himself away inside an armoured command shell as so many other Captains did, and ordered the viewing filters off, steeling himself for the sight outside. The *Nevsky* was gone. All that remained of it were several huge still-burning fragments which were slowly sinking down into the gravity well of Stranivar, where they would set alight city-sized bonfires that would probably burn for months.

Semper sensed the presence of his First Officer. 'The raiders are retreating back into the warp, sir,' reported Ulanti. 'Estimate about half the battlegroup has survived, although none of us are spaceworthy enough to go after them.' The young Necromundan paused, lost for words to describe the scale of the disaster. 'The... the *Nevsky*, that seemed to be what they were after... a hit-and-run attack on the flagship.'

Semper stared out into the starfield of open space, trying to imagine the conflict to come. 'This was no hit-and-run raid. This was a first strike, the opening shots of full-blown war. I pray to the Emperor I'm wrong, Mister Ulanti, but I fear there is worse - far worse - to come... '



WOLF PACK

A tale from His Divine Majesty's Ship the *Lord Solar Macharius*

by

Gordon Rennie

'MAINTAIN FORMATION, *MACHARIUS*. All that matters is that the rest of the convoy makes it safely to Orar. Need I remind you that, as a senior adept of the Departamento Munitorium, the safe delivery of the three Guard regiments this convoy carries is my responsibility!'

Leoten Semper, Captain of His Divine Majesty's Ship the *Lord Solar Macharius*, stared at the flickering green image of the gaunt-faced Adeptus Terra official on the opticon screen for a moment before giving his carefully worded reply.

'Indeed. The cargo may be your responsibility - but the transports carrying them are mine. As commander of the convoy's Navy escort, it is my decision to recover the two lost transports. This system is a pirate nest. We lost four transports here on our last run and five the time before. I'll not lose any more this time. We will leave you the frigate escorts and as many attack craft squadrons as we can spare. Pray that they are enough. *Macharius* out.' Severing the comm-link. Semper turned away to face his senior command officers assembled before him on the bridge deck, catching their approving nods at the manner in which he had dealt with the Departamento Munitorium official.

'Orders, sir?' asked his second-in-command, Flag-Lieutenant Hito Ulanti.

'Bring us about, Mister Ulanti. Set course for the last known location of the *Vanya* and the *Magnar*, and take us there All Ahead Full. We've got two lost sheep to save from the Wolf Packs.'

DRIFTING AMONGST THE cover of one of the system's many scattered asteroid fields, the commander of the pirate scout ship watched in satisfaction as the surveyor screen in front of him showed the larger target icon of the Imperial Dictator Class Cruiser detach itself from the rest of the convoy. As he watched, he saw a swarm of smaller energy readings suddenly appear in the cruiser's wake.

'He's turning back for the stragglers and launching attack craft to guard the rest of the convoy,' he noted, picking apart the enemy captain's battle plan. 'Starhawk bombers, probably. Even with those three frigates still there, he's not leaving enough firepower to protect the convoy's flanks.'

He paused, running a scarred hand over his face, feeling the strange new bone-shapes forming under the splitting flesh. It had only been recently that he and the other pirate pack captains had formally sided with the forces of Abaddon the Despoiler, but already the effects of the Mark of Chaos were starting to manifest themselves on all of them.

'Assemble the pack,' he ordered. 'By the time that cruiser returns, all that will be left for it to protect will be drifting wreckage and some burned-out hulks.'

CAPTAIN MADSEN CHEN of the *Vanya* looked round the battered command deck of his ship, steadying himself against the side of his captain's pulpit as another explosion rocked his ship. Somewhere, thousands of kilometres of space behind them, their sister ship the *Magnar* was in its death-throes, its main drive crippled and its internal atmosphere bleeding out into space as the enemy used lance weapons to punch holes through its hull. Both ships were what were scathingly called "junkers", ancient decommissioned hulks hastily refitted and pressed back into active service at the onset of the war. A convoy moves at the speed of its slowest

ship but, travelling through the pirate-infested wilderness space between the Bhein Morr and Orar Sub-Sectors, the limping speeds of the *Vanya* and the *Magnar* had put the rest of the convoy in too much danger and so they had been left behind as the other transports raced towards the safety of the next warp-jump beacon.

Another impact, stronger this time, rocked the command deck. Captain Chen looked to the tech-adept monitoring the damage control systems. 'Damage report!'

The adept checked the runes scrolling rapidly across the screen in front of him. 'No incoming weapons fire, Captain, but something just penetrated our hull. One of the enemy ships is launching assault craft. We're being boarded!'

Chen swore, his hand automatically reaching for the hilt of the sabre hanging on his belt, a pointless gesture of bitter defiance. Underarmed and undermanned - most of the other convoy transports had holds filled with thousands of Imperial Guard troops, but his carried only equipment and supplies - the *Vanya* and its crew would be little challenge to any determined attacker.

Still, Chen was a loyal servant of the Emperor, and he knew it was his duty to ensure that his ship and its cargo did not fall into the hands of the Emperor's enemies. He activated a rune on his command lectern, opening a comm-net channel to the engine room sanctum where the tech-priests of the Adeptus Mechanicus nurtured and monitored the beating plasma core heart of the ship's power systems.

'Captain Chen to Magos Hensho. Commence your preparations for the Rite of Self-Immolation. Shut down the coolant systems and—'

He was interrupted by a shout from one of the crewmen manning the surveyor monitors.

'Captain! We're reading the energy signals of another ship coming straight towards us. Emperor's mercy, it's the *Macharius*!'

THE HARD VACUUM around the lead Starhawk bomber was filled with bright energy bursts as the squadron commander pilot jinked his craft through the incoming enemy fire. He flinched as, several kilometres off to starboard, one of his wingmen suddenly exploded apart. The servitor

behind him, hardwired into the ship's surveyor systems, counted off the range in ten kilometre increments as they closed in on their targets. Latest reports now showed fifteen pirate vessels prowling round the fringes of the convoy. They were keeping a wary distance from the formidable prow lances of the three Firestorm frigate escorts. But the Firestorms couldn't cover the entire convoy, and the pirates were making quick probing attacks up and down the line of transports, testing the four Starhawk squadrons left behind by the *Macharius* as a makeshift secondary line of defence. Now, finding a gap in those defences, one pirate squadron was making a direct attack run on the convoy, and Nemesis Squadron was racing to intercept.

Approaching optimum strike distance the targets came into view through the cockpit's opticon-enhanced viewing ports. They were system-class vessels, too small to be fitted with warp engines, and the pilot's experienced eye picked out the details of half a dozen other vessel types cannibalised in their construction. The remaining Starhawks launched as one, the engine trails of ten plasma missiles streaking away towards the pirate ships. Two of the pirates broke off and retreated, but the third was too slow, a line of missile strikes raking it along its midships. The pirate gunship's hull burst open and seconds later it exploded as its breached reactor went critical. Nemesis Squadron peeled away to avoid the debris cloud thrown out by the explosion. In his cockpit, Nemesis Leader checked his instrumentation, seeing that his bomber's payload and fuel reserves were now at less than fifty percent. Attack craft such as the Starhawks had a severely limited operating capacity, and without mothership support, Nemesis and the other bomber squadrons would soon be unable to protect the convoy from the attacking pirate pack.

The comm-net link crackled into life, his Navigator feeding him the coordinates of another reported incoming pirate attack further down the line of transports. Nemesis One relayed the orders to the rest of the squadron, bringing his swooping gull-winged craft round to the new heading. *Vandire's Oath*, he swore to himself, where is the *Macharius*?

THE *MACHARIUS* POWERED forward, armoured blast doors sliding open along the launch bay sections on either side of its baroquely armoured hull

to unleash a wave of the deadly silver dart shapes of its Fury interceptor squadrons. The craft fell upon their targets with merciless abandon, and the void between the *Vanya* and its pirate squadron attackers was lit up by volleys of lascannon fire and the answering flashes of exploding assault craft. In the vanguard of the attack, Storm Leader eased back on the power flow to its engine systems and allowed the armoured limpet shell shape of its target to drift through into its weapon sights. Storm Leader watched a row of runes on his instrument panel flash green - *Lock On!* - and stabbed the firing trigger, sending volleyed streams of lascannon fire from his wing-mounted weapon banks. The pirate assault boat disintegrated and in the flare of burning gases escaping from the destroyed craft the Imperial pilot could see the bodies of the assault troops inside spilling out into space as he peeled away, already in search of his next target.

Aboard the *Macharius*, Leoten Semper watched as the pirate squadron disengaged from the attack on the *Vanya*, abandoning the assault craft wave to the marauding Furies.

'Targets dead ahead,' Master of Ordnance Remus Nyder reported. 'Torpedoes ready to fire on your command.'

'They're too close to the *Vanya*,' Semper noted. 'We can't risk any stray torpedoes locking on to it as well. Helm, give me ramming speed. All decks, brace for impact!'

The Imperial cruiser's plasma core engines sent it surging towards its target, and in the last few seconds before impact, Semper could clearly see the manoeuvring thrusters studded along the hull of the pirate ship flare into life as it futilely tried to slide out of the path of the oncoming thirty-kilometre long juggernaut. The adamantium-armoured prow of an Imperial cruiser was specifically designed for ramming attacks, although tactical orthodoxy, as taught in the naval academies on Cypra Mundi, said that such attacks should only be considered as a last resort. Thrown to the deck by the tremendous impact of the collision, feeling the shuddering tremors of his ship smashing a path through the body of the enemy ship and hearing the exultant cheers of his crew as the *Macharius* carried on through the debris cloud of twisted wreckage of what only seconds ago had been another vessel, Leoten Semper could only disagree with his naval academy tutors.

It was, quite simply, the most satisfyingly effective order he had ever given.

Semper climbed to his feet to find the impeccable and apparently unshakeable figure of his second-in-command waiting for him.

'*Vanya* signals her thanks and requests a safe escort back to the convoy. Remaining enemy vessels are escaping but still within range of our portside batteries. Gun crews are ready and waiting. We are also picking up urgent mayday signals from the main convoy. What are your orders, sir?'

+FIREDRAKE REPORTING. ONLY two of us left, all payload expended.+

+Harbinger reporting. Payload nil; engine systems are running on vapours and prayers.+

+Mantis reporting. Minimal payload and five percent fuel reserves remaining. Requesting assistance - three enemy vessels incoming on our position.+

Nemesis One listened to the litany of reports from his fellow squadron leaders. Ignoring the flashing red warning runes of his own fuel monitor panel, he keyed open the comm-link channel.

+Nemesis to Mantis. We've just enough fuel left to reach you. We'll join you in a combined attack wave and—+

The comm-link frequency buzzed with static as a powerful new transmission source cut in.

+*Macharius* to all Starhawk squadrons. Stand down. We'll take it from here.+

"WOLF PACKS" THESE pirate groups were called, but to Leoten Semper they seemed more like scavenging jackals, attacking weak and vulnerable prey but fleeing at the approach of any larger predator. The *Macharius* and the Firestorms had pursued the pirate pack to the fringes of the asteroid fields, claiming another four kills along the way, before turning back to rejoin the convoy. Now, with all surviving Starhawks safely recovered and the *Vanya* escorted safely back by four squadrons of Fury interceptors, the

convoy had reached the edge of the system and was preparing to enter the warp.

Semper looked out of the viewing port, staring at the pattern of now distant asteroid fields. The Wolf Pack were in there somewhere, hiding in their asteroid lairs and licking their wounds for now, but he knew they would be back again soon enough.

One day, he promised himself, one day when we've the time and the ships to spare, we'll be back in force to clean out these pirate nests. Then this scavenger pack and all the others like it will know what it means to face the full might of Battlefleet Gothic.



BLOOD CRIES FOR BLOOD

James Peaty

AS THE CHILL air whipped around the cabin of squad flyer nine-two-four, the pilot couldn't help but smile at how typical it was of life on Persana that something like this could happen on the coldest night of the year.

They'd been leaving the fortress, flying over a crowd that had assembled outside when, from below, someone had fired upon the flyer and shattered the rear shield.

The crowd had been massing nightly outside the imposing building over the last week, protesting at alleged Enforcer brutality in the city's Downside. That in itself made the pilot smile. How could you be anything other than brutal on the streets of the most degenerate slum this side of the Rhuric Nebula, especially with the threat of civil war looming?

But then that was Persana for you.

Not much made sense.

Clearing the Downside, flyer nine-two-four moved towards the power station at the city's southernmost point. Two officers were staking out the station and they needed a full sweep of the surrounding area before they could move in.

It was boring work, made worse by the added ventilation that chilled the pilot and his partner to their bones.

To pass the time they listened to the commercial band transmissions while their spot-lamps swiped around the base of the fossilised diamond

that powered the city, fuelled the planet's economy and dominated the southern skyline.

'...spokesman said that no charges would be brought against Merden Jorsted. The Governor's aide is being held after allegations were made linking him to an off-world organised crime ring. The news adds further strain to the already tense relations between the Governor's office and the Enforcers, who are in dispute because of the Governor's reluctance to call in Imperial Guard reinforcements to help deal with the southern secessionist threat...'

'Boring.'

The pilot spat a lump of phlegm out of the side window as he switched off the transmission. Usually his partner could deal with his dismissive attitude, but today it irritated him.

'Don't you ever take an interest in current affairs?'

The pilot snorted.

'As if I give a shi-'

The radio crackled back into life.

'Flyer nine-two-four, do you copy?'

The pilot flicked a switch above his head.

'This is flyer nine-two-four. We're in position over the power station.'

'Nine-two-four, get back to the fortress. We've got a full scale riot breaking out here and we need aerial support.'

The pilot turned and shared a look of exasperation with his partner.

'Confirmed, control, we're en route.'

As the flyer peeled round, the pilot looked into his aft monitor at the image of two small figures waiting near the south entrance.

'You're on your own now, boys.'

AS THE TAIL lights of the flyer receded into the distance, Enforcer Klimt shivered. The night air was bitter. The cold seemed to be burning him from within. To stave off the growing discomfort he amped up the internal heat on his body glove. It didn't seem to make much difference.

He rubbed his arms and prayed they'd hurry up and get inside the power plant soon. Unfortunately, he knew they had to wait a while before making their entry.

Damn regulations.

Shifting in the saddle of his bike, he looked over at Yedas.

The older man seemed anxious. It was unlike him but, considering recent events, his distraction was understandable.

As usual, Yedas was railing against the regime of Governor Schaar.

'He knows I know he's dirty. That's why he wants me off of the street.'

Klimt was used to Yedas's' rants, but in the last few weeks they had escalated to a whole new level.

'Personal prejudices aside, I think Schaar's done a good job,' Klimt said.

'You're young,' Yedas snorted. 'I've been on this planet for twenty years. I know what it was like before he came along.'

'And that was?'

Yedas pulled out the necklace he wore under his uniform. It was the only memento he kept from his homeworld and he had a habit of playing with it when he was nervous.

'More disciplined. The scum from the Downside knew their place.' He let the necklace hang outside his uniform.

'The poor like Schaar because he blames us for their problems. The rich tolerate him because they make money and now this "war" will mean that he can tighten his grip on power and line his pockets even more.'

Klimt shrugged his shoulders.

'Things seem to be improving though.'

Yedas bridled. Klimt took this as a bad sign. Even though he was only eighteen months into his posting on Persana he knew his partner's body language intimately.

'Schaar is a passing trend.'

Klimt laughed and tried to make a joke of Yedas's escalating anger.

'Maybe to you, but the rest of us have to get on with the world as it is and the one constant is that everything changes in time.'

Yedas stared at him without blinking.

'That sounds like heresy to me.'

ONCE INSIDE THE power station the two Enforcers moved stealthily through the cavernous lower hall. As they approached the gang of six who stood near the stairs to the upper gantry Yedas shattered the silence.

'Enforcer! Put down your weapons!'

Klimt's surprise was buried under a hail of fire. The two officers quickly dived behind a pair of adjacent coolant towers as bullets ripped through the metal and gouged up rockrete.

As Yedas returned fire and one of the criminals fell, two of the gang ran for the upper levels. Seeing this, the older Enforcer turned to his younger partner.

'I need you to cover me.'

Klimt nodded and began offering covering fire as Yedas weaved his way from behind the coolant tower to the ladder that led to the upper gantry and the central core.

Continuing to duck, he quickly fired off six shots. The tower took more rounds into its metallic shell. Hearing the tearing and denting of the metal that protected him, Klimt knew that his haven wouldn't be that for much longer.

Diving into the crossfire, Klimt began to roll along the cold, hard floor. Rockrete chips rose up as he evaded the bullets that buzzed around him.

His body glove softened most of the impact, but it still jarred him from his jaw down to the base of his spine.

There were three gunmen firing at Klimt. They were positioned behind a stack of empty barrels covered with a dirty tarpaulin.

Klimt continued to fire. As he reached a similar vantage point behind a smaller stack of barrels, one of his shots caught the central gunman right between the eyes. A halo of crimson jetted upwards.

Above the gunmen's heads hung a platform suspended by two chains on a pulley. It was used to winch waste to the upper levels to help power the secondary core and was made of wrought iron, about four inches thick and roughly twenty feet wide.

Rising from his crouched position, catching a bullet in his left arm as he moved, Klimt fired off two rounds at the chains securing the platform to the pulley. The chains broke and it fell, crushing the gunmen beneath the huge panel of metal. The noise was deafening.

As Klimt emerged from his position. His arm burning from the wound, he assessed the scene. Four lay dead. That left two more on the upper levels being pursued by Yedas.

Klimt heard the gunshot from above.

As he rushed along the upper gantry, Klimt blocked out the sound and fury of the liquid metal core of the central generator.

Stepping out onto the circular platform that surrounded the top of the core, Klimt could see no one. Turning and surveying the scene, he paused when he heard a noise behind him.

Leading with his pistol, he knelt and moved towards a tiny alcove. The source of the noise was the low moaning of a man. Klimt moved in closer. He was small, feral and dressed shabbily. Blood poured down his face from a head wound that appeared to have been inflicted by a blow from the handle of a pistol or a similar blunt object.

The man recoiled as Klimt pushed his gun into his face.

'Where's your partner?' Klimt shouted.

The man snivelled and pointed at the bubbling core.

'And the other Enforcer officer?' Klimt asked desperately.

The man hesitated. His eyes danced and refused to make contact with Klimt's. The young Enforcer lost his composure. He grabbed the cowering criminal by the throat and pushed his sidearm forcefully at the man's head.

'Answer me, or I swear I will shoot you where you sit!'

The shaking criminal finally spoke.

'He... he struggled with Jonek... They both fell into the core.'

On hearing this Klimt released the man's arm, which he was gripping like a vice. Klimt fell back on the platform onto his backside.

He let his pistol drop and suddenly felt cold again.

AS THE GUN barrel pushed tighter against his head, one thought swirled around in Sacris's mind.

'I'm an idiot!'

How it had happened, he wasn't sure. Fatigue after a twenty-four hour crowd control shift? Maybe, but every other member of the Enforcers stationed on Persana was out doing the same and they weren't being held at gunpoint in the lobby of the fortress.

But then it wasn't everyday that the Planetary Governor was assassinated.

As the only other two officers in the foyer at the time tried to placate the screaming perp, Sacris found it ironic that he should get caught out

like a first year cadet on a day when virtually every other Enforcer was out trying to prevent Persana from slipping further into anarchy.

If he hadn't begun to black out from the pressure on his throat, he may even have allowed himself a sardonic smile.

The assailant was young, barely out of adolescence. He was nervous as hell and coming down off of Idea or one of the other low grade chems that the denizens of the Downside frequently used.

'Stay back or I'll shoot!'

As the elevator doors opened and deposited an unusually pre-occupied Enforcer Klimt into the fortress foyer, the last thing he was anticipating was becoming embroiled in a hostage situation.

That his imminent departure to a new posting on Caldana was now on hold, thanks to the fall out from Governor Schaar's assassination, merely compounded the confusion he already felt due to the package that lay open on his bunk upstairs.

All available Enforcers had been placed on active duty until further notice, but Klimt was having a hard time focusing on anything at the present time.

That changed the moment Klimt saw the young officer with the gun pointed at his head. All thoughts of personal distraction became secondary.

All that mattered was the job before him.

The medic and the duty officer turned sharply as they saw Klimt striding towards them. He was dressed in his blue Enforcer uniform and his sidearm was clearly on view.

'Don't do anything rash,' the duty officer squealed. Klimt shot him a look that let him know exactly what he thought of his advice.

The shooter was becoming visibly more agitated. The narcotic euphoria of Idea had made it seem perfectly rational to overpower the tired officer who'd wearily taken off his helmet and left his gun holster unbuckled. But now, without Idea whispering in his ear, the implications of this action were quickly catching up with him.

'Stay back!'

Klimt said nothing, but continued to move forward until he faced the gunman and Sacris barely ten feet away.

The gunman was perspiring profusely, his hands shaking rhythmically. The gun, growing ever slicker in his palm, was erratically working the

circumference of Sacris's temple.

Sacris remained rigid. His body locked in position so as to not give his captor any sudden cause to fire. Even though his shoulders burned and his concentration was waning, when Klimt nodded, Sacris knew he would be okay.

'I told you the first time, stay ba-'

He didn't know what the object was - an explosive? a knife? - but as it left Klimt's hand on a trajectory towards his face, he reasoned that he had to shoot it.

Raising the gun from his hostage's temple to shoot the object in mid-flight gave Sacris the opening he needed. In a second he had shifted his body enough to throw the shooter off balance.

Three shots rang out.

As the medic quickly moved in to examine his neck, Sacris looked up and saw Klimt approaching. He began to formulate an appropriate 'thank you', but before he could open his mouth, Klimt walked straight past him.

Kneeling down alongside the gunman's body, Klimt picked up the bullet-shattered dataplate. Without breaking his stride, Klimt tossed the broken dataplate at the surprised duty officer and continued walking back towards the elevator.

'I was going to get you to send that to Caldana for me. Broadcast a personal transmission instead; tell them I won't be leaving here until the trouble in the city is over.'

As he entered the elevator and turned to face the eerie silence of the foyer, Sacris and Klimt shared a glance.

In the two years he had been stationed on Persana, Sacris had never spoken to Klimt, but his reputation preceded him.

He was a legend among the other officers, forging his formidable reputation on countless cases during the decade of bloody civil strife. Many recent graduates took it on themselves to observe Klimt in action. It was a way of learning how to deal with life on the tinderbox that was Persana, something even other senior officers encouraged.

Sacris had studied Klimt from afar and knew his expression, style and body language as well as he knew his own. It was therefore all the more surprising for Sacris to see Klimt nervously fiddling with his pistol as he waited for the elevator doors to close.

IT WASN'T UNTIL the medic had checked and discharged him from duty that Sacris realised just how quiet the fortress actually was.

As he stood by the near-indestructible plastiglass window of his quarters and looked down, Sacris thought that - without sound - the violence and movement of the riot in the city below was almost poetic.

Angry oranges and yellows were crowned by thick black smoke. It looked a lot like the ceremonial war paintings that Sacris's grandfather used to paint back on their homeworld.

Sacris slid his hand across the control panel that was mounted to the left of the window. The plastiglass silently disappeared into its distributor frame. The noise from below was deafening.

The din of breaking glass, gunshots and human screams collided, each of them vying for primacy but merely flattening together into the collective sound of the city tearing itself apart.

Sacris flicked the switch on the control panel and the plastiglass reformed in an instant. Silence returned and the only reminder of the terror below was the acrid smell of smoke and fire that filled the room.

THE CONTENTS OF the package had deeply unsettled Klimt. Apart from the interlude in the foyer he'd been wrestling with its implications all day. Like some weird code it brought together the ghosts of the past with the twilight of his present, but without any pattern as to its deeper meaning.

As he sat alone, staring at the twisting object hanging from the handlebars, Klimt finally knew what he had to do.

THE AIR WAS always cooler in the vehicle pool and many Enforcers used to escape down there when the pressure of law enforcement on Persana got too much. Sacris was usually one of them, but tonight, as he entered the open basement, he was going there to apologise.

He'd approached Klimt's quarters with a certain amount of trepidation and was disappointed when he discovered - after finally mustering the courage to knock on the senior officer's door - that he wasn't there.

As he'd turned to leave, he heard a voice behind him.

'He's in the vehicle pool.'

It was Enforcer Magellan. He was standing in the doorway of his quarters situated across the corridor from Klimt's.

Magellan was recuperating from an incident in the Downside two months previously and leant on crutches as he smiled at Sacris. A street gang peddling liquid Idea had gotten the upper hand on Magellan and his partner. The incident had cost Magellan's partner his life and it had been touch and go as to whether Magellan would follow. Luckily, the medics had managed to save him, albeit at the expense of one of his kidneys.

'When was that?'

'Five minutes ago.'

He thanked Magellan and made his way down the corridor to the turbo shaft at the end of the hall.

Entering the relatively empty vehicle pool, Sacris saw Klimt was sitting on the saddle of his bike. He looked as if he were looking at something suspended on his handlebars.

As he approached, Sacris wasn't sure what he should say. 'Thank you,' was the intention, but he was concerned that he would appear even less substantial than he had when Klimt saved his life.

On reflection, Sacris realised that pride was getting in the way of sense. This was a mistake that Enforcers were encouraged to avoid.

He began to walk over.

SETTING TO WITHIN a few feet of the senior Enforcer, Sacris noticed that Klimt appeared to take an object that was hanging from the handlebars and put it in his pocket.

Klimt looked up and stared at the young officer.

'It's Sacris, isn't it?'

Klimt could tell that the younger man was a little awe struck, but he continued to look into Sacris's eyes without blinking. It was a trick he'd developed over the years that managed to unnerve even the most hardened perp.

Apparently it seemed to work just as well on fellow Enforcers too.

'Nice work upstairs.'

Sacris felt himself turning red with shame. He knew that this was just a foretaste of the ridicule he would get from the massed ranks of his colleagues. That the first assault came from someone he admired hurt even more.

'I... I came down here to say thank you.'

Klimt waved Sacris away.

'Forget it. You survived - that's all that matters.'

'Thanks to you.'

Klimt let a small but ironic grin crack his otherwise stern face.

'Well, let me give you some advice -don't let it happen again.'

Sacris noticed that despite his calm demeanour, Klimt was nervously moving his hands on the handlebars.

'Are you going out into the city to help with the pacification?'

Klimt paused long enough to arouse Sacris's suspicion.

'No... I've got to follow up a lead on the assassination.'

This struck Sacris as odd.

'And you were going alone?'

Klimt gave the younger man a withering stare.

'Yes.'

Sacris looked the elder Enforcer directly in the eye.

'It's a breach of regulations to go into a potentially life-threatening situation without back-up.'

Klimt held Sacris's gaze.

'You think I'm unaware of regulations?'

Sacris smiled and Klimt looked away.

It was true, he needed back-up, and he knew the young Enforcer was angling to come with him. Maybe to get out of the fortress, but more likely to try and make it up to Klimt for saving his life earlier. The reasoning didn't matter.

The older Enforcer paused. Who else was going to help him? Everyone else was either out in the streets fighting to maintain order, recovering from injury or ass-welded to a desk job. And did he really have to tell this eager, but - from what he'd seen so far - unimpressive, young officer the whole truth?

Klimt looked up and nodded his head in the direction of the exit.

'Suit up and be back here in five minutes.'

THE RIDE INTO the Downside was hard. Burning vehicles lined the streets. Broken glass covered the sidewalks, shop fronts were ablaze and buildings were being ransacked indiscriminately.

It was the worst day on the streets that Klimt had seen. The atmosphere was pure poison and the relationship between the population and the Enforcers which, thanks to Governor Schaar's skilful playing off of these two opposing forces, permanently bubbled somewhere between hostile and hateful was now boiling over in a way that it had always threatened, but somehow just avoided.

Turning off from the main street, the concentration of violence thinned out considerably and the road ahead seemed clear.

Most of the rioting was occurring near the Central Amphitheatre in the heart of the Downside. This was where Schaar had been giving his annual Festival of Light address when two sniper shots from a nearby rooftop turned the world upside down.

It was funny. As Klimt rode through the streets of the Downside, he couldn't help but remember the first time he experienced its degenerate charm.

His first sight of Persana had been from the air. Through the plastiglass window of the transport ship, it appeared to him as a gleaming jewel dwarfed and bracketed by the giant twin structures of the power station and the fortress at either end of the city.

He didn't know then that life inside the 'jewel' was anything but precious.

Klimt had been expecting a squad flyer to take him to the fortress from the spaceport, but was surprised to discover that he would be sharing a bike with the man who had just introduced himself as his partner.

'You want to learn about Persana?' Yedas had asked as they walked to the bike.

'Sure,' Klimt had replied glibly.

The only thing that matched the arrogance of Klimt's response was the shock he received as they hit the Downside.

Sat on the back of the bike, Klimt was rapt at the procession of human and alien life at its rawest that unfolded before him.

The energy on the streets was palpable. Street vendors and musicians rubbed up against pick-pockets and gang members, all of them trying to scratch a living on the grey, eroded sidewalks, alongside Salvationists who believed that the Emperor himself was coming to take everyone up to the feet of his Golden Throne in one enormous rapture.

It was ugly and beautiful in equal measure.

They stopped in the traffic and Yedas turned to him.

'Bet you've never seen such a collection of freaks, weirdo's and outcasts?'

Klimt had to agree that he hadn't.

Yedas began to laugh as the traffic began to move again.

'And they think that fraud Schaar is going to save them?'

The engine roar drowned out his laughter, but Klimt could feel the vibrations through his partners body as the bike drove on through the night.

THE TWO ENFORCERS arrived at the grim hab-block on the edge of the downside just after midnight. The building stood four storeys high and its exterior brickwork was half eaten away by the chemical storms that occasionally befell this part of town.

The stairwell was deserted and rain damage stained the walls. Sacris brushed corrosive moisture drops from his uniform as he climbed the steps.

On reaching the fourth floor, the two Enforcers turned left and continued down the dark, peeling corridor until they reached door number four-zero-four.

Klimt nodded at Sacris. Both men drew and cocked their pistols.

The rotten door flew off of its hinges with one kick from Klimt's right boot. Both Enforcers entered the room crouched, their guns drawn. The apartment was silent.

As Klimt went off to search the other rooms, Sacris tossed the sitting room. Not only was it dark and dank, but the floor was covered with rotting food and assorted garbage.

In the corner, by a dust-encrusted pict-viewer, were fifteen identical boxes, stacked up like cans of provisions.

Each box contained forty inhalers. They were meant for citizens with respiratory problem but their alternative street use was as a delivery system for a potent vaporised form of the drug Idea.

Sacris was pretty certain that the occupant of the apartment was not a licensed apothecary.

Exiting the main room, Sacris called after the senior officer. There was no response. As he moved through the dark apartment, the younger officer began to realise that he was enjoying himself.

His train of thought was derailed the moment he entered the bedroom.

The corpse that lay atop the unmade bed had been shot in the head, the rear of the skull obliterated by the exit velocity of the bullet. The wall behind the bed was daubed a violent red.

But it wasn't the blood that made the wall striking.

Virtually every inch was papered with a vast collage comprised of images and text relating to the late Planetary Governor Schaar.

'By the Emperor...' Sacris whispered.

Many of the images in the collage had been culled from a variety of news sources, yet some had obviously been taken covertly by stealth camera at various public events.

Different news headlines - detailing Schaar's strained relationship with the Imperium and the Enforcers - bracketed and bordered the images. Judging by the yellowing of much of the central part of the collage, the pictures and articles had been built up over a substantial period of time.

The most recent article was dated two weeks ago and detailed Schaar's continued resistance to the Imperium's plans to call in the forces once and for all.

It had been a popular move with the general populace of the Downside.

Written through the middle of the collage in fresh, black paint was one word: Heretic!

Klimt stood transfixed by the wall. Sacris couldn't help but look at the body.

The man on the bed was small and feral in appearance and wore threadbare clothes that were in keeping with the general decor of the apartment. His face was contorted. His eyes rolled up inside the lids.

Resting across the body was an AP-24 sniper's rifle. Neither needed to say that it was the same type of gun that had been used to kill the

Governor.

Sacris rubbed his hand through his hair before finally speaking.

'Looks like that's the Schaar case closed.'

Klimt raised his head and looked over at Sacris with suspicion.

'Why do you say that?'

Initially Sacris thought his superior was joking, but soon realised he wasn't.

'The shooter obviously came back here after he killed Schaar and sucked down on the barrel.'

Klimt motioned with his head in the direction of the wall.

'Pull the bullet out of the wall.'

Sacris looked over at the hole in the wall where the bullet had entered. Pulling his knife from his gauntlet, he dug into the plaster and extracted the bullet from the wall.

It fell into his palm. Sacris examined it closely.

'This bullet is from a pistol.'

Klimt nodded. He shifted on the spot, looking down at the corpse on the bed before adding:

'This man was murdered by Governor Schaar's assassin.'

Sacris took a moment to check what he'd just heard.

'How can you be so sure?'

'Believe me,' Klimt said.

Sacris sat down on the edge of the bed. He didn't know what to think.

'Sir... what's going on here?'

There was silence in the room, a silence that overpowered the stench of damp and death. The situation was a lot more serious than Klimt had envisaged and Sacris had seen too much already.

He reached into his right side pocket and handed its contents to Sacris.

Sitting in his palm was a ceremonial necklace and a single bullet. The bullet was of the same calibre as that used by the rifle currently lying on top of the corpse.

'I don't understand...'

The older officer relaxed his stance and looked down at the floor as he began speaking.

'Earlier today - before I saved you - I received a package.'

Klimt shifted awkwardly on the spot.

'Inside was the necklace, the bullet and a printed note with this address.'

Klimt looked over at the corpse wistfully.

'I didn't know he lived here.'

'Who's he?'

'He is, or was, Scabus Jenk.' Klimt paused for a second. 'He was also the last person to see my partner alive ten years ago.'

Sacris looked down at the necklace and the bullet in his hand.

'You think he sent you this?'

Klimt smiled weakly.

'Someone did.'

Closing his fist around the necklace, Sacris took a moment to process what he'd just been told. Klimt stood by the window looking out at the oppressive night sky.

Sacris got up from the bed and walked into the bathroom. He felt dirty and needed to wash his face. Klimt was still staring out of the window when he reentered the bedroom.

'Someone definitely knew you were coming.'

Klimt turned and saw Sacris standing before him holding a cheap, white envelope.

'It was taped to the mirror in the bathroom.'

Klimt's name was written on the envelope in black ink. He took it and opened it hesitantly, scanning the note inside.

He let the envelope and note fall to the floor.

'We have to leave.'

Before Sacris could reply, Klimt had walked past him and out of the door.

Sacris moved over and picked up the crumpled, printed note from the floor. It read: Ten years asleep. See you at the mausoleum.

AS THE BIKES tore through the guts of the Downside on this night of eternal darkness, Klimt couldn't help but conclude that in the last fifteen years - despite the prevailing wisdom of the time - things had gotten worse under Schaar.

A planet ravaged by war, sixty-five per cent unemployment, a forty per cent rise in crime and a population more dependent on handouts than ever

before.

This was Governor Schaar's legacy.

As he and Sacris turned down the deserted back streets, Klimt noticed a huge mural, freshly painted on the wall of an abandoned market. The mural read: Blood cries for blood.

The words evoked something in Klimt, his mind wandering back ten long years.

It was just before the incident at the power station and Yedas had recently been informed that the case against Jorsted was about to be dropped. The heat was building and Governor Schaar was openly pushing for Yedas's badge; leaking allegations to the press that Yedas had roughed up Jorsted a little too much during one particular interrogation.

Klimt had been there when this had allegedly occurred and Yedas had treated Jorsted like any Enforcer would have treated any other suspected criminal on Persana.

That was the thing about Yedas. He was always by the book.

At the time, Klimt had naively thought his partner would get a token punishment and that would be it. With the benefit of hindsight and experience, he now knew that Yedas was facing suspension and redeployment to another posting or - as seemed more likely -expulsion from the force.

On this particular night, Klimt had come to see Yedas about some evidence relating to another case. It was late and Yedas was in his room. As Klimt approached he could see that the door was open.

He peered round the half open doorway of Yedas's quarters. On the bed, Klimt could see his partner sitting, head in hands, weeping softly to himself.

Klimt hesitated. Should he go in or turn and walk away? He took a few moments before finally turning away from the door and moving back towards his own quarters.

He'd thought no more of it until tonight. But now, for the first time, he considered whether Yedas had left the door open on purpose. Perhaps in the hope that someone would find him before it was too late.

ON ENTERING THE power plant for the first time in ten years, Klimt felt a shiver climb the length of his spine. The bullet holes in the cold floor still remained. The dents in the coolant tower still pock marked its surface.

Climbing the gantry, Klimt was overwhelmed by the heat pouring forth from the central core. For a second it was as if the last decade had never happened. He half-expected to find Scabus Jenk cowering in the same alcove.

The almost familiar voice behind him shattered Klimt's nostalgic interlude.

'You made it then?'

Klimt turned. He recognised the outline of the man before him immediately. He cleared his throat and tried to speak without betraying the emotion in his voice.

'How could I not, old friend?'

THE EVENING AIR was cold, but inside Sacris was bubbling with rage. Not only had Klimt lied to him, he'd also forced the younger Enforcer to sit outside and wait like an errant child when Sacris reasoned Klimt needed back-up most.

He'd argued this with Klimt, but to no avail. He truly was as stubborn as his reputation suggested, but Sacris was surprised that someone could be so self defeating in their stubbornness.

The high esteem in which he held the older officer plummeted the colder he got. What was the point of waiting around for Klimt to be brought out in a body bag while he froze to his saddle?

It was in this growing spirit of rebellion and disillusionment that Sacris finally got up from the bike and began the slow walk into the power plant via the south entrance.

I've made one bad decision already today, the young Enforcer thought to himself as he cocked and loaded his sidearm.

What difference is one more going to make?

AS THE TWO men faced each other across the platform that surrounded the central core, the static in the air was almost audible.

'You look well, for a dead man.'

Yedas laughed. It echoed around the high roof and encircled Klimt until he wasn't sure if it was Yedas laughing after all, but rather himself.

'As droll as ever,' Yedas intoned, barely suppressing his disdain. He'd always had a way of making Klimt feel inferior and that talent had seemingly remained undiminished in the intervening years.

'You caught up with our old friend, Mr Jenk?'

'I found his body, if that's what you mean.'

Yedas put his hands into the pockets of the duster he wore. Klimt's body tensed.

'I'd like to say that he'd improved as a person in the decade I spent with him, but when you're dealing with Downside scum as thick and recalcitrant as that, you're deluding yourself if you think they ever rise above what they are.'

Yedas removed his right hand from his pocket and rubbed his face idly.

'Still, he served his purpose.'

'And that was?' Klimt asked icily.

Yedas smiled at his former partner.

'To help me set Persana on the long road to salvation.'

As he talked, Yedas appeared so perfectly calm and detached it was almost as if he were reciting lines he had learned by rote.

'The heresy on this planet that the Enforcers have allowed makes me sick to my stomach.'

'There has been no heresy on Persana.'

Yedas let out a muted laugh.

'You think those heretics down in the south aren't in league with Schaar? From the day he took office, everything he has done has been to line his own pocket and to undermine the Enforcers' authority.'

Looking at Yedas, Klimt realised that the image of Yedas as a raving madman he had constructed in his mind on the drive over from the apartment block was being demolished before his eyes.

Yedas was many things, but mad was not one of them.

'Why do you think he's resisted the call for Astartes reinforcements? It would reveal this whole war, this whole abortion of a society he sits atop, as being the abomination it is.'

Klimt breathed deeply, absorbing what his former partner had just said.

'That's an interesting theory, but we would have uncovered this a long time ago.'

Yedas slowly slipped his hand back into the pocket of his duster.

'When have the Enforcers ever seen beyond the end of their nose?'

Klimt's head was beginning to throb.

'No, you're wrong.'

Yedas's face darkened. It was almost as if his patience in indulging Klimt was visibly at an end.

'Have you ever considered that it may be you who is wrong?'

Yedas pulled his pistol and fired at his former partner.

Klimt had been watching Yedas's hand for the last minute. It enabled him to evade the shot. He hit the iron grille floor with a thud.

Drawing his own sidearm from its holster he tried to return fire, but it was kicked from his hand before he could cock or load.

The echo of the pistol smashing against metal took an eternity to die away. When it did, Klimt was faced with the snubbed barrel of Yedas's pistol pressed into his face.

The older man looked down at Klimt with an expression that seemed peculiarly pained as his grip on the trigger tightened.

Klimt closed his eyes, waiting for the inevitable.

'Freeze!'

Klimt opened his eyes again and saw Sacris standing behind Yedas. The younger Enforcer had his pistol pointed at the back of Yedas's head. His face was hard and focused.

'Put the gun down!'

Yedas threw the pistol to the floor in front of him.

'I'm arresting you for the murder of Governor Schaar.'

Klimt repositioned himself on his haunches and moved to pick up Yedas's pistol.

'Raise your hands above your head,' Sacris barked loudly.

As the older man raised his arms, he twisted and moved with a speed that Sacris was unprepared for.

Unencumbered by body armour and using his still formidable reflexes, Yedas disarmed Sacris and had the younger Enforcer's firearm at his head before Klimt could lift the gun from the floor.

Yedas held Sacris tight as he sneered at both Enforcers.

'And there I was thinking that the quality of recruits had reached an all-time low with your generation, Klimt.'

Klimt looked up from his position on the floor. He held Yedas's pistol limply at his side. Raising the gun from the shadows, Klimt fired two shots from the pistol in his hand.

Sacris screamed. The bullets tore through both his legs, just above the knee.

Yedas was frozen to the spot.

As Sacris slumped to the floor, it gave Klimt just enough time to fire off another shot.

The bullet tore through Yedas's left shoulder. The older man was knocked back onto the floor. Klimt tried to fire again.

Clik!

The clip was empty.

By the time he had scrambled back and found his own pistol in the shadows, Yedas was gone. A trail of blood and his abandoned duster the only sign of his ever having been there.

Klimt - keeping low to the ground - moved over to the downed Sacris. Quickly binding the younger man's wounds with strapping torn from Yedas's duster, Klimt helped Sacris over to the alcove where Scabus Jenk had hidden ten years before.

AS HE MOVED through the hungry darkness of the power station, following the trail of blood that Yedas had left behind, Klimt continued to duck as bullets ricocheted against the railings.

Kneeling close to the floor, Klimt heard a familiar clicking sound echo across the cavernous hall.

Yedas's gun was empty.

Klimt slowly rose to his haunches and continued onwards.

Moving along the walkways, Klimt approached the open furnace of the secondary core. The heat from the core was intense and it burned furiously through the grille under his feet.

It was above the core that Klimt finally found Yedas.

He had left the walkway and was clambering across the gap between the north and south gantries. The only link between the gantries was via five

parallel platforms that hung from the plant's roof over the bubbling secondary core. This was the only route to escape via the North Entrance.

Holstering his pistol, Klimt jumped over the side and onto the first unstable platform. The platform moved significantly with his added weight, but he held onto the chains that attached the platforms to the pulleys in the roof and secured his footing.

The two men were half-way across the gap when they met face to face again.

Yedas turned as Klimt lunged for him. Deflecting Klimt's blows with his forearm, the older man knocked his former partner to the floor. As Klimt rose to his feet, Yedas pulled a knife from his boot and slashed him across the chest.

Klimt fell to the floor, bleeding and exhausted.

'You're a disgrace to the Enforcers, just as this planet is a disgrace to the Imperium.'

Klimt looked up at his former partner. He felt pity for him, but as he pulled his own blade from his gauntlet and plunged it into the side of Yedas's knee, he could only think of survival.

He turned it twice before letting go.

Yedas fell backwards in agony, his own knife falling from his hand as he grabbed at the small blade that was embedded almost to the hilt into the side of his knee.

As Yedas lay there, Klimt slowly rose to his feet. He pulled his pistol from its holster and pointed it down at Yedas.

He hesitated for a moment and then lowered the gun.

Leaving Yedas writhing on the floor, Klimt jumped back towards the relative sanctuary of the adjacent platform and raised his pistol to the roof.

Yedas could see his former partner's intention and looked at him with pleading eyes.

Klimt remained firm.

'Give my regards to Governor Schaar.'

He fired twice at the pulley supporting Yedas's platform and watched as Yedas fell towards the molten core below.

Falling backwards onto the metal platform, for a moment Klimt allowed himself the luxury of closing his eyes.

It had been a strange day.

SAFE IN THE alcove, Sacris looked down at the communicator in his hand. As he dialled the fortress's frequency, Sacris composed an entire transcript for the disciplinary hearing he was convinced he would now be facing.

The phantom hearing concluded with Sacris being found guilty of gross incompetence and sentenced to penal servitude for the rest of his days.

Sacris was already mining with the other Chem-Dogs on the deadmoons of Savlar when he felt a gun barrel press against his cheek.

Not daring to look around, Sacris was convinced that this time he was finished. He was surprised therefore to hear a familiar voice whisper into his ear.

'Turn that off, or I'll shoot you.'

It was Klimt.

'You look terrible,' Sacris ventured as he switched off the communicator. Klimt didn't respond.

It was Sacris who finally broke the silence.

'Was Yedas telling the truth?'

For the first time in a decade, Klimt didn't have an answer.

The silence spoke volumes.

HIS LEAST FAVOURITE section of the Enforcer fortress had always been the medical bay. Even though it had been remoulded and remodelled twice since he had been stationed here, a change in equipment and decor did not remove the antiseptic smell that Klimt always associated with death.

The one time he'd been required to stay overnight in the bay he'd discharged himself within an hour of his arrival. Yedas had laughed at him then and said...

But that was in the past now.

As Klimt turned the corner into the main ward he was struck by how many Enforcers had been hospitalised during the riots. It was estimated that a quarter of the force had been injured and about one hundred had lost their lives. He didn't even want to think about how many civilians had

been injured or killed, but surveying the scarred and blackened city this morning he knew the prognosis was not good.

'Hey, Klimt!'

Klimt turned sharply. It was Sacris. The younger Enforcer smiled at him. Considering that he was in traction with two broken legs from the gunshot wounds that the older man had inflicted upon him, Klimt felt that was generous.

Klimt stood at the edge of the bed.

'How are you?'

'Well I won't be joining a dance class anytime soon, but other than that...'

Sacris looked over at the Enforcer in the next bed. Bandages covered him from his head to his feet. He'd been set alight by a group of thugs during the riot. The medics didn't anticipate he'd make it through the night.

'I'm fine.'

Klimt could see that Sacris, despite his upbeat exterior, had been changed by the experiences of the last few days. Where he was once eager and bright eyed, he now carried the dulled colouration of a veteran. For Klimt it was like looking into a mirror.

'How did your meeting with the Majore go?'

'Interesting.'

After Klimt had brought Sacris back to the Fortress he'd demanded a meeting with his superior straight away. The Majore wasn't prone to being ordered around, especially during a crisis, but when Klimt hinted at its nature he quickly found time to see him.

The Majore sat stoney faced as Klimt told him everything. When he'd finished his superior leaned forward on his elbows.

'Never speak of this again.'

The story that had already begun circulating in the press was that Scabus Jenk - a known criminal with links to both organised crime and various loyalist secessionist groups - had acted alone in assassinating Governor Schaar.

Despite this, in some quarters whispers of a conspiracy had already begun to gain currency. There was nothing anyone could do to stop the

apocrypha of idle gossip that would grow around this subject. Klimt was glad he wouldn't be around to see it escalate.

'What time does your transport leave?' Sacris enquired.

'In an hour.'

Sacris looked disappointed.

'After everything, I thought you might stay.'

Klimt shook his head.

'Well, good luck.'

Klimt smiled. 'You too.'

He extended his hand to Sacris. The younger man took it and shook it firmly. As he withdrew his hand he felt Klimt slip something into his grasp.

Opening his hand, Sacris looked down and saw Yedas's necklace sitting in his palm.

He looked up, but Klimt was already gone.

Placing the chain over his head, Sacris lay back onto the pillow. The weight of the necklace around his throat was uncomfortable, but something would not allow him to take it off.

AS KLIMT LOOKED down at Persana from the air for the last time he felt a sense of sadness for the planet below and for the future it would have.

Already, transport ships containing battalions of Imperial Guardsmen were massing in the upper stratosphere, preparing to descend upon Persana and begin the liquidation of the secessionist forces once and for all.

Turning away from the window, Klimt tried to settle down for the long journey ahead. He gave up after five minutes.

Staring once more at the eternal blackness of space, one phrase kept echoing through Klimt's mind. It was, he thought, the only thing of any value he'd learnt from his time on Persana.

Everything changes in time.



ALTAR OF CYRENE

Lucien Soulban

PLUMES OF DUST rained across Cyrene, the sky unable to shed tears any longer. A layer of fine debris filled the stratosphere and sent slow-drifting columns of suffocating ash down on the planet's surface. Occasionally, the storm thundered at the touch of orbital mass-driver rounds that rippled the cinder clouds and shattered the ground. The projectiles were fashioned to look like ten tonne metallic statues of the Emperor. Each bomb sent more dust and fire-borne ash into the heavens. Each bomb was an exclamation point in the litany against heresy and another hammer fall in the Exterminatus and destruction absolute of Cyrene's every living citizen. Chaos had a foothold, but the might of the Imperium was busy kicking it loose, and using the final death throes of the planet as an example for all who might falter.

The black fleet of the Adeptus Astartes orbited Cyrene, raining down the will of the Ordo Malleus. No unsanctioned craft could pass through the debris cloud, although escape vessels occasionally breached the canopy of dust, before falling back under the blistering fire of the blockade. Hulls blackened and tongues of flame spat through ruptured seams as the ships careened back to the planet, adding to the confusion. Only the fleet's Thunderhawks and dropships earned free passage, ferrying the wounded and bringing fresh forces into the fray.

And far below the stationary fleet, Cyrene rotated slowly, bringing city after city to bear under the attack.

THE THUNDER WAS still distant, but the ground shook with the erratic pulse of the fleet's pounding march across the face of the world. Cyrene quivered under the vengeful boot of the Ordo Malleus. If the white haired Captain Gabriel Angelos of the Blood Ravens felt the approaching doom, he ignored it for more pressing concerns. A door shattered under the heel of his thick boot. He could have stepped around the door, through a gaping hole in the house's wall, but Gabriel was in violent humour this early morning. He stepped though, his blood-hued armour and gold winged-skull crest turned a deep sanguine by the surrounding flames. The two silver service studs on his scalp glistened.

'Where is he?' Gabriel roared in frustration.

Librarian Isador Akios did not answer. He moved through the rubble with a grace that belied his bulky librarian's armour. Arcane banners fluttered lightly from his shoulder guard and his features were as broad as Gabriel's. But somehow, Isador seemed smaller than the Blood Raven captain, even though the crest-standard of a winged skull rode high above Isador's helmet. It was as though Gabriel's unwavering conviction added to his already impressive stature. And Isador wasn't easily cowed, as Gabriel knew. He was the most powerful librarian in service to the Blood Ravens; he was the most powerful one Gabriel knew. Yet, Gabriel still eclipsed him.

'If he is not here,' Isador said, measuring his words carefully, 'then might I recommend we return to the task at hand?'

Gabriel said nothing. He moved deeper into the house, bearing his shoulder against fallen beams blocking a door. The servos of his exogauntlet whined briefly before he shoved aside the heavy debris one-armed, and moved further into the darkness. Gabriel knew what to expect, but he wanted to see it with his own eyes. Nothing. The room was empty.

'Captain?' Isador said.

Gabriel remained silent. He wasn't in the mood to listen.

'My friend,' Isador repeated finally. 'I sense no thoughts here. He's fled.'

'No!' Gabriel spun around, slamming his fist into a wall, anchoring it wrist-deep in concrete. 'Esmond hasn't fled.' Gabriel pulled his hand from the wall and pushed past Isador. 'Mark my words.'

'I hope he's worthy of such praise,' Isador said after Gabriel, following him outside. They stood among the ruins of buildings that bled a choking

smoke into the night air. All around them, the sounds of bolt and plasma fire cut screams to the quick while deeper, within the heart of the city of Bastillius itself, explosions rattled the senses and sent debris raining down in the surrounding blocks. The captain heard little of it, however. This pandemonium was familiar to him, this war-song his serenade to the Emperor.

'Gabriel,' Isador said. 'Look around you. We are here to bear witness to this. We are the last who will see this world alive. We should return to the Grey Knights before this quest of yours endangers the Blood Ravens.'

Gabriel spun on his heel and walked up to Isador, staring him straight in his black eyes, piercing him with a nail-hammered gaze. 'Are you saying the Blood Ravens do not stand with me in this?'

'We do stand with you,' Isador said. 'Through whatever hell you charge into, you'll find us at your side.'

'But?'

'But let the cause be just. We will follow you, but don't abuse our trust in you. What is one man's life in all this?' Isador said, spreading his arms to encompass the destruction around them. 'What is one man's fate compared to the will of the Emperor?'

'Nothing,' Gabriel admitted through gritted teeth.

Isador nodded. 'Nothing.'

There were only ruins around them, Gabriel realised, blackened carapaces of hollowed buildings, the cries for help, the streaks of light that brought death in their wake. 'We'll return to the land speeder,' Gabriel said. 'Scout the area on behalf of our Grey Knight brethren. But on my word... on my word, I will do what I must if I see him.'

'I-' Isador said, but Gabriel silenced him with a cautioning finger and stared at him until the librarian finally nodded. 'Very well,' he said with a sigh. 'I'll help. If only to save you from yourself.'

Gabriel smiled. 'I knew you were good for something, brother.' He headed back to the land speeder which hovered a few inches from the ground in the empty street.

'Captain,' Isador said.

Gabriel turned to find Isador staring out into the ash-choked distance, where flashes danced through the haze and earth-rending shudders shook the ground.

'Over there,' the librarian whispered. A flash of coruscating energy flashing across the open plates of his helm. 'Psykers do battle.'

Gabriel recognised Isador's tone, it was his war voice that delighted in the anticipation of battle. Touching his ear module, Gabriel brought the silenced comm-net chatter back into focus.

'...retinue. Inquisitor Lord Ca... fallen... encount... heavy psyker resis... Gregoriask Dist...,' a voice cried before a wail of static erupted over Gabriel's earpiece.

Both men jumped into the speeder's seats, nimble despite their heavy armour. Isador gunned the throttle and sent the craft gliding through the debris-clogged streets.

'All Blood Raven squads in the vicinity of Gregoriask,' Gabriel said. 'Converge on my signal.'

They headed toward the thick curtain of smoke.

THE SURROUNDING BUILDINGS were phantoms in the swirling dust, the battle hidden in quick bursts of lightning and fractured screams. Isador steered the land speeder, reacting to obstacles before they appeared from the ashen mists mere metres away. Obstacles raced by Gabriel, but he was focused on what lay ahead of them. He half-stood in his chair, bracing one foot against the seat, ready to pounce from his perch.

They shot past a ruined Rhino with its jagged metal petals blossomed open. Flashes ahead caught Gabriel's attention. The craft decelerated and Gabriel leaped from his seat, momentum carrying him forward through the fog. He landed in a run and jumped again, clearing several metres more with his quick stride.

Ahead, in the fog, a cowled psyker appeared. Dark sigils covered his clothing and from him emanated the stench of darkness. Metal tubes snaked from the back of his skull, he bore a shark's smile and twin embers of hellish light for eyes. Energy coursed around him and he fired once into the darkness, trying to hit Isador. By the time he noticed Gabriel's charge, it was too late. The captain pressed the barrel of his bolt pistol into the psyker's temple and fired, rocking him off his feet and slamming him into the ground.

Gabriel never slowed his pace.

Running, he scanned the darkness for more targets. About him, screams and weapons discharges tore through the night, as did the whine of Isador's land speeder and the whump-whump of its mounted heavy bolter. Another shape appeared from the mists, this one bulky and laden with prosthetics. It swung around at Gabriel's approach. Gabriel could see that its arms had been replaced with melta cannons and a chain blade, its upper body crawling with preservation tubes and armour plates. One eye was gone, replaced by a large implant. It was an inquisitor's gun servitor, tracking movement with a servo-skull. The servitor nodded to Gabriel before opening fire into the darkness, screaming its holy fury at some invisible enemy.

Gabriel swung wide and to the outside, following the servitor's superheated thermal discharges, but keeping his distance lest the blast's halo cook him instead. Something returned fire back at the servitor, the mist displaced by the scorching pressure wave of a raw psyblast. It tore up and blistered the ground in its passage, striking the gun servitor in its chest. It screamed, white-hot pyrokinetic flames engulfing it. Gabriel ran faster, knowing what would come next. The fire ignited the pyrum-petrol gases that still lingered in the servitor's fuel lines, back into his subdermal reservoirs. The explosion spread the servitor's body across two dozen red metres.

The shockwave threw Gabriel through the air. He landed, fell and was back on his feet again, his eyes scanning the turbulent mists for his opponent, as if nothing had happened.

The psyker betrayed his position, cackling at the servitor's expense. Gabriel gritted his teeth and honed in on the psyker's voice. He charged into the darkness, surprise his best weapon. The mists parted, revealing a mutant, his neck twisted one-hundred-and eighty degrees and his bearded face stretched long. His four eyes blinked, offset from one another, and he stared straight at Gabriel with a malicious grin. Surprise did not belong to the captain.

Before Gabriel could raise his bolter, the psyker unleashed another scorching psy-blast. Gabriel dodged to the side, avoiding the flare that ripped past him, but not the blast's superheated corona. Even through his armour, it blistered the skin on his neck and scalp. He fired at the psyker

from the ground, punching large holes in his opponent's chest and skull; it fell to the ground.

Gabriel raised himself to one knee as a third psyker entered his field of vision, electricity crackling about his body. Even the robes on this one couldn't conceal the misshapen bulk hiding beneath. With subtle grace, Gabriel touched his earpiece.

'Die,' the creature hissed, raising his arm.

'Only when the Emperor so instructs,' Gabriel responded.

Before the psyker could react, Isador's land speeder burst forth from the mists. Isador caught the mutant in the face with the vehicle's front grill, decapitating him. Gabriel's earpiece erupted with new comm-net chatter and a squad of Grey Knights loomed out of the smoke. Their armour was of burnished silver and engraved runes glowed a subdued gold. They were impressive and would have brought any man to his knees in reverence, but Gabriel was not so easily cowed by these glorious servants. He stood and nodded. He would meet them as equals.

THE GREY KNIGHT apothecary sprayed the burns on Gabriel's neck. The wounds calcified into dead, hardened skin while the apothecary offered the Litany of Healing and peeled off the flakes. Gabriel didn't grimace at the large patches of skin being torn away. His thoughts rested elsewhere.

'We sensed rogue psykers in the area and were on our way to cleanse them with fire. It seems you beat us to it,' the apothecary said.

Out of the corner of his eye, Gabriel saw Sergeant Caine of the Blood Ravens standing by Isador's side. They waited for the apothecary to finish his healing rituals.

'Are we done, good brother?' Gabriel asked the Grey Knight.

'Almost,' he responded before jabbing the hypo-spike into Gabriel's neck. A burning liquid rushed into Gabriel's jugular, scouring infections from his system.

Gabriel rubbed his neck and walked over to Caine and Isador. They waited for the apothecary to walk out of earshot.

'We stayed off the comm-net channels as you requested,' Caine said to Gabriel.

'Did you find him?' Gabriel asked.

'We did, brother-captain. Brother Uray and his squad sequestered Esmond in the St. Bellstus Bunker in New Carnith.'

'We must hurry,' Isador said. 'The Grey Knights are moving through the area, eliminating all in their path. If they catch Brother Uray harbouring a fugitive... well.'

'Very well,' Gabriel replied. 'Thank you for your help, Brother Caine. Return to your sweep sector and avoid arousing the Inquisition's suspicions. Comply with their every demand. If they ask for me, do not lie for my benefit. I will not see anyone else dragged into this.'

With a curt nod, Caine walked away, rejoining his squad.

'We should hurry,' Isador said.

Gabriel studied Isador for a moment, one eyebrow raised. 'I'm surprised,' he said. 'I thought you believed my actions misguided. Why encourage me to see Esmond?'

'Because if you don't,' Isador said, 'then you'll always wonder. And if you wonder, then you'll be distracted, and distraction leads to dangerous places.'

'You hope doing this will clear my thoughts.'

'I wish you clarity, Gabriel. I know you. You are strongest when you remain a focused instrument of the Emperor's will. Your heart should have space for none other.'

'Very well,' Gabriel said, then paused. 'I could order you to stay behind.'

'You could,' Isador said, getting into the land speeder. He sat down in the driver's seat, looking straight ahead. 'But why force me to disobey an order?'

A crooked smile tugged at the corner of Gabriel's lips. He sat in the passenger's seat and watched the ground fall away as they rose skyward.

A CLEAN WIND from the Canarrin Mountains swept over Bastillius, dragging away much of the ash fog, but doing nothing to improve the vista. The city burned and the fires spread with a rapacious hunger, forcing the land speeder to duck beneath the black canopy of smoke. The craft skimmed over cratered buildings and ruined hulks, buffeted from sudden drafts and hot columns.

From his vantage point, Gabriel studied the streets below, the apocalypse of a world unfolding in hellish detail. Squads of Inquisitorial storm troopers, wearing red cloth and gun grey armour, moved through the streets. They directed their meltaguns against the adjoining building, through windows and holes, herding the hidden occupants out into the streets, where others waited to cut them down in a blistering hail of fire. Those who didn't escape the buildings died in the inferno.

Further on, Grey Knight Terminators served as artillery units, firing gas grenades into fleeing crowds. Those caught in the noxious fumes screamed short-lived cries, before the acid clouds seared out their lungs. They fell to the ground convulsing, their skin sloughing off as the gas ate at the connective tissue anchoring flesh and muscle to bones. They died after several minutes of agony, skin draped loose over their own skeletons.

Gabriel slammed his hand against the land speeder's door, his blow rocking the vehicle and leaving behind an appreciable dent. Isador didn't react, but Gabriel knew that his eyes darted in his direction.

'They earned this fate, Gabriel,' Isador said.

'I know,' Gabriel responded through clenched teeth. 'But this is my...' He trailed off. Isador already knew what this place meant to Gabriel.

'I know these streets. I once lived here,' Gabriel said.

Isador said nothing at first, and Gabriel knew he didn't appreciate the weight of that statement. The librarian was raised in a monastery, training to control his power, to resist the whispers of the warp. He had no home. Nothing to watch die.

'Cyrene was your home centuries ago, my friend,' Isador said. 'Nearly everyone you know is dead and gone.'

'But not their children, or the names I remember.'

'Do you doubt the wisdom of this?' Isador said, his brows furrowed.

'No!' Gabriel replied, angry that Isador would suspect him of the most hateful of all sins: the sin of doubt. 'This action is just! Even if I was asked to end the life of every man, woman and child here, one bullet at a time, then I would do so. The planet was steeped in heresy, the taint of the warp in her very soil!'

'Then why are you angry?' Isador asked.

'Because they fell to heresy. My people, Isador, my entire world! It is corrupt enough to sanction the destruction of every last soul. They failed

the Emperor, and for what? Tell me. They sacrificed their very salvation for what?'

'I don't know, my friend. And for that, I am glad.'

'And look at the Inquisition down there. Look at them, cackling at their duty. This is not sport. This is a just and holy cause, yet...' Gabriel said, trailing off, suddenly realising he felt spent.

'Yet what?' Isador asked.

Gabriel looked at the librarian and saw no suspicious glances, no sense of disgust, just concern for a friend.

'And yet,' Gabriel said, 'the Inquisition acts like a plague of locusts.'

'That is their role in this. Their duty. It is up to them to be the terrible plague, ridding the planet of this taint.'

'I do not question their place in the Emperor's plan,' Gabriel said.

'Neither do I question the importance of all this. Let this diseased world be amputated, lest the scourge of heresy infect more worlds. I just wonder if there are none here who deserve a quick, quiet death. Not everyone here is corrupt. Surely not all deserve their burning fate, nor the renouncement of their names? Not all were so weak as to fall. I wish we could leave them their dignity in their final hours.'

'Who are we to take that chance?' Isador asked. 'I would prefer a million innocent victims to die than to suffer one false martyr to the dark to escaped our notice. A hollow saint undermines, no, mocks, the sanctity of our faith. And remember, nobody here is innocent. The Inquisition deemed it so. The heresy was too widespread, too pervasive, for anyone to miss its presence. If they knew of the sacrilege, then they are guilty of doing nothing. And if they didn't notice so obvious a plague, then they must pay for their blindness. There is no innocence here, Gabriel. There is only heresy, and the duty to eradicate it.' Isador paused, obviously considering his next words. 'What is it St. Galantain said?'

Gabriel closed his eyes, bringing the verse to memory. 'Let each sacrifice be a lesson unto others. I sacrifice my eyes so that others might see. I sacrifice my tongue so you are not swayed by sweet words.' He opened his eyes in time to see Isador nod appreciatively. 'You're saying Cyrene shouldn't be viewed in context to its own misery?' Gabriel asked.

'This lesson is not meant for Cyrene. It is a lesson for others, that ignorance is not the same as innocence. Now, citizens of the Imperium will

be more vigilant against the followers of the ruinous powers lest their own worlds suffer this fate.'

Gabriel looked down again and saw all the servo-skulls floating around, taking account of events and recording everything for the sake of posterity. Strange how he never noticed them before. 'Such spectacle,' he said to himself.

'But necessary. Otherwise why would we to all this trouble?'

That's when Gabriel saw something on the ground flash, then the corkscrewing smoke trail.

'Missile!' Gabriel shouted, but it was too late.

THE MISSILE SWALLOWED the land speeder's starboard stabiliser wing in a bloom of fire, sending the craft screaming earthward. Gabriel muttered the Litany of Safe Landing and gripped the door's frame, while Isador fought for control of the vessel; he managed to pull up from the dive at the last moment, sending the land speeder skidding down a decimated street, tearing up plascrete.

The land speeder came to a stop, both wings shredded and sparking wires hanging from rent seams. Gabriel and Isador stumbled out from the vehicle, rattled but unharmed. Isador muttered a thanks to the land speeder's machine spirit for delivering them safely. Gabriel scanned the burned-out hulks of the local buildings for signs of their attackers.

They didn't wait long.

A small cluster of people emerged from the ruins, perhaps ten or fifteen, their expressions hard and their eyes like knives. Some were from Cyrene's Imperial Guard regiments; others carried weapons scavenged from fallen inquisitors and storm troopers. None bore the taint of Chaos.

Isador stepped forward, ready to engage the rabble, but Gabriel cleared his throat, stopping him. The librarian looked at him, his eyes betraying his confusion.

Then he understood.

More people were hiding in the buildings, armed with the Emperor knew what. Isador relaxed, though Gabriel knew he was ready to lash out with the formidable psyker abilities at his disposal.

Gabriel studied the people who advanced slowly, cautiously, their plundered weapons at the ready. The captain could see that some didn't even understand the nature of their firearms. None knew how to appease the spirit of the machine or offer Litanies for the Pulling of the Trigger or Arming of the Magazine. They were angry, and they were frightened, and they wanted blood.

Gabriel decided to goad more out from the shadows, to reveal their true numbers.

'If you are trying to frighten us with this pitiful flock, I suggest you return when you have more people,' Gabriel said and turned around to walk away. Around them, more citizens stepped out from the shadows of buildings blocking their path, holding pipes and makeshift weapons. The dozen turned into a mob of two hundred, with Isador and Gabriel surrounded.

'I offer you a quick, painless death, which is more than you deserve,' Gabriel said.

'Deserve?' a woman said, her voice an eagle's screech, her plump body covered with tiny wounds and dust. 'We didn't deserve this.'

'Then what did you deserve?' Isador asked. 'Praise for allowing heresy to fester beneath your very noses?'

'We are not heretics!' an old guardsman cried, waving an arm which had been amputated at the elbow. 'I lost my limb for the Emperor.'

'And yet you desecrate that honour now,' Gabriel said. 'How sad that you couldn't serve your Emperor here, when it truly mattered. Better we rid Him of such hollow devotion.'

The old man spat in disgust and raised his lasgun to fire. Gabriel was quicker and fired first. The guardsman's head exploded, spraying those around him. The crowd shrieked, some falling back, others rushing forward to tear at Gabriel and Isador with their bare hands and clubs.

Isador was the first to act, his armour crackling with electricity, his movements blindingly quick as he swung his cable-mounted axe, dismembering people in the crowd two or three at a time.

Gabriel did nothing to hide his rage. His temper unravelled, slipping with each burst of violence against his own people. Anger surging forth, Gabriel's field of vision tightened until the world narrowed into dagger-

points. He raged against the mass of bodies throwing themselves at him, trying to tear him apart.

'How could you do this?' Gabriel said, crushing three people with the sweep of his gauntlet. 'How could you allow this to happen? You gave heresy a home in your own shadows. Whether by ignorance or indolence, you did this to yourselves!'

The crowd shrieked in anger and more people threw themselves upon the two Space Marines. Gabriel could no longer see Isador.

'How dare you do this to my home,' Gabriel screamed, his voice deafening, his bolter dropping attackers two and three at a shot. 'Everything I knew,' Gabriel continued as he threw one man into several others. 'St. Garryin's Monument, the Bachsellan Festivals, the Spring-Borne Lakes, the Winter Lights of the South, all gone because of you!'

'How could you do this to us?' someone cried out. 'How could you destroy your own people?'

'Damn you!' Gabriel roared. 'Damn you for drawing this upon yourselves and damn you for making me your executioner. Who do you think discovered your shame? Who do you think it was who brought the Inquisition here?'

'You betrayed us,' someone said, before Gabriel crushed him underfoot.

'I did not betray you,' Gabriel screamed, his indignation uncontained. 'I merely lifted the rock and found you squirming beneath. You betrayed yourselves.'

More bodies fell upon Gabriel, but none could dam his fury. He raged against all those who touched him, cutting lives with the brutal mercy of bolts, fists and boots.

THE TWO MARINES walked in silence, deeper into the heart of Bastillius where buildings lay in piles of burning rubble and the ravens sang serenades to the corpses. Gabriel's march was silent, his thoughts as dark as the night around him. Isador remained quiet. Gabriel could see he was invigorated after the massacre, a chance to destroy heresy was a powerful affirmation of his own faith in the Emperor. But the librarian was also wise enough not to say anything. This was not a victory for Gabriel. It was

his troubled duty, and Isador had known Gabriel long enough to recognise the distinction.

Both men continued their march across the city, with Gabriel determined to reach the St. Bellstus Bunker in New Carnith. Both were caked in the filth of death, their every victim having left something of themselves behind on their armour.

And they walked because Gabriel refused to contact anyone via the vox, he refused to draw any more of his men into his personal quest, or to reveal his position.

Gabriel and Isador stood upon the rise of the hill that was once crowned with monolithic buildings. All that remained were the streets and the flattened terrain. Massive earth movers had shoved the rubble into the crude fortifications that now surrounded the Crucivex Camp at the foot of the hill. Gabriel and Isador stared down, their minds unprepared for what lay below them.

The Crucivex Camp stretched into the darkness for miles. Tens of thousands of Cyrene's citizens had been crucified on crosses, their lifeless - or near lifeless - bodies dangling from cross bars, their death one of slow suffocation. None could cry out, so the flocks of ravens did it for them. In the chaotic maze of hanging bodies, servo-skulls wove lazy paths, recording everything as a warning to others who would truck with heresy.

Gabriel and Isador said nothing. Their surprise was naught but a brief pause, long enough to register the fact that they'd never witnessed this particular horror. But now they had. Now it was time to go on.

Their path took the duo through the ruins of this place, past breaks in the high walls of rubble, past the bare, impaled feet of the crucified and through the forest of crosses. For the hour they walked, the occasional victim stirred, but most noise came from the buzzing corpse-flies, laying their eggs in the dead, and the ravens who feasted upon this unexpected banquet.

The sound of a lasgun stopped the pair. Gabriel and Isador waited, their breaths held to hear more reports. A moment later, there was another shot, the discharge muted.

They moved toward the sound, careful of their surroundings. A third shot finally brought them within sight on a black-haired Imperial Guardsman. He was young and without the blemish of a scar or cybernetic

augment, a neophyte to Cyrene's defence force and now among the doomed. He looked broken, his clothing ripped and covered in dust, his arm bandaged for some wound that drew flies to it, and a lasgun hanging limply at his side. He walked among the crosses, searching for anyone who was still alive, defying the Inquisition who had left this dead place for better killing fields. When he found someone, their breaths shallow and their wounds still bleeding, he fired a shot into their forehead. He didn't notice either Space Marine as he walked away from them.

Isador's eyes narrowed, he stepped forward, intent on stopping him. Gabriel placed his hand on the librarian's shoulder.

'He has no right to end their suffering,' Isador replied, but Gabriel shook his head. He drew his bolt pistol. There were two rounds left. The fight with the mob had drained his ammunition.

Gabriel ejected one round into the palm of his gauntlet - he would have need of that later - and pointed the pistol at the soldier.

He fired.

The shot nicked his bicep; he screamed in surprise and ran, vanishing into the darkness. Isador stared at Gabriel, not daring to ask the question. The captain offered nothing and continued walking. He left the question hanging in the air, but Isador knew as well as anyone else.

Gabriel rarely missed.

DAWN APPROACHED, YET the sky remained dark and overcast with clouds of soot and ash. The city was quiet in these early hours, the harrying Inquisition marching westward in gigantic convoys and leaving the city to its appointed hour with the fleet's orbital mass drivers. Less than a half-hour remained.

Gabriel and Isador reached St. Bellstus's Shrine: an old bunker now exposed to the heavens. Its exterior was monolithic, a squat rectangular building that once rested far beneath the earth. During an ork invasion that had swept through the system decades before, the bunker was the site of a great massacre after the orks had breached its defences, slaughtering the thousands inside. When the Imperium reclaimed the world they dug up the bunker and turned it into a shrine.

Outside the single, open-mouthed entrance, the blond-haired Brother Uray waited with another Blood Raven, Akios, by their land speeder. They both looked apprehensive. Uray quickly donned his helmet at Gabriel's approach and ran up to him.

'Do you have Esmond?' Gabriel asked.

'We do. We caught him trying to flee the city.'

Gabriel gritted his teeth, but otherwise did not react to the news. Akios looked away: Gabriel knew he enjoyed being right about most things, only he didn't want to be right about this. He didn't want to be right at Gabriel's expense, and that bothered Gabriel even more.

'Captain,' Uray said. 'The Inquisition have ordered our evacuation to the city of Sestra. The orbital bombardment begins soon. I ordered my squad to leave, but-'

'You did well,' Gabriel said, his gaze fixed upon the bunker's entrance. 'Give me ten minutes, then send a Thunderhawk for us.'

'As you wish, captain, but hurry. He's in the rear shrine. We barricaded the door. May the Emperor watch over you.' Uray ran for the land speeder. The other Blood Raven was already invoking the machine's spirit, readying it for flight. They sped off quickly.

'This is as far as you go,' Gabriel told Isador.

'Very well, old friend,' Isador said. 'But you know whose will you must serve in this.'

'There is one God, and He is my Emperor, Isador. I am His instrument in all things.'

'I do not doubt your faith, Gabriel,' Isador said. 'In fact, I marvel at your conviction, and I envy you the well you draw your strength from. Just remember that your actions are just, even if you may question them.'

'I know my actions are just, old friend,' Gabriel said, walking toward the door. 'And, as in all things, truth needs pain to make it real.'

THERE WOULD BE no one left to honour the dead here Gabriel realised as he walked the hallways. The bunker-shrine served as a sepulchre that interred the skulls of all those massacred in St. Bellstus during the ork invasion. The skulls now sat inside grate-covered niches along the walls, each one painted red and blue with prayers and decorated with wax

imprints and rune-covered banners. In a few hours, they'd be buried under rubble, with nobody to remember their names or celebrate their lives. In a few hours, the spirits of the thousands who died here would be joined by millions more. Their voices would be lost in the chorus of heretics.

Gabriel reached the rear shrine and found the double doors chained. It was easy enough to kick it open with his heavy boot, scattering splinters across the floor. Inside the candlelit shrine were the skulls of the unnamed dead, stacked in columns, an altar for prayer and four rows of pews. Praying at the altar was an old man. His eyes were milky, his bald head covered with liver spots, his face caked in stubble and filth and his body covered in a network of tubes and filters that wheezed as they pumped rejuvenation fluids into his organs. The old man recognised Gabriel and straightened, an act of defiance that seemed to belie his long years.

'You're here to kill me?' Esmond said, his voice raspy.

'That I do not know, father. That I do not know,' Gabriel responded.

'ATTENTION, BASTILLIUS CLEANSER units. This is a final call for evacuation of all Inquisition, Grey Knight, Storm trooper and Blood Raven squads. Regroup at staging area ten miles east of Sestra. Expect heavy resistance from active XIV Cyrene Guard Legion. Orbital bombardment commences in ten min-'

Gabriel tapped his ear piece, lowering the barrage of noise from the vox. He studied his father who matched his gaze with equal venom, his eyes glittering in the candlelight.

'Where were you trying to escape to?' Gabriel asked calmly. 'You should know there is no place left to flee.'

'I will not die cowering like an animal,' he spat.

'No, instead you forced me to chase you down like one.'

'You will excuse me if I don't apologise.'

'It wouldn't matter,' Gabriel said, waving his hand. 'I wouldn't accept your apology. Forgiveness is a means of earning a second knife in your back.'

'Yes. Imagine, then, my surprise when the knife I found in my back belonged to my own son.'

'I swore to protect the Imperium against all manner of threat.'

'I am not a heretic,' Esmond said with a mechanical hiss in his voice.

'But you are a coward.'

'Better I the coward, than you the butcher!' Esmond's outburst sent him into a coughing fit. He spat up black liquid. No doubt one of his rejuvenation pumps was leaking.

'It means nothing to me. Butcher. Murderer. Assassin. I have been called them all today, yesterday, in the weeks before. And I will hear them in the weeks to come.'

'You... must be very... proud,' Esmond said between gasps.

'Proud? I am, that I can serve the Emperor against all adversaries. But that my adversaries include members of my own world, my own family. That is hard to take.'

'Gabriel, you've betrayed us. For the sake of eliminating a handful of heretics, you condemned our entire planet. Your home, your own blood!'

'It isn't for a handful, father. Do you think me so ruthless? The corruption is complete, and complete enough to blind you all.'

'We weren't blind,' Esmond said. 'And it wasn't heresy. We were tired of living under the Emperor's rule. It was a rebellion of ideals, not religion.'

'So you knew?' Gabriel asked, his worst fear realised.

'I knew. And I embraced it. Our ideals were just.'

'There is no ideal but the Emperor's!'

'Spare me the hollow mantras. I taught you to think for yourself.'

'And I do. With a terrible clarity, but I do.'

'I hope you realise that your so-called ideals were a doorway for Chaos to slip through. Good men and women are fighting the heretics infesting the sewers of Undergauth. All the psykers from the local Pathfinder Gymnasium were turned, as were high-ranking officers within the Imperial Guard.'

'They'd have you believing anything, now. They lied to you.'

'No, it was you who were lied to. The minions of Chaos led you astray and you walked in their company, blissfully ignorant. Heresy is heresy, and it was widespread. Even now, the Inquisition is questioning all Cyrene guardsman off world, and I doubt any will survive the torture, or escape from this unscathed!'

'Except you,' Esmond said.

'What?'

'You will escape this unscathed.' Esmond said, regaining his strength for what Gabriel knew to be his next venomous attack. 'You requested this destruction, and thus, are above blame or fault in this. The last innocent son of Cyrene, only...'

'Only what?' Gabriel said, trying to keep his temper contained.

'Only, you did not see the corruption either, until it was too late. Are you not, therefore, guilty of being blind yourself? Are you not guilty of our so-called sin?'

'What is this? Some feeble attempt to riddle my mind with doubt? Guilt? Now you are speaking like a heretic.'

'Oh, that would be an easier pill to swallow, wouldn't it? Far easier for you to kill the heretic than your own innocent father. Well then, kill me. Do what you came to do. But have the courage to look me in my eyes and acknowledge my innocence.'

Gabriel studied his father a moment, searching for some deception. He saw none, but felt a low rumble move beneath his feet. It wouldn't stop. The bombardment had begun further east, and was getting closer.

'I will do no such thing,' Gabriel replied.

'Then who's the coward now? You wish to kill me? Use your bolter, put me in your sights, and say: "Father, you are an innocent man in all this." Then pull the trigger.'

'No,' Gabriel said without a shred of emotion. 'I came here so you could take your own life, not to execute you.' Gabriel put his bolt pistol on the altar. 'Reclaim your pride. Do what is right and let me remember you the hero, not the coward. It has one bolt left, for you.'

Gabriel watched his father, while around them both, dust drifted down from the ceiling, shaken loose from the earth-torn tremors growing in magnitude. Esmond looked at the bolt pistol and picked it up, its size and weight ungainly in his feeble grip.

Esmond shook his head. 'You're lying,' he said, and put down the gun. 'The man I raised wouldn't leave a bolt in a weapon, so he could be killed by it. And if you were so stupid, I still wouldn't turn the bolter on myself. Better my blood on your hands, so you might never wash it off.'

Gabriel took the bolter from the altar and removed the clip.

'Hiding behind the coming bombardment?' Esmond said. 'Asking me to kill myself, to spare you that pain? Who's the coward now?'

'You are right that I am not such a fool as to stay defenceless.' Gabriel removed the round hidden in his belt pouch and shoved it into the clip with a small prayer. 'But I am not a coward. I will kill you.' He pointed the bolter at Esmond. 'But I had hoped that you would prove yourself the brave man I remembered.'

'And I hope you are orphaned from everything and everyone you hold dear,' Esmond said. 'I curse the day your mother spat you out from between her legs.'

'At least she had the courage to turn the bolter on herself,' Gabriel said before he pulled the trigger.

THE BLUES AND whites of Cyrene were gone, swallowed by a choking death. All that remained was a ceiling of black clouds and the occasional hellish glow of magma-fuelled fires from where the orbital bombardment had shattered the crust.

Cyrene was dead. Yet, that did not stop the orbiting fleet from broadsiding the planet with their cannons.

If Gabriel noticed his burning world through the starboard chancel's bay windows, however, he showed no emotion. Instead, he remained kneeling before the impassive Grand Master Qanox, a Grey Knight Space Marine who dwarfed the captain in stature. Qanox was impressive in his silver armour and the long strips of parchment intertwined around both arms. In his hands, he held a special writ, while at his side, a robed hierophant with tubes snaking in and out of her robes, read aloud:

'...and let all know that by decree of the sovereign might of the Golden Throne of Terra, that Captain Gabriel Angelos acted with righteous diligence in requesting the destruction of Cyrene, and that he is found innocent of the heresy tainting the planet.'

Gabriel accepted the writ.

'You did well, last son of Cyrene,' Qanox said. 'Stand and rejoin your brethren, as an equal.'

The room exploded into cheers as the Blood Ravens surrounded the captain, forcing him to his feet. Qanox nodded once and left the room with the hiero-phant in tow, leaving the Blood Ravens to their moment.

Gabriel remained grim-faced throughout, even after they toasted him for his innocence and drifted off into smaller groups, talking of their recent exploits on the now-dead world. Only Isador remained by the captain's side.

'Careful,' Isador said quietly and nodded to the writ.

Gabriel suddenly realised he was gripping it so hard that he was creasing the parchment. He loosened his grip, but not his expression.

'I thought you should know,' Isador said. 'We leave orbit tomorrow, the machine spirits willing.'

'I thought we were to remain here for the week,' Gabriel said, momentarily forgetting his sorrow.

'The fleet will remain, but we are to escort the Hellwatch Battlegroup. An ork fleet has entered the Tartarus system and the Imperium is dispatching us to handle the invasion.'

'Tartarus? Why is that name familiar?' Gabriel asked.

'It is a pilgrim world, with a very important saint. She lies near the Eye of Terror and has endured several Black Crusades.'

Gabriel smiled. 'I know it now. Good libraries?'

'Supposedly,' Isador said with a grin. 'There are some tomes that our Chapter's library needs desperately.'

'Good. You can visit them when we are done with the orks. After these two weeks,' Gabriel said, staring out at Cyrene, 'a little war will be a welcome relief.'



A BLIND EYE

Steve Lyons

RED AND GREEN lights danced in the night sky. The air was a bracing minus-four degrees. Ice floes stretched to the horizon in each direction like white jigsaw pieces.

It might have been a beautiful scene - but for the Imperial drop-ship, the roar of its engines shattering the peace as it fought to remain suspended above the fragile ice.

In its shadow stood two tiny figures, one relaying instructions to his comrades above, shouting to be heard even over the vox-net. Steele wished he knew what he was doing here, on Poseidon Delta.

Oh, he understood his orders. Somewhere in the water beneath him, there was an Imperial base. An Adeptus Mechanicus facility. Transmissions from this base had ceased, some months ago, and Steele had been sent to find out why.

His only question was... why him?

They were winching down a vehicle from the belly of the ship: a Valhalla-pattern Termite. With its gun emplacements closed and sealed, it was watertight: Kellerman had spent the past few hours making sure of this.

He stood beside Steele now, ostensibly overseeing the winching operation, in fact saying little. Kellerman was a tech-priest, swathed in the red robes of the Martian Priesthood. Currently, these were but the outermost of the many layers of clothing he wore. The bulge in his back, Steele took to be a mechanical servo-arm, although he hadn't yet seen this

in action. Kellerman wore a scarf around the lower half of his face, and a hood pulled down over his eyes.

He was still shivering with the cold.

'ALL I AM saying is, it makes no sense to me.'

The troopship. That morning. Mikhaelev had lowered his voice, so that only his four comrades at the mess hall table could hear him. So he had thought.

Anakora had scowled at him. 'It is not for us to question the wisdom of the Departamento Munitorum,' she had said gruffly.

'But why us?' Mikhaelev had persisted. 'Why extract us from Dask and fly us halfway across the galaxy for something so trivial?'

'Perhaps there is more to this than we have been told,' Grayle had suggested.

Barreski had nodded eagerly. 'An Adeptus Mechanicus base on an ocean world.'

'A world that has never been settled,' Grayle added.

They could be doing anything down there - studying xenos tech, perhaps, that could change the course of a thousand wars.'

'They've probably heard of the legendary Colonel Stanislev Steele,' said the young, enthusiastic Trooper Chenkov, 'and his daring exploits on Cressida.'

Mikhaelev had shot him a withering look. 'We lost almost nine thousand men on Cressida, and failed to rescue Confessor Wollkenden from the enemy.'

'That was hardly the colonel's fault!' said Anakora.

'I'm not saying it was,' said Mikhaelev, 'but Cressida is the reason why Colonel Steele no longer commands a regiment, and if you want my opinion—'

'Do we have any choice in the matter?' Grayle had said, with a grin.

'I'd say we have likely been chosen for this fool's errand,' Mikhaelev had continued, 'because our new commander would be pleased to be rid of us.'

Steele's augmetic right ear had cut out, then, but he had heard enough. Not that anything had been said that hadn't crossed his mind already. He had resumed his circuit of the troopship's main deck, deep in thought.

THE TERMITE SWAYED on creaking chains, above the ice.

Anakora and Petruski helped haul Steele and Kellerman up into the passenger compartment, to join the other six men within. Once they were shut in, Sergeant Gavotski instructed the driver, Grayle, to vox the troopship. A moment later, Steele could feel the Termite being lowered again. His augmetics picked up the sound of ice cracking beneath its tracks, then water slapped against the front shield.

The Valhallan 403rd, Steele's new regiment, had no sub-aqua vehicles. They had had no need of them before. The Adeptus Mechanicus base, however, was over two hundred metres down, too deep for even an Ice Warrior to dive to it unprotected.

They had been forced to improvise.

It seemed an eternity before the Termite set down on the seabed. Grayle reported that the winching chains had been unhooked and retracted. It took him four attempts to start the engine, and when it caught at last it proceeded to spit and to splutter asthmatically. 'It doesn't much care for the water,' murmured Palinev.

This Termite was modified to burrow through glaciers,' said Sergeant Gavotski. 'Its engine has been drenched with melted ice a thousand times'

'It's old, that's all,' said Grayle. 'Well, no sense in sending a newer vehicle down here when there's little hope of retrieving it later. It'll cope.'

'I hope you're right,' said Mikhaelev. 'If that engine fails before we get where we're going, there'll be little hope of anyone retrieving us either.'

He was right. Kellerman had only been able to narrow the location of the undersea base down to a few square kilometres. Grayle began to search that area, in an efficient grid pattern, but the Termite's luminators were next to useless in these murky depths. He could have driven them right past their goal without their seeing it.

And the rest of it? What Mikhaelev had said in the troopship's mess hall?

Steele had served long enough to know what it was like when one regiment was absorbed into another, how petty insecurities and grievances could grow out of hand. Not with Colonel Boiski, though; he would have staked his artificial right eye on it.

Gavan was an old friend. He had been almost embarrassed to find Steele under his command, and had bent the rules to give his fellow colonel as much autonomy as he could. He had even kept Steele's old command squad from the 319th together, though there had been a few new faces to replace those lost on Cressida.

It hadn't been Gavan who had sent Steele and his men to Poseidon Delta. That order had come from someone higher up than him.

THEY HAD BEEN searching for thirty minutes when they encountered the creature.

A giant tentacle lashed across the front shield, causing Grayle to let out an ancient Valhallan curse. A moment later, a heavy weight landed on top of the Termite, making its roof groan and bow. Barreski gave the massive borer attachment a spin, and this seemed to discourage their attacker for the present.

'You said there was no aggressive fauna in this area,' said Steele to Kellerman.

'According to our scans,' said the tech-priest, 'there wasn't.'

'Get us away from here, Grayle,' ordered Gavotski. 'If that thing comes back—'

'No,' said Kellerman sharply. 'Colonel Steele, if you please,' he added quickly, moderating his tone in the face of the colonel's glare. 'Intelligence suggests the facility is close by. The warm currents vented from it would naturally attract some life forms.'

The drill-mounted flamers should work underwater, sir,' Barreski offered. 'I can loose off a few bursts to keep it at bay.'

'Do it,' Steele agreed.

It was soon after this that Grayle sighted something. Steele leaned forward keenly, but even he could only just make out a looming shadow ahead of them and to the left. It could have been the Adeptus Mechanicus base. It could have been a rock formation.

He was still trying to work out which it was when the creature struck again. It rammed them from behind, and almost tipped the Termite tail over nose. Barreski's hands flew over the flamer controls, but he was firing

blindly, and a moment later he reported that the promethium tanks were all but empty.

'We're not making headway, sir,' Grayle cried over the rising shriek of the engine. 'It's like... It's as if we're being pulled back!'

'We've been breached!' It was Chenkov who sounded the warning, but there was scarcely need of it. The back end of the Termite was being slowly crushed. Cracks scored their way across the tortured metal, and water had begun to gush through them.

There was nothing else for it now.

'Get those hatches open,' Steele ordered. 'We're going to have to swim for it!'

STEELE WAS THE last out of the stricken Termite. By now, even the newcomers to his squad knew that such was always the way with him. He knew he could last longer than any of them in the water. Not long enough to reach the surface, though.

Kellerman had been right. The water was warmer than it should have been at this depth. Still cold enough to paralyse a less hardy man than a Valhallan soldier. Steele had shed his backpack, but he needed the protection of his armoured greatcoat. It weighted him down to the seabed, as he turned to see what he was facing.

The creature was huge, squid-like in shape, a dark purple in colour, and it held the Termite enwrapped in its ten long tentacles. As Steele watched, the hatchway through which he had just swum was crushed.

Then the squid lost interest in its catch, as it noticed ten more enticing targets.

Its tentacles lashed out like whips. Steele's comrades had struck out for the nearby base - what they hoped was the base. They were scattered by the attack, and Mikhaelev was hit. Worse, Palinev was caught and held fast by a tentacle.

Mikhaelev was sinking, apparently insensate. Anakora and Sergeant Gavotski turned back for him. In the meantime, Palinev was being reeled in towards the creature's great maw - but Barreski had a handheld flamer.

A stream of burning promethium seethed through the water, struck the creature between its eyes. The recoil sent Barreski spinning away. He was

caught by Petruski, who braced his comrade as best he could to fire again.

The creature must have had no pain centres, because it didn't flinch at all and its grip remained strong, despite a pair of angry red burns. On dry land, it would have died anyway, but the water kept the promethium flames from spreading to engulf it.

Barreski refocussed, aiming now at the tentacle that was holding Palinev, perhaps hoping to sever it, but his look of frustration told the story. He couldn't fire at the creature for fear of burning its captive too.

Palinev was still fighting. He was the smallest of the Ice Warriors, but perhaps the most tenacious. He was hacking at the tentacle that held him with a knife, unleashing tiny geysers of black blood. But the creature was crushing him, and the last of his air was bubbling out through his nose and mouth.

Steele motioned to Barreski and Petruski to disengage, head for the base, save themselves. There was nothing more they could do here.

Palinev had gone limp, his knife drifting out of his grasp. His strategy had been sound, though. He had just needed a bigger blade.

Steele drew his power sword. He didn't use the controls in its hilt - he wasn't sure what the water would do to the machine-spirits within if he did. The metal itself, along with the enhanced strength he gained from his bionic upper right arm, would have to suffice. He launched himself at the creature, kicking off from the seabed.

He drew the sword back, over his head, and brought it down two-handed. It was slowed by the water, but still bit deep. Black suckers on the sea creature's tentacle exploded like pustules. Palinev was freed, but unconscious, and Steele's sword was embedded in the creature's flesh. He lacked the leverage to pull it loose.

The tentacle thrashed, and Steele, unwilling to let go of his weapon, was carried with it, over the creature's head. It was all he could do not to exhale precious air. His lungs were starting to burn. He had no choice but to activate his sword, after all. It freed itself with a startling blue flash. Just in time. Another two tentacles were reaching for him. He discouraged them with a swipe of his still-glowing blade.

The water around him turned black; the creature had discharged some kind of ink. Steele had lost his bearings. As he settled on the seabed again, he interrogated his internal compass, but it failed to respond.

Cursing the vagaries of machines, he didn't see the next tentacle coming. He did, however, hear the whoosh of water displacement that preceded it, in time to throw up an arm to protect his head. Steele was struck in the side. His greatcoat kept his ribs from breaking, but he lost almost half his air.

On the third time of asking, Steele's compass responded to him. He headed for the base, half-swimming, half-walking. He emerged from the ink cloud, and could see it ahead of him: a dull, grey dome, strictly utilitarian in design.

He saw no sign of Palinev's body, and had no time to search for it. His internal chrono was counting down remorselessly to the moment when he would lose consciousness. His augmetics calculated that, at Steele's current speed, he wouldn't make it.

A shadow fell over him. The squid was hanging back, more cautious than it had been since its taste of Steele's blade, but reluctant to let the last of its morsels get away. Steele braced himself to fight again.

Then a jet of fire flared over his head, and burned the tips off two grasping tentacles. It was enough, finally, to make the squid creature turn and to skulk away, hungry.

Barreski was drifting in the water above Steele, his flamer to his shoulder. Ahead of them both, Steele could make out Petruski, plodding along the seabed with a slighter form that could only have been Palinev slung across his broad shoulders.

No doubt both troopers would claim not to have seen their colonel's hand signals earlier, or to have misread them. They didn't all have bionic eyes, after all. They would swear they hadn't disobeyed orders - and Steele would choose to believe them.

'WELL,' SAID GRAYLE, when he could speak again, 'that was a new experience.'

They were slumped in a musty airlock, shivering and coughing up water.

'I... I'll say,' gasped Barreski. 'You've lost a lot of Imperial vehicles in your time, Grayle, but I think you just set a new speed...' He succumbed to a choking fit.

They had been lucky. They had all survived. Kellerman, too - the tech-priest must have been tougher than he looked. It was he who had opened the door for them. Steele had been the last through, his body in convulsions, light-headed, but confounding the predictions of the machines inside his brain. His men had waited for him, of course.

There had been a tense minute, then, as the last of the draining water had sloshed around their boots, as Anakora had had to resuscitate the unconscious Palinev. She had brought him round, at last - not that Steele had doubted she would.

'The Termite served its purpose,' said Gavotski. 'Grayle too. They got us here.'

'Shouldn't someone have come to meet us by now?' asked Mikhaelev.

His luminator found a rune-pad on the wall. There had been a similar one outside. When Steele judged that the Ice Warriors were ready, he nodded to Kellerman, who tapped a code into the pad. An inner door slid open with a hydraulic whoosh. The passageways beyond were as dark as the airlock, and the atmosphere as stale.

Normally, Palinev would have been sent to scout the way ahead. He was still weak, however, so the job went to an eager Chenkov.

As soon as the young trooper set foot inside the base, lasguns barked out from each side of him. He was caught in a crossfire of ten or more beams and cut down.

Seven Ice Warriors went for their own lasguns, and Barreski for his explosives. He was beaten to it. An Imperial frag grenade came clinking, skipping along the floor, and landed perfectly in front of the airlock doorway.

Steele had already pushed Kellerman aside, slapped his palm against the rune-pad. The others flattened themselves against the airlock walls as the door whooshed closed and, in that same instant, was blasted off its frame.

The door had saved the Ice Warriors' lives, taking the brunt of the explosion. There was enough smoke, too, to provide them with some cover. Grayle and Mikhaelev were the first through the doorway, firing left and right, diving into the mouth of the passageway opposite as the answering fire came. Right behind them, Barreski braved a las-beam gauntlet long enough to hurl a grenade of his own back the way the other had come. 'Easy on the explosives,' Steele cautioned through his comm-

bead, as metal floor plates trembled beneath his feet. 'Remember where we are. One hole in the outer wall of this—' He broke off as a static burst threatened to deafen him.

Barreski's frag grenade had put paid to the las-fire from the left. However, with the smoke clearing now, most of Steele's squad was still pinned down. Crowding into the airlock doorway, Anakora, Mikhaelev and Petruski sent a volley of las-beams to their right, as did their three comrades opposite. The battle lasted for several minutes, but slowly the enemy fire lessened, then ceased and, with his augmented hearing, Steele detected several pairs of footsteps half-running, half-shuffling away.

CHENKOV WAS DEAD. But there was no time to mourn him. They had hardly had time to get to know him, anyway. At least he had been avenged.

They found four bodies down the passageway to their right, and the remnants of seven to the left: mutants, all. One of them clung to life: it seized Grayle's foot in its gnarled claws, tried to bite his ankle through his boot. He didn't waste his ammunition on it. He speared it through one of its three eyes with his bayonet.

Steele felt a familiar rush of disgust, just looking at those twisted corpses. Even more disturbing, however, were the tattered red robes in which they were wrapped.

'Adeptus Mechanicus robes,' said Mikhaelev, with a sidelong look at Kellerman.

'They could have taken them from this base's personnel,' said Anakora.

Sergeant Gavotski shook his head. He had seen what Steele had seen. Most of the dead mutants had servo-arms, or mechadendrites of some description. From where else could they have come, anyway? Where else but here?

How long, had Kellerman said, since contact with this base had been lost? That was how long it had taken for these men, once good men presumably, to succumb to the lure of the Ruinous Powers, for their bodies to have become as ugly as their minds.

'How many?' asked Steele.

'Twenty-three,' said Kellerman quietly, seeing his implication. 'Twenty-three tech-priests were stationed here. I have faith that some of them—'

Gavotski nodded. 'Some of them would have resisted. At least three mutants remain alive, but there may be no more than that - or as many as twelve.'

Steele tested the vox-net. It was working, but intermittently. They had left the heavy caster behind in the Termite, and evidently it was damaged, unreliable.

Steele chose to divide his forces, anyway. There would be little chance, that way, of a mutant slipping past them as they fanned out across the base. They had all seen hololithic plans, which showed a large central control shrine. Gavotski and Petruski would take the most direct route to this, and take Kellerman with them; the rest of the Ice Warriors would circle around and join them there later.

Steele, Anakora and Palinev went left. Anakora had the only working luminator of the three of them, so she took point. Steele kept a close eye on Palinev, who professed to have recovered from his near-death ordeal but looked pale. They followed a curving passageway, searching bunkrooms and store cupboards as they passed them.

They found wires torn out of a wall, the machine-spirits in them spitting their annoyance. That explained the lack of lighting in the base, at least. They also came across the corpses of three tech-priests, seemingly unblemished. Kellerman had been right - some of them had resisted.

Barreski reported in. He had to repeat himself, and even then Steele heard only half his words - enough to know that his team had found a second airlock, and a four-man escape vehicle. Grayle was checking to see if it was functional.

Anakora raised a hand, bringing her comrades to a halt. 'There are mutants ahead,' she whispered. 'I can smell their stink.' Palinev agreed that he could, too.

Steele could detect nothing. However, in such matters, he had come to trust the natural instincts of others above his own.

Palinev asked to be sent ahead, reminding Steele that he was the lightest on his feet. Steele gave him a long, appraising look before nodding his assent.

Palinev removed his boots, fearing that the squelch of water in them would betray him. He screwed an infra-red scope onto his long-las sniper's gun, and put it to his eye. Steele switched his bionic eye to infrared, too, as

Anakora extinguished her light. Then Palinev set off again, alone, hugging the passageway's inner wall, his footsteps barely audible even to Steele. He had gone less than twenty metres before he stopped, drew back a step and lowered himself onto his haunches.

He took his time, finding his unsuspecting targets through his scope. Then he fired around the curve of the wall, just twice. Then he waited again.

At last, he stood and beckoned for the others to join him. 'There were just two of them, sir,' he reported to Steele. 'Both dead.'

Steele was about to speak, when he heard more las-fire. It was distant, muffled by the base's internal walls, and it lasted only seconds.

He voxed the other two teams for status reports. Mikhaelev's voice buzzed through Steele's comm-bead, but its words were indistinguishable.

From Gavotski, Petruski and Kellerman, there was nothing.

THEY TURNED DOWN a radial corridor, making straight for the centre of the base.

Steele led the way at a run, slowing only to approach the arched doorway into the circular control shrine. He cranked his hearing up to full. He could hear a mechanical pump, and the ragged, shallow breathing of a man close to death.

He stepped inside, and almost stumbled over a corpse. A fourth tech-priest.

The shrine was crowded with big, black metal engines, streaked with soot. Most were silent and dark. One machine, however, still functioned, grinding and wheezing.

There was something atop the machine: the body of some creature, splayed out. As Anakora walked up behind Steele, as her luminator light fell on that body, Steele almost gagged. It was a foul, black thing, bigger than a man, a near-formless mass of tentacles and legs and eyes.

Steele had never seen a daemon before. He had only heard tales of those warp-spawned abominations, enough to know they came in all shapes and sizes. He had no doubt, however, that a daemon was what this malformed creature was. He made the sign of the aquila, and Palinev tried to do the same but had to turn away and vomit into a corner.

It was bound to the machine - nailed to it, in fact, its blood dried black around its wounds. Numerous wires and tubes burrowed into the daemon's flesh. Its leathery chest - what Steele took to be its chest - had been sliced open, to expose muscle and sinew. Inside, a shrivelled, black organ emitted regular spasms. The machine, it seemed, was keeping the daemon alive, so that it could be dissected, studied.

'Colonel,' said Palinev, in a small voice, sounding quite ill.

Steele followed his down-turned gaze, saw that Palinev's toe had touched another corpse. Its head had been severed and was nowhere in sight, but Steele had served long enough with Sergeant Ivon Gavotski to recognise his body.

Anakora found Petruski. He was still alive, just. She broke out a medipack, did what she could for him. She stayed as far from the daemon as she could. Steele was still staring down at Gavotski, his oldest friend. He had never expected to outlive him. He had thought his imperturbable sergeant a constant in his life. He had come to rely on his counsel - perhaps too much.

He hadn't heard the quiet footfall behind him. His augmetics, however, had registered the sound and shrieked a warning in the back of his brain.

Steele whirled around. He found himself facing Kellerman. He must have been hiding in the shadows. Kellerman didn't flinch, though Steele had raised his sword to strike. He lowered it again, wondering how he had not detected the tech-priest's presence earlier. He cursed himself for having been distracted.

'What happened here?' he asked brusquely.

'A mutant ambush,' said Kellerman. He was perfectly calm.

'They were wielding blades?' asked Anakora, still tending to Petruski. Steele noted the gaping wound in the fallen Ice Warrior's side.

'Maybe they hoped not to be heard,' said Palinev, 'but our people got off a few las-shots.' He looked around as if expecting to find a couple of mutant corpses to add to the human ones. There were none.

'How many?' asked Steele.

'I didn't see,' said Kellerman. 'Your sergeant had me wait outside while he and his man searched the shrine. I heard the mutants fleeing as you approached. I tried to vox a warning to you, but the machine-spirits have abandoned my comm-bead.'

Even as he was speaking, he walked past Steele, as if their conversation held no interest for him. His gaze had alighted upon the captive daemon. Barreski, Grayle and Mikhaelev arrived, then, and Steele had the three of them and Palinev guard the control shrine's four doorways as he waited patiently.

He couldn't see Kellerman's expression - he still wore his scarf and hood. His body language, however, suggested that he was more angered by the daemon's presence than repulsed by it. The tech-priest turned his back on the ghastly thing with a shudder, and recited a prayer to himself.

'What is it?' asked Steele, though he knew the answer already.

'It seems,' said Kellerman, 'that the tech-priests assigned to this base were the architects of their own downfall.'

Steele summoned Barreski forward. He came unwillingly, his eyes on the slumbering daemon. He brightened considerably when Steele gave him his orders. Anakora took his place on watch, as Barreski assembled his flamer. A single burst set the daemon's flesh alight, and melted the tubes that sustained it. Barreski fired a second, anyway.

The daemon dissipated before Steele's eyes, no spark of life remaining to anchor it to this physical realm. For a long time afterwards, nobody said a word. The daemon may have been gone, but this shrine had been tainted by its presence.

Steele had never been told the purpose of this base. He hadn't asked. He wondered if Kellerman had known - if any of the hierarchy of the Adeptus Mechanicus could have known - what was being researched down here.

He could understand the temptation. It had probably been born of the purest of motives: the desire to better comprehend the forces that beset Mankind and, in so doing, to find their weaknesses. But that knowledge was forbidden for a reason - one to which the ruined bodies in the passageways around this room well attested.

Was that why this base had been constructed down here, he wondered, so far from any pocket of civilisation? Was that why it had been submerged?

'I think we have seen enough,' said Kellerman. 'It is our duty now to destroy this facility, and bury the dark deeds that have been done here.'

'I agree,' said Steele. 'First, however, we should complete our search.'

Grayle reported that his team had found two more tech-priests - they had shut themselves in a bunkroom and taken their own lives. This left four unaccounted for, at least two of whom were now sword-wielding mutants. 'The chances of saving any of them are slight,' said Kellerman, impatiently. 'We ought to proceed with—'

'If we are to clear this base before it blows,' said Steele, 'we will need to set our explosives on a long timer. I'd rather not take the chance of leaving anything behind that could defuse them.' Kellerman bowed to his wisdom, and Steele divided his squad again. Barreski and Grayle were to head for the base's third and final airlock, in the hope of finding a second escape vehicle. Anakora and Palinev were to cover their backs as they hunted down the last of the mutants.

'Mikhaelev and I will stay here,' said Steele, 'with Kellerman. We will set the majority of our charges in this shrine, so we can be sure of blasting these machines to dust.' Palinev couldn't conceal his look of surprise at this. It must have seemed to him that his colonel had assigned himself to the detail least likely to see combat. Had this been so, it would indeed have been unusual.

Steele, however, had his reasons.

MIKHAEELEV HAD SIX Krak grenades. More than enough, if they were placed wisely. He attached two to the half-melted machine that the daemon had befouled with its touch. Just to be sure. 'If there's anything else,' he said to Kellerman, 'anything on this base we don't want salvaged, we should bring it here.' The tech-priest nodded.

'Set the timers for two hours,' said Steele.

'Can we not work more quickly?' said Kellerman.

'We're in no hurry,' said Steele. Kellerman's body language said otherwise - his hands were twitching impatiently - but he didn't push the point.

Petruski hadn't come round. He needed better medical care than could be provided for him in the field. Steele had hoped for a chance to question him. He didn't know Petruski well, but he had been impressed on more than one occasion by his physical strength. When this was coupled with Gavotski's natural caution and instincts honed by long experience, it

seemed incredible that they could have been defeated so easily, at least without claiming a few mutant scalps first.

It was likely Petruski could have told him nothing, anyway. The angle of his wound, and the way he had fallen, suggested he had been hit from behind. He may not have seen his attacker.

Static hissed over Steele's comm-bead. He couldn't make out a word of the incoming message, nor identify the voice that had sent it. He could hear las-fire again, however, and this told its own story. Mikhaelev could hear it too, and he reached for his gun and looked to Steele expectantly.

'Stay here,' said Steele. 'Keep laying the explosives. I'll deal with it.' He drew his laspistol and power sword and marched out of the control shrine, determinedly.

As soon as he judged he was out of earshot, he came to a halt. He turned around, and crept back the way he had come.

Steele wasn't sure about this. Sometimes, the augmented part of his brain could piece things together and came up with a conclusion a more intuitive man would dismiss out of hand. A man like Sergeant Gavotski, perhaps. A voice in his head was screaming at him to go to his men's aid, while another insisted they could take care of themselves, and that the real threat was right here behind him.

He didn't know which voice to trust. He didn't know which of them was which.

He flattened himself to the wall outside the shrine. He peered around the doorway.

Mikhaelev was crouching by the opposite entrance, setting another grenade. At first, Steele feared he must have been mistaken. In which case, it was the other members of his squad who needed him, and he had let them down.

Then, the red-cloaked figure of Kellerman swept into view. He crept up behind Mikhaelev - and, from the folds of his robes, he drew a power sword, and ignited it.

Steele had seen enough. He stepped into the doorway, levelling his pistol. He didn't shout a warning. He shot Kellerman, twice, aiming at his head.

The first beam struck true. It ought to have been fatal.

Kellerman spun around and threw up an arm, deflecting the second beam. His reflexes were incredible - and he had to be armoured beneath his layers of clothing.

He threw out his arm, and bright energy crackled from his fingers. The air was split by jagged bolts of lightning, and Steele dived for the protection of one of the machines but was struck, speared through his augmented right shoulder.

The lightning was conducted through metal, through flesh, into his brain, where it burned like a thousand suns. Steele heard himself screaming, but turned the scream into a howl of defiance. There was a moment of blackness. Then, Mikhaelev was standing over him, helping him to his feet, and Kellerman was gone.

'I don't understand, sir. I thought Kellerman was one of us. How could he be...?'

'A mutant,' growled Steele. 'A psyker.' He didn't know the answer to Mikhaelev's question, not for sure. But he had his suspicions. 'Where...?'

'Escaped, sir.' Mikhaelev nodded towards the opposite doorway. 'He was gone before I could get off a shot at him. If you hadn't come back when you did...'

Steele felt drained, weak - not of body, but of mind. He was afraid his organic half had blacked out, for a second, his augmentics bringing him around. It had happened before. He felt as if someone had taken a scouring pad to the inside of his head.

He could no longer hear las-fire. The battle with the mutants was over. The rest of his squad were probably on their way back here: Kellerman's psychic lightning had been almost silent, but they ought to have heard Steele's own two shots. To be sure, he aimed his laspistol at the ceiling and fired three more times, a call to arms.

'Colonel Steele,' said Mikhaelev, 'there's a Krak grenade missing. It was attached to the console here. Kellerman was standing right by—'

'Wait here for the others,' said Steele. He was already running.

HE FALTERED AT a junction of passageways. He swept each direction with his infra-red gaze, listened for footsteps. There was nothing.

Steele was short of breath and his legs were weak: the lingering effects of whatever it was Kellerman had done to him. Unacceptable. He refocussed his mind, and immediately felt stronger. He had allowed his augmetics to take on a few more of his brain functions, surrendered another small part of himself to them.

He didn't know where Kellerman was. But he could guess where he was going.

Steele closed his eyes for a half-second, called up the plans of the undersea base that he had seen once and memorised, plotted the most direct course to his destination.

He reached the airlock in less than a minute - the one in which his men had discovered the escape vehicle. It was still there: a grey, egg-shaped pod, slimy with seaweed and lichens, balanced on a square launching pad.

He waited in silence, in the darkness. He began to wonder if he had been wrong. Then he felt the slightest shift in the stale air, and knew he was no longer alone.

'Kellerman, I presume?' said Steele. 'Or should I say, *inquisitor*?'

Kellerman stepped out of hiding. He had discarded his red robes, along with whatever apparatus had given the illusion of the servo-arm beneath. He wore a darker-coloured cloak over armour. The lower half of his face was still covered, but his hood was gone and for the first time Steele could see that he had only one eye. An old, deep scar ran through the empty socket of the other, to disappear beneath the scarf. Steele wondered if Kellerman had been offered a replacement as he had been, and if he had refused it.

He didn't correct Steele's assumption. Not that it had been difficult to work out, once Steele had seen all the evidence. No mere impostor could have infiltrated his squad as Kellerman had. He would have needed the cooperation of the *Departemento Munitorum*, and most likely of the *Adeptus Mechanicus* too.

'*Ordo Malleus*?' Steele guessed.

'I have the authority of the God-Emperor of Mankind behind me, Colonel Steele.' The daemon hunter's voice was quiet but commanding.

'I recognise that, *Inquisitor*,' said Steele. 'But my men have fought bravely and well for the Emperor. They deserve a better fate than you intend for them.'

'None of us can escape the taint of this place, colonel.'

'The daemon is dead now,' said Steele, 'and its taint has not spread to my heart, nor, I would warrant, to any of theirs.'

'Would that we could be sure of this.'

'I am sure,' Steele countered. 'I know those men, Inquisitor Kellerman. I have fought alongside them. On Cressida, when the stench of Chaos was in the air itself...'

He didn't complete the sentence. He had seen the look in Kellerman's eyes when Cressida had been mentioned, the flicker of an expression on his face, and Steele *knew* now. He knew the truth.

Experimentally, he edged a little to his right. Kellerman's single shrewd eye followed him unerringly. The darkness was of no advantage to Steele, then. He activated his power sword, to dispel it. Kellerman did likewise. They circled each other slowly, both of them accepting, in that moment, how this had to end.

'You knew what we would find here,' said Steele, 'or suspected it at least, before we even embarked upon this mission.'

'There is a higher concern here,' said Kellerman. 'Were it to become known, this attempt by the Cult Mechanicus to truck with the Ruinous Powers, then—'

'I understand the stakes,' said Steele.

'Then you understand,' said Kellerman, 'that faith in all too many is a fragile thing, and that the unity of Man must needs be preserved.'

'I understood,' said Steele, 'that the purpose of your order was to shine the Emperor's light upon the sinner, not to hide his deeds in deeper shadow.'

'The Emperor sees all,' said Kellerman, 'and our deeds are for Him to judge.'

'You didn't need to bring us down here,' said Steele. 'You could have had this facility torpedoed from orbit, and protected its secrets that way.' He left the accusation implied: *Had you not been so keen to learn those secrets for yourself. Had you not known full well the purpose of this base, and turned a blind eye to it.*

And that was why Steele had been chosen for this mission. Cressida. He had never told a soul about what had happened there, about Confessor Wollkenden's madness. In some quarters, however, suspicion was often

enough. Kellerman had required an expendable squad - and, in the eyes of some of the members of his order, there was one whose commander had already seen too much.

Steele was not an emotional man. His augmetics saw to this, swift to counter any perceived imbalances in his brain chemistry. Right now, however, there was an ice-cold ball of fury forming in his stomach.

He held it down, long enough to make one final appeal to the daemon hunter.

He had to know he had no choice, that it was kill or be killed.

'I will keep your secrets, inquisitor,' he vowed. 'What would it gain me to do otherwise? My devotion to the Emperor is beyond question. What I will not accept is the slaughter of good men, good soldiers, in His name - struck down from behind by one they took to be an ally.'

'Stand aside, Colonel Steele,' Kellerman growled. 'Stand aside and let me pass'

And Steele could see it again, in his mind's eye - Gavotski's headless corpse, lying at his feet - and there was no going back now. He shut out the part of his brain, the logical part, that wanted to restrain him. He gave himself to the ice-cold anger.

His first sword thrust was parried easily. Steele's blade locked with Kellerman's, their energy fields clashing in a shower of blue sparks. The daemon hunter was stronger than he looked, perhaps another expression of his damnable psyker talents.

He was fast, too, or perhaps Steele was beginning to slow down. He was driven back, step by inexorable step, as Kellerman went on the offensive, slashing at his opponent again and again. An unexpected thrust to Steele's stomach threw off his footing, and Kellerman's blade struck for his neck.

It took Steele's augmetics a tenth of a second to calculate that there was too much power behind the attack for him to stand a chance of blocking it. Too long.

He let his blade take the brunt of the blow, but dropped at the same time. His sword was wrenched from his hands, but Steele rolled beneath a second strike and came up with his laspistol flaring. Kellerman winced and aborted another thrust, as he was hit in the shoulder.

The daemon hunter raised his right hand, and bright energy collected at his fingertips again. Still on his back, Steele was a sitting duck.

He smiled to himself. He had heard what his opponent had not: four pairs of booted footsteps, running to Steele's rescue.

Palinev was the first to make his presence felt. He sniped around the nearest corner, striking Kellerman between his shoulder blades. Kellerman swung around, unleashed his psychic, lightning bolts at this new target, but Palinev had already ducked back out of sight. Anakora and Mikhaelev appeared next, around the curve of the passageway - and, as the Witch Hunter turned to defend himself against their las-fire, Barreski came up shooting behind him.

Kellerman was staggered, at last, then driven to his knees. His power sword slipped from his weakened grip, and Steele retrieved it, stood over his vanquished foe.

'The... the Emperor,' Kellerman gasped. 'The God-Emperor sees all, and He will... He will judge you for your deeds today, Colonel... Stanislev...'

Steele swung his borrowed blade. He repaid the murderer of Sergeant Ivon Gavotski in kind. He parted Inquisitor Kellerman's head from his shoulders.

'I DON'T UNDERSTAND, colonel,' said Anakora, as they gathered around the body. 'Was that... was that Kellerman? What happened to him?'

'He must have been infected,' said Steele, 'as the other tech-priests were. This place...' There was no need to tell them the worst of it.

Palinev's eyes widened. 'Then we must get out of here, before—'

Steele nodded. 'More urgently than you might think, trooper. Where's Grayle?'

'He took a hit to the leg, from the mutants,' said Barreski.

'He stayed with Petruski in the control shrine,' said Mikhaelev.

Steele was already trying to raise Grayle on the vox. He heard his voice, through a static hiss, and spoke slowly and loudly: 'Listen, Grayle. You have to take Petruski and make your way to...' He broke off, and asked Barreski, 'Did you reach the other airlock? Did you find an escape vehicle in there?'

'No, sir. We never reached it, I mean. We had only just slain the last of the mutant scum when we heard your—'

'Take Petruski,' Steele instructed Grayle, 'and make your way to the third airlock. Quick as you can. I'll meet you there.'

He turned to the others, and jerked his thumb towards the four-man pod in the airlock behind him. 'Go,' he said.

'But, sir!' protested Anakora. There was always a protest, though they knew by now it would make no difference.

'I'll bring the vehicle back for you, sir,' said Barreski, 'in case there are no others.'

Steele nodded. Another lie he was letting his men believe.

This time, the truth was revealed to them in the thunderclap sound of an exploding krak grenade. It made the floor at their feet tremble, and almost shook the escape vehicle off its pad.

This had been Kellerman's plan, of course - except that he would have been far from here before his bomb went off, before the base's outer wall was breached.

The explosion had been close. Before its echoes had died down, Steele heard the roar of oncoming water. He was running before the others could react, before they could try to stop him. He took the nearest radial passageway, towards the control shrine.

He had almost made it there when he was struck from behind by a tidal wave. He was swept off his feet. He tried to fight it, in vain. He could only go limp and let the water carry him. It expelled him from the passageway, and Steele was dashed against something hard and metal. One of the shrine's black engines.

He scabbled at its pitted surface, found purchase, clung on for his life as more water lashed against him. It was cascading into the shrine from all directions, now.

It wasn't until the room was almost totally submerged that the water calmed down, and returned control of Steele's body to him. He climbed up onto the machine that had been his anchor, pushed his face above the rising surface, took one last lungful of air, then let himself sink again. He still had half the base to cross.

Progress was easier, thankfully, than it had been outside. He had the machines to push off against, and then the walls of the passageways that led to the third airlock. There had been no sign of Grayle in the control shrine. Hopefully, this meant he had received Steele's orders and acted on

them. With luck, his squad would lose no more of its members today. With luck, and the Emperor's favour.

THE ICE FLOES AGAIN. The sun had risen: a distant, cold light in the violet sky.

Seven of them had made it back. Seven out of ten. The survivors had clambered out of their floating escape vehicles, soaked and exhausted.

Steele had marched them almost three kilometres across the half-frozen landscape before allowing them to rest.

They were still waiting for the drop-ship to collect them when the explosion came.

They saw the flash first, lighting up a wide area of the sea. Then, a column of seething water was thrust skyward, a hundred metres high, and even at this distance the Ice Warriors were spattered with stinging hot droplets.

When it was all over, there was a hole in the ice, four hundred metres in diameter. A hole centred on the spot where, an hour before, the seven of them had stood.

Steele removed his fur hat, bowed his head, and led his squad in a prayer for the souls of Sergeant Gavotski and Chenkov. For those courageous men, the shattered remnants of an underwater dome would be the only grave markers they had.

He made no mention of Kellerman.

He gave thanks to the Emperor, for protecting the rest of them. There had been a second escape vehicle, as Steele had prayed there would be. It had taken him all he had to reach it - and then he had found the airlock in which it had stood waterlogged, the door jammed open. Fortunately, Grayle had made it too, with Petruski. He had studied the vehicle's dashboard runes, worked out how to drain its cockpit.

There had been no sign of the squid creature, or any other hostile life forms, as they had bobbed up onto the surface of the water - another palpable blessing.

'Did we succeed in our mission?' asked Palinev.

Mikhaelev nodded. 'We left nothing alive.' Of all of them, he was the most likely to have guessed the truth. The truth that Steele couldn't tell

them.

No one could prove that he had knowingly killed an inquisitor.

He did not doubt, however, that the Ordo Malleus would have their suspicions about his dealings with Kellerman, just as they had had about his dealings with Confessor Wollkenden. They would ask themselves how many dangerous secrets were stored in this upstart Ice Warrior's half-augmetic brain.

More so now than ever, Colonel Stanislev Steele was a marked man.



ENGAGE THE ENEMY

Jeff Smith & Hary Heckel

THOKAR, WOLF PRIEST of Fenris, transmitted his acceptance of the wolf lord's command, although he didn't expect the wolf lord to give it more than a glance. The wolf lord demanded quick obedience and such formalities were not to his taste. Thokar surveyed the Space Marines around him. Grey power armour glinted under the bright lights of the battle barge. Contrasting their boltguns and grenades, pelts and skulls of Fenrisian Wolves hung from their chest plates, shoulder pads and anywhere else the Space Wolves could fit them. Beneath his helm, Thokar smiled.

'For Fenris! For Russ! For the Emperor!' shouted the Space Wolves, raising their fists. The wolf priest lowered his black gauntleted hand as the others moved to the Thunderhawk. For other Chapters, war cries might be ceremony, but those words echoed like thunder in the hearts of his Wolves.

Thokar watched each of his Marines, seeing not the armoured and invincible warriors of the Imperium, but the individual warriors that he had chosen. So many times he'd searched for the bravest warriors of Fenris. He remembered the reverence in the eyes of mortals as they looked upon the Space Wolves as armoured gods. Each of these Grey Hunters had once been a Fenrisian warrior, struggling to survive in a land of eternal danger. The skills, the loyalty and the heart of these few had proven them worthy of travel to the Fang, the fortress of the Space Wolves. Thokar had guided each one through the terrifying initiation process, implanting them with the gene-seed of the Chapter. Many warriors had not survived, but others accepted the gene-seed transformation into the Emperor's finest.

Inside each one of them, the predator - the wolf within -stirred, awaiting the fight.

Thokar strode aboard the Thunderhawk, anticipating the descent to the war torn world below. Even the wolf priest in his long centuries had never seen a war like this one. The battles of Armageddon under the command of the Great Wolf, Logan Grimnar, paled in comparison to the massive conflict caused by the Black Crusade. Abbadon the Despoiler, most terrible living lord of Chaos, had led his Traitor Legions out of the Eye of Terror in such numbers that they threatened to consume the Imperium. Not since the Horus Heresy had mankind seen such conflict.

The machine spirits within the Thunderhawk roared as the landing craft descended to the dark jungles. To the east, the wolf priest saw explosions as battle continued in a burning city. The jolts of the descent mimicked the excitement in his blood. He was ready for combat, and he could sense that his packs were ready as well. The Thunderhawk came down with a hard landing, bursts of promethium flame clearing the jungle around the vessel.

Thokar nodded to his Grey Hunters and loyal Wolf Guard. They knew their roles: one team of Grey Hunters would scout ahead. Wulfric, a member of the Wolf Guard and an old friend, loved the hunt. He led Pack Morkai, while Pack Ranulf kept close to Thokar. The wolf priest stepped onto the planet's surface. Behind him, the ramp to the Thunderhawk closed.

The Space Wolves moved with a singular purpose. Within instants, the first squad of Grey Hunters had vanished. Pack Morkai had to move quickly, minutes were precious. Although the wolf priest had every bit of faith in the crew of the Thunderhawk, he knew that this enemy might detect the landing of even a single Thunderhawk. Thokar only hoped that the Iron Warriors hadn't already entrenched and trapped the jungle floor. Long minutes passed as the Space Marines moved through the jungle. The wolf priest waited for the first call from Wulfric and his lead pack.

'My lord, we have discovered the aftermath of a battle. Someone has claimed a few of our kills,' said Wulfric, with a hint of a grin in his voice.

The wolf priest nodded to the Grey Hunters around him. 'The first of our enemies have fallen.'

'Hold your position.' The wolf priest gestured to Pack Ranulf. No words were spoken; none were needed. In the matter of Chaos, they could not

take chances. Bolters at the ready, the wolf priest led Pack Ranulf cautiously through the jungle to Wulfric's position.

The wolf priest's senses sharpened, focusing on this new world. Of the hundreds of smells in the jungle air, Thokar picked out several that did not belong in this environment. The oily and metallic odours of machinery were mixed with familiar scents, reminding him somehow of his own Wolves.

When Thokar reached the site, the jungle had already reclaimed most of the battlefield. Creeper vines, blood ferns and assorted insectoids covered the metallic and gold plated armour of the Traitor Marines. The smell of death permeated everything. Wulfric glanced at Thokar, then stepped back to allow the wolf priest's examination. The events of the battle unfolded in Thokar's mind as he pieced together the remains.

'WE HAVE THE position covered. The plans for ambush are proceeding apace.' Champion Dalloc flexed his power claw, admiring the way the energy crackled and sizzled from his fingertips.

'Sir, we have motion in the undergrowth.' The squad raised their bolters.

'Assume fire pattern omega,' stated Dalloc calmly. 'Expect indigenous predators.' He never glanced at his men, thousands of years of training made their drill flawless.

'Sir, nothing in the north quadr...'

Something moved toward Dalloc, a blur of speed, fast enough that even his enhanced vision couldn't lock on it.

'Fire at will!' commanded Dalloc. In an instant, the jungle exploded with bolter fire. As the sound of the guns died, inhumanly strong claws tore apart the champion's helmet and fangs ripped off the front of his face.

The jungle cried out with growls and the sound of splintering metal. Dalloc's power claw lay on the ground, quiet and lifeless.

THE WOLF PRIEST carefully picked up the power claw. Claw marks completely covered the armour which lay nearby. His sharp eyes picked up a strand of fur across the metal. He carefully picked it up, twisting it in his fingers. Thokar knew the scent. The hair was that of a Fenrisian wolf and

yet, something wasn't right. There was a vaguely human scent mixed in as well. Strange, it reminded him of...

The wolf priest quickly activated his comm. 'Defender of Russ, a Space Wolf has succumbed to the curse of our gene-seed. All of my Wolves are present. Are any men missing, especially from the ranks of the Blood Claws or Wolf Guard?'

'Wolf Priest Thokar, we have no reports of anyone succumbing to the gene-seed. There are no Wulfen in your area. Are you certain of your findings?'

'Not entirely. I will report back when I know more.'

Thokar signaled his men to move forward. They spread out, vanishing from sight. Only the wolf priest's acute senses told him that the Grey Hunters maintained their formation.

As Thokar pushed his way through the jungle, the hairs on his neck rose. The smell of rot assailed him, overcoming the other smells of the planet.

'We've found the remains of a vehicle,' came a call over the vox.

A fallen Chaos dreadnought lay in a charred section of jungle, surrounded by dozens of small fires, as if part of a foul ritual. The sarcophagus was missing, the metal edges around it thin and flaking. Thokar knew a melta weapon at close range had vaporized the metal.

The wolf priest knelt down beside the remnants of the infernal machine. The hairs on the back of his neck remained standing as he examined the blasphemous runes etched across the dreadnought's metal surface. Small gargoyles, spikes and plated skulls hung from the fallen giant. He muttered a quick prayer to Russ. A single precise hit had destroyed the Dreadnought. Only the Emperor's finest, the Space Marines were so accurate. There were no Space Marines, assigned here... and a lone Wulfen couldn't have done this. This attack was recent, happening within moments of the first attack they had discovered.

A highly coordinated assault... even through this jungle. So fast that even these Chaos Marines were caught unprepared,' observed the wolf priest. The colours of the enemy were unmistakable. Though little could be certain about Chaos, the wolf priest knew his ancient lore. Before their fall, the Iron Warriors were master tacticians. Of all Space Marine Chapters from ancient times, the Iron Warriors had been unsurpassed in siege warfare. Now, ten thousand years later, after giving themselves to the

powers of Chaos, no one knew the limits of their abilities. Yet, Thokar noted, someone had caught the enemy off guard.

Drawing on his decades of experience, Thokar paced over to the spot from which the melta shot should have come. The boot prints he found were unmistakable... power armour, a few different types, from different eras. They could be traitor Marines. Yet their scents reminded him of Fenris. However they had arrived, the Iron Warriors' attackers had left no trail. They had used teleporters. Space Wolves did not teleport, they had a healthy mistrust of such technology. Still, the scents of Fenris were unmistakable to Thokar. Space Wolves had been here.

Bolter shells illustrated where the Iron Warriors had returned fire against their attackers. Crushed plants indicated that some of their number fell during the initial attack, only to have bodies removed later. The wolf priest found an unusual shell, larger than the others. It was an autocannon round fired from another direction.

'Thokar, come see this,' Wulfric gestured. As Thokar strode through the undergrowth, he noted with approval that the Grey Hunters stayed watchful, instinctively creating a perimeter.

The remains of a massive Chaos war engine lay burned and crumpled in the creeper vines. At first, Thokar mistook the machine for another Dreadnought. Although it was obviously a walker, the infernal device had six legs and a turret mounted atop them, more akin to a tank. The scent of sulphur, and a sickly smell of decay mixed with the acrid aromas of spent shells and oil, hung around it.

'What in the frozen hells is it?' asked Wulfric.

The wolf priest raised a hand. An autocannon hung off the shattered turret. Even more impressively, the main gun appeared to be a battlecannon. Thokar had heard reports of such creations. This was a construct of daemons. The rear armour of the turret showed signs of plasma blasts. Precise hits, obviously from close range. Yet these blasts weren't precise enough to destroy the war engine. A single strike, possibly from a power fist, had shattered the heart of the machine. The faintest scent of blood and... wolves came from the power claws found at the end of each of the Chaos machine's legs. Thokar noted the faintest flakes of grey ceramite on two of the claws, a slightly darker shade than his Wolves

wore. The paint could have come from any of a number of Space Marine Chapters, but this colour meant something to Thokar.

‘Space Wolves used to wear this colour,’ whispered the wolf priest. ‘Ten thousand years ago.’

Thokar felt his heart rate increase as the words left his mouth. He strode around the war machine, and then he found bootprints. No prints came or went, although autocannon shells and bolter rounds lay all around. He saw the impression of a power armour clad body in the soft earth, but there was no body. There had been two. One had fallen, but, it was as if both had vanished.

The thought that two men would have attempted to take on a tank-sized monstrosity like this one spoke of men pushing the limits of courage. What was more, the blast strikes suggested that they knew where to shoot the strange vehicle. They must have fought such things before.

Thokar felt a sense of religious awe flow through him. By Russ! How could he have ever guessed? If what he was seeing was true, there was only one explanation. The lost 13th Company had survived over ten thousand years in the Eye of Terror. What could sustain even the Emperor’s finest for ten thousand years in pure Chaos, surrounded by enemies?

Thokar looked around at the Grey Hunters he could see, and scented the ones he could not. He felt the determination and the focus in each one. The wolf priest also felt the Wulfen growl deep within his own soul. It would not let him die or fail. What if the entire Chapter had given themselves to the Wulfen?

Icy sweat broke out on Thokar’s brow. What sort of foe had the Iron Warriors faced?

Thokar nodded to his Wolf Guard. It was time to find the objective. Wilderness Outpost Delta was their mission, although it paled in comparison to what the wolf priest had discovered. If it were true...

Thokar shuddered inwardly, unsure whether to feel elation or fear. He had personally killed recruits on Fenris, lost to the Wulfen. Only the strongest Space Wolves, Wolf Guard or older could survive attaining the Mark of the Wulfen.

‘More bodies, sir. We’re very close,’ came Wulfric’s voice.

Thokar saw the blood drenched, torn remains. These were the ones he had seen evidence of earlier, the ones who had been near the dreadnought. He recognised the scents. They had fallen back into an ambush.

‘Let me see...’ Thokar knelt over the remains.

The attack had been different this time. Although the carnage was substantial, the claw and teeth marks were absent. This time, more conventional weapons had been brought to bear: power weapons, a power fist and something else. He carefully examined the cuts in the power armour. He could have identified an axe slash even before he had donned the mantle of Blood Claw, and the weapon had cleanly cut the armour, leaving the edges ice-cold. Only a Frostaxe, a sacred weapon of the Space Wolves, left these marks. The sacred weapon had struck with wild abandon in a frenzy, a definite sign of the Wulfen.

‘Sir,’ said the Wolf Guard. ‘There is no sign of the body of a champion. We are almost at the objective.’

‘Indeed. Move on,’ ordered Thokar, already piecing together what happened. He had a vision in his mind of what must have occurred, shortly before their arrival.

CHAMPION KURNOS ORDERED the retreat. Adaric’s squad was not responding. These weren’t ordinary Space Wolves. There was only one explanation: the 13th Company, the Space Wolves who had followed them into the Eye of Terror itself.

Suddenly, the air shimmered around his squad. A Rune Priest appeared before them, accompanied by a squad, clad in bits of power armour from a dozen Chaos Chapters. Before Kurnos could shout orders, his attackers launched a savage assault. The Rune Priest fought with unmatched fury. Kurnos felt strangely detached as claws severed his right arm. He closed his eyes and waited for death.

Death never came. Instead, strong hands wrestled his helm off and jerked back his head. A pair of bright, yellow eyes stared down. They were not the eyes of a man, but the eyes of a wolf.

‘Tell us, Iron Warrior, will your commanders come for you?’ growled the Marine. ‘Call them.’ Kurnos heard the hum of the power weapon as it

sectioned off his knees. The attackers dragged him across the ground, writhing in agony.

‘Iron within, iron...’ Kurnos started the mantra of his Legion.

‘This is your emergency beacon. Live long enough to signal them, not to speak,’ growled his attacker. Razor claws sliced apart his tongue. Dimly aware of his shock, Kurnos realised that he lay on the floor in the outpost. The 13th Company had set an ambush. He was bait. As Kurnos heard his emergency beacon go off, the iron within him turned to rust.

INCOMPLETE TRENCHES, HALF-USED razor wire, unassembled gun emplacements and bodies of Iron Warriors littered the area around Wilderness Outpost Delta. The wolf scent was strong here. This was the site of a Wulfen attack.

‘Seize the objective,’ ordered Thokar in a tone that brooked nothing but obedience.

‘There are slain Iron Warrior Terminators scattered inside,’ called Uller, one of Pack Morkai’s Grey Hunters. The wolf priest was prepared for the carnage.

The exterior of Wilderness Outpost Delta was standard rockcrete, covered in camo netting to hide the communications array. Thokar had seen the same building on half a hundred worlds. Inside lay the corpses of five Iron Warriors in Terminator armour, and a sixth in power armour. Wulfric led Pack Morkai back outside, while Pack Ranulf stayed with Thokar. Blood splatter decorated the interior of the room. Thokar knelt over one of the dead Terminators. The wiring attaching the corpse’s backup power supply sparked.

‘Something over here, sir,’ said Bran. ‘Looks like part of a skull.’

Thokar nodded to the Grey Hunter. This was the end of the story as he had seen it.

THE AIR SHIMMERED as five of the Warsmith’s Chosen materialised from the warp inside Wilderness Outpost Delta. The Terminators dwarfed other Space Marines. Their armour was the most ancient and ensorcelled of their Chapter. They had no equals, and only bent their knees to the

Warsmith himself. They looked down on Kurnos' twitching form. He saw daemonic faces leering at him from within the glossy dark metal of their armour.

Kurnos struggled to warn the Chosen, but it was too late. The Wolves were inside, power fists smashing against the Terminators. A chill ran through Kurnos as the Frostaxe stole the heat from the room, then sliced open the sacred Terminator armour, as easily as it cut the flesh within. The Chosen of Chaos, the Warsmith's Terminators, were no more.

'A transport has landed,' said one of the Marines.

'You've earned this,' another of the bestial Marines growled to Kurnos. Kurnos looked up and the claws took off the top of his head.

WULFRIC AND PACK Morkai reacted as one. Somewhere high above the range of human hearing, they each heard a familiar sound, a sound that they had heard a thousand times before, on a hundred different worlds. In every case, on every world, it came with the same deadly result.

'Incoming ordnance!' howled Wulfric over the comm.

The wolf priest and Pack Ranulf disappeared in smoke, fire and debris as the first of the artillery rounds impacted dead centre on the Outpost. A geyser of dirt, rock, concrete and ceramite armour fragments erupted as the second round hit home. Ancient power armour failed to save two members of Pack Morkai as their remains rained down on their brothers. Shells struck all around them.

Wulfric triggered his comm. 'Thokar... Thokar... please respond...'

Static answered the Wolf Guard. Wulfric's anger built in his heart. His wolf priest should not die on this backwater world. He howled in rage.

Wulfric heard movement behind him. He spun, drawing his power sword. Thokar stood over him, dirt smeared across his black armour.

'Wulfric, we have work to do. Control yourself until we can get to grips with them,' Thokar said with a half grin.

Wulfric took the moment to control his own inner beast. Relief replaced rage on his face. 'Russ be praised! I thought we'd lost you!'

The wolf priest spoke reassuringly. 'It will take more than Iron Warrior artillery to kill me.'

‘Uller, establish a flanking position to the east. Keep Pack Morkai in the cover of the jungle, at the clearing’s edge. Wulfric, stay with me. They will come upwind from the north,’ ordered the wolf priest. ‘Wulfric, we’re the bait.’

The surviving Space Wolves took up positions among their fallen in the ruins of the Wilderness Outpost, making good use of the rockcrete as cover. They waited. The jungle fell silent.

Thokar mentally reviewed his plan. Iron Warriors bombarded their enemies to soften them before an assault. When the Chaos Marines broke cover, they would open fire. In that instant, Uller and Pack Morkai would return fire from the jungle, giving Thokar, Wulfric and the survivors of Pack Ranulf the opportunity to seize the initiative and take the fight to them.

A skirmish line of iron behemoths broke from the thick jungle. Stepping into the midday sun, they wore armour from a different time and place, holy relics from ten thousand years past, now polluted with Chaos symbols and unholy markings. It sickened Thokar that these gifts of the Emperor were now bastardised tools of Chaos.

Boltgun rounds exploded around Thokar and the Wolf Guard. The few surviving chunks of Wilderness Outpost Delta blew apart, sandblasting the Space Wolves hiding in cover. Brother Sven looked up, only to catch a bolter round in his helmet. Thokar cursed the young and bold.

Pack Morkai opened fire from the jungle. The Iron Warriors paused for a fraction of a moment, confused by the attack from an unexpected quarter. That fraction of a moment was enough of a signal for the Space Wolves to charge from the ruin.

Raising his plasma pistol, Thokar exploded from behind his cover. ‘For Russ!’ he shouted. Each Space Wolf in turn added their own battle-cry to Thokar’s until ‘For Russ’ resounded above the bolter shots.

The Wolves tore into the Iron Warriors like predators on prey. Pack Morkai swiftly joined their brothers. Throughout the vastness of space, few could match the fury of a Space Wolf assault. Today, the Iron Warriors would learn this lesson. The Wolves asked no quarter and offered none. Bolt pistol rounds met ceramite and chainswords bit deep, first into armour and then into corrupted flesh. The Iron Warriors fell in droves.

Thokar briefly paused as the torn corpse of an Iron Warrior slipped from the grasp of his power fist. ‘Regroup and prepare to move...’ Thokar started, then realised that something was distinctly wrong.

‘Russ protect us!’ shouted Wulfric beside him.

Thokar knew the unmistakable scent. Whenever the Iron Priests evoked the Holy Litanies of the Machine God, they anointed their great machines with oil. Trees crashed into the clearing from the south as twin abominations charged. The Iron Warriors had flanked them!

Thokar had underestimated his foes, perhaps lulled into false security by the carnage they had encountered earlier. The Chaos Dreadnoughts roared with madness as they lumbered toward the Space Wolves. Two squads of Iron Warriors followed, spraying bolter fire as they advanced.

‘Pull back. Use the cover of the jungle,’ Thokar ordered. The wolf priest hoped that the thick foliage might neutralise the Iron Warrior’s numbers and superior firepower.

A small ball of energy cut off the withdrawal, appearing in front of the treeline. The energy pulsed once, then expanded into a sphere several feet in diameter. Lightning swirled across the sphere’s surface, then the sphere vanished with a thunderclap. Iron Warrior Terminators stood in place of the energy. As the Space Wolves paused, twin bolters and reaper autocannons sent the souls of three members of Pack Morkai to their ancestors. The Iron Warriors had them surrounded.

One of the Terminators raised a hand and the firing stopped. His armour was far more ornate than the others, decorated with longer spikes holding many skulls and the helms of a dozen Chapters of Space Marines, including the Space Wolves. Faces twisted across the surfaces of his metal armour, like trapped souls trying to escape.

‘What do we have here? Pups of Leman Russ, pet dog of the False Emperor!’ the warsmith spat the words like venom. ‘You have a choice: renounce your failed Emperor or beg for a swift death!’

Before Thokar could retort, howls echoed from all around, faintly at first, then growing rapidly in volume and intensity. The warsmith paused and turned his head, trying to locate the source of the sounds.

‘Thokar, behind us!’ Wulfric warned.

Thokar glanced back at the Iron Warriors and their ancient war machines. Behind the forces of Chaos, the landscape distorted as a vortex

of energy formed, flinging bolts of lightning in all directions. Shadowy figures materialised.

Immediately, one Chaos Dreadnaught collapsed. A pack with the markings of Long Fangs, the most experienced Space Wolves, poured nuclear fire into the remaining Dreadnaught from meltaguns. The war machine exploded, engulfing several Iron Warriors in a blossom of destruction.

Thokar seized the moment. 'Pack Morkai, aid our reinforcements. Wulfric, everyone else, take the Terminators. The warsmith is mine!' shouted Thokar. The Space Wolves attacked.

Even as Thokar swung his power fist into a Terminator, new combatants joined the assault. A snarling mass of fangs and teeth leapt upon the enemy. The primal fury of the Wulfen amazed even the veteran wolf priest. His new allies were more beast than Marine, clad only in remnants of power armour. A few held weapons, but these were secondary to claws and teeth as they gouged out crimson chunks from beneath the pewter and gold Chaos Marines.

Distracted for a second, Thokar barely evaded an attack. It was the warsmith. Thokar cursed as a second blow caught him squarely in the chest, throwing him backward into a crater left from the bombardment. Pain seared through Thokar's ribs. The warsmith loomed over the wolf priest, glaring down at him from the crater's edge. Thokar slowly rose to his feet, growling with defiance as energy rippled from his power fist.

'Your time is over, Wolf!' declared the warsmith.

'Your pitiful existence is all that will end today, betrayer!' responded the wolf priest.

The ancient warriors collided. Thokar, filled with rage, deflected or dodged every one of the warsmith's attacks. The power fist was an ancient weapon, slow and cumbersome to wield. In lesser hands, that would have been a liability. Thokar used its weight to his advantage, holding back, luring the warsmith closer. The master of the Iron Warriors swung his power sword in a killing blow, overcome with confidence. Only as his weight shifted into the swing did he realise that Thokar had feinted, tricking him into overextending his attack. The wolf priest had an opening. His power fist only needed one. The warsmith's helmet exploded under the

impact, and broken spikes rained helmets and skulls all around him. Victory belonged to the wolf priest.

Searing pain flooded through Thokar's left arm. Instinctively, Thokar ducked and twisted to his right and brought his power fist around. With a sickening crack, a Wulfen's chest splattered.

The 13th Company survivors surrounded the remaining Space Wolves. There was no question in Thokar's mind as to the fate of the 13th Great Company. Their time in the Eye of Terror had unleashed the beast within. The wolf priest saw no remaining humanity in their feral yellow eyes. The Space Wolves hesitantly leveled their weapons at the Wulfen. Each one had reached same conclusion. They faced fellow Sons of Russ. They didn't want to fire on their own, some even lowered their weapons, apparently choosing destruction over betraying their lost brothers.

'Hold, my brothers!' The command came in ancient Fenrisian.

Instantly, the Wulfen submitted and withdrew to the edge of the clearing. A grizzled ancient figure, tall even by Space Wolf standards, with a snow-white beard hanging from a cracked, weathered face stood at the tree line. The figure wore black armour from a time before the Great Betrayal, from the Time of Russ. He was a wolf priest.

The Wulfen disappeared into the jungle. When the last one had gone, the old priest slowly turned to face the Space Wolves.

'Lord priest...' Thokar began. If there were any words beyond that they were lost to him.

With a last glance to Thokar and a slight smile, the wolf priest disappeared as well. The silence within the clearing was deafening.

THOKAR'S COMM CRACKLED. 'Commissar Thaddeus Palentine at your service, lord Chaplain. We are your relief. Is the area secure for our landing?'

'This is Thokar, wolf priest of Russ,' stated Thokar, efficiently introducing himself and correcting the commissar simultaneously.

'I'm afraid we missed all the fun. Our intelligence indicates that you were horribly outnumbered,' observed the commissar.

'Russ was with us today,' offered Thokar.

‘We’ve had scattered reports of bestial creatures wearing fragments of Space Marine power armour. We were hoping that maybe you and your men could shed some light on these matters,’ said Commissar Palentine.

‘Have you ever battled Chaos? They are all mindless beasts wearing power armour,’ Thokar spat. ‘We have Khorne Berzerkers in the area, frenzied, skull-rending killers. This area isn’t safe for your men. We’ll handle things. Go where you are needed. The Space Wolves will handle it from here.’

‘I see...’ replied the commissar. ‘Very well.’ The comm signal died.

‘Not that I would ever challenge you, wolf priest, but I’m not sure I understand what you said to the commissar,’ Wulfric stated.

Thokar sighed. ‘I lied, Wulfric. Our brothers have returned after centuries of existence within the Eye. You saw them. They can never return to Fenris. The Great Wolf can never welcome them back. However, we can ensure that they do not become hunted, hunted by those who they set out to defend ten thousand years ago. So, I gave the commissar what he was looking for: an answer.’

As the wolf priest and Wolf Guard walked back toward the ruins of the Outpost, the ancient yellow eyes of a predator tracked them.



CRIMSON STORM

Dan Abnett

ITHAKA. PROUD ITHAKA. Ocean world. Cradle of Snakes. The armoured dropship turns like a comet in high altitude, streaming fire like a comet. On its white-hot hull, the double-lopped serpent insignia of the Iron Snakes Chapter glows, incandescent...

Sergeant Priad, leader of Damocles Squad, unlocked his seat restraints and lumbered in full armour to the nearest porthole. He stood with his hands braced against the hull wall either side of the port. Beneath him, through the luminous streams of re-entry fire, he saw the oceans, the dark tumult of vast, cold water, the thrashing frenzy of the deep, Ithakan seas.

The dropship swooped, levelled and ceased to burn. Low, low over the ocean top it skimmed, assailed now by hurricane salt-winds and kilometre-high waves. Seunenae, the folding wall of iron, bane of every wyrm-hunter.

Priad saw the bright reflection of the racing dropship flashing off the dimpled, roiling darkness below. He saw marysae, the white water foam. He saw the boiling cauldrons of ulbrumid, the wyrm-spoor.

Ithaka. Proud Ithaka. Ocean World. Cradle of Snakes.

They would be making planetfall soon. A minute or two. Time for the squad leader to unscrew the copper flask and make the Rite of the Giving of Water.

Priad had not been home for six years. And this was home. This was Ithaka.

Salt-water ran from his eye corners. The Rite had begun. Removing his glove, Priad wiped the tears from his eyes and marked the emblem of the Iron Snakes on the bulkhead. His men watched him do it.

Sometimes the Rite was special. Sometimes, you didn't need the flask.

The dropship streaked west across the sky like a tracer round, over the fishing villages and orub-groves of the archipelagos, basking in the sun, out towards the stilt-rocks of the Primarch's Causeway. These great towers of rock rose from the water like spines in a two hundred and eighty eight-kilometre curve where the archipelagos met the open ocean.

Priad had already given the dropship's pilot instructions. The ship slowed, adjusted and hove down towards Sulla's Rock, a thirty-metre stack dominating the trailing western lines of the Causeway. Ocean-faring hookbeaks and smaller littoral scale-birds burst from their roosts on the stack at the shrill sound of the dropship's downjets. They mobbed and circled, clacking bills and crying into the wind, the sunlight flashing off their grey flight-scales. White water boomed and erupted around the stack's base.

The dropship shuddered and settled on the flat top of the stack, its three landing claws extended and firm. The hatch opened with a clank, flooding the cabin with cold sea-air and the boom of the ocean.

They felt it on their faces. All of Damocles squad were un-helmed. Priad led them out into the buffet of the stack top. As one, they breathed in the clean metallic stir of the open water. It was overwhelmingly intense.

For years, their senses had been siphoned through the relay systems of their armour. Now they were exposed raw, in the wind. The olfactory receptors built into their skulls amplified the scents of the place a million fold. Priad sighed. He could smell the ozone in the fleeting wind, the lime-stink of the scale-birds guano. He could detect the aroma of saline mucus in the bivalves clamped to the stack's base, the oil slick of a sounding rocaloe shoal ten kilometres out.

The citrus in a glass of grain alcohol poured twenty kilometres away in a waterside tavern in the archipelago.

Too much.

Priad crunched across the salt-crust rock to the lip. Below him, at his toes, a giddy drop to the water. Hookbeaks turned and banked in the rising spray, cutting through the brief rainbows the vapour makes.

He looked back to his men. Kules. Xander. Pindor. Natus. Andromak, with the snake-standard flapping between his shoulder blades. Scyllon.

The pilot and his assistant had also emerged from the dropship, kneeling a little way behind the main group to show their respects.

'In the name of the Primarch who sired us, in the name of the Chapter which binds us, in the name of the God-Emperor who rules us, in the name of Ithaka... let this which was Ithaka's be Ithaka's again.'

Priad unstopped his copper flask and let the last of the water trickle out. The spattering droplets fell away down the side of the stilt, twinkling in the sun. This was the Rite of Returning. Every Iron Snake carried a flask of sacred life-water from his homeworld to anoint his actions across the galaxy, for the life-water comes from the ocean and the ocean is the blood of the Emperor. Now, on returning, what little remains must be given back.

One by one, the men stepped to the brink and poured the contents of their own flasks away. When all had finished, Priad, Andromak and Xander returned to the edge and emptied three flasks whose owners had not made it home. The life-waters of Calignes, Illyus and beloved Memnes. Then Kules, Scyllon and Natus stepped forward, bringing the eusippus, the copper urns. As the oldest of Damocles, this last duty fell to hawk-eyed Pindor, not the sergeant.

As Priad intoned the Lament of Dysse, Pindor unscrewed the lid of each eusippus in turn and shook out the grey ash. Soft, loose, light, it sieved away into the wind and returned like the water to the sea. They could smell it. Microscopic motes on the wind. The smell of death and glory.

Calignes. Illyus. Memnes. Fallen to the archenemy on Ceres. Gone, but never forgotten. In his armour's hip-pouch, Priad had the prepared statement of their lives, actions and deaths, sealed and ready to be placed into the archive of the Chapter House.

'Look!' said Pindor, catching Priad's arm. 'Look, there!'

Out beyond the stilts, barely a kilometre distant, the ocean boiled and seethed. Ulbrumid. Wyrmspoor. The great whirl was midnight black under the churning froth of white water. Thousands of sea birds wheeled and spiralled above the massive upsurge.

For a moment, one great coil of serpent broke the froth, horn-plate dazzling as it caught the light. Then it was gone, the ulbrumid fading, and the sea birds dispersing.

'A good sign, a good omen,' said Pindor.

Priad nodded. The great snakes of Ithaka had taken back their own.

'YOU HAVE performed the due rituals?' asked Lexicanium Phrastus. Priad nodded.

'Sir, the Rite of Returning is done. This morning, on the homeworld below. We went there directly before coming here.'

'I see.' Phrastus walked round to his writing lectern and took a holoquill from the energy well. 'Their names?'

Priad had been gazing out of the tower chamber's pressurised window, looking across the rockcrete fortifications and the barren crags of the moon to where Ithaka, green-white, was just then rising over the horizon.

'Names? '

'Of the fallen, sergeant.'

'Ah.' Priad sighed. 'Calignes, Illyus, Memnes.'

The Lexicanium wrote the names down.

'Any record of deeds?'

Priad took the sealed scroll from his hip-pouch and handed it to the Lexicanium. 'Full orders of merit, in detail and all particulars. They all have my highest commendation.'

'These will be catalogued.'

Priad unslung the narthecium from his shoulder and placed it on a side table. Inside, in self-locking sterilised tubes, lay the precious progenoid glands taken from the fallen. With Memnes dead, Priad had been forced to cut the glands out himself.

Phrastus rang a bell and summoned apothecaries to take the narthecium away.

'You will need new blood,' said Phrastus, setting aside his quill and coming to join Priad.

'Yes.'

'Captain Phobor has asked me to personally assist in your selection.'

'I am honoured, sir.'

'I have prepared a list of phratry petitioners. All of them new recruits of the highest quality. They are itching for selection into an active squad. And Damocles has a worthy reputation.'

'I'm glad of that, sir.'

'You lost your apothecary, didn't you?'

'Memnes. Yes, sir.'

'That is the hardest choice, in my experience. There are two promising candidates, both newly raised to that rank. Sykon and Eibos. I'm sure one or other will suit your needs.'

'I'm sure, sir. But I was hoping for Khiron. I heard what happened on Cozan. I thought-'

'Khiron? Oh no, no. I'm sorry, brother. That just won't be possible.'

Priad looked around. The scent of the Chapter House seemed suddenly intensely sterile and cold.

'Not possible?'

'The Emperor grant you grace,' said the Lexicanium. 'Welcome back to Karybdis, brother.'

KARYBDIS. Fortress moon. Chapter House. Barefoot and dressed in a loose white robe, Priad stood on the marble deck of the observation platform at the summit of the Chapter House's fortress. From here, he could see out across the mighty defences of the Iron Snakes' bastion, across the sloped turrets of the earthshaker guns, the massive curtain walls, the hardpoint blisters of the Hydra batteries. He could smell stone, prometheum, fycelene. The crude power. This was where the Iron Snakes' legacy took flesh, and from here they marched out to conquer the stars in the Emperor's name.

Priad had spent two hours in the armour-drome with his men as Chapter functionaries slowly removed and blessed every segment of their mark seven Imperator battle-plate and took it away for overhaul and repair. Then an hour soaking in the warm baths of the balneary, in deep dishes sculpted from the polished coil-plates of great wyrms. Then the plunge-pools and the cold scrubs, the brusque ministrations of the wooden thryxus to purge and scruff the skin and exo-skeleton, the application of warm, glossy orub-oil, the salving of sore body plugs and inflamed bio-link sockets.

Their hair had been oiled, combed out and coiled. Their faces shaved and smeared with depilatory wax. All Iron Snakes in the regular troop levies were clean shaven. The wax treatment kept their faces smooth for years at a time. The irritation bristles and whiskers growing under a full-

face helmet that might be worn for months at a time was considered a distraction from the focus of combat.

Washed, oiled, scrubbed, anointed. Priad felt cleaner and rawer than he had in years. His skin tingled. The perfume from the oils and unguents adorning him seemed noxiously sweet. They assaulted his armourless, superhuman senses, sickly, invasive.

And he felt light. Superhuman. Like he could jump up, break open the sky with his hands and never come down.

He hadn't realised what a weight the armour had become, no matter the strength and invincibility it gave him in battle. He had become used to its burdensome weight, and the focusing muzzle it had put on his senses. In truth, he had not been out of armour for any real length of time in six years.

Six years. Six years ago, he had stood on this very deck, similarly robed and similarly cleansed. He had gazed out over the fortress of Karybdis and rejoiced. He had been Troop-brother Priad, newly selected for Damocles by Sergeant Raphon and Apothecary Memnes.

Now he was back again. As Sergeant Priad, in Raphon's place. And Memnes too was dead.

Priad was painfully aware of the way honour had passed into his hands. He looked down at them, surprised to see them human and bare. It felt wrong that the great power claw wasn't clenching as he closed his hand.

He had held the squad together well since Raphon's death. They had enjoyed victories on Ceres and Eidon. But now he had to remake it. Almost a third of the squad had to be reselected and inducted.

Priad looked up at the stars, as he often did when in search of guidance, no matter what part of the galaxy he found himself in. He didn't know even half the names - that was the job of a librarian or an apothecary - but he usually found meaning in their display and formation. The God-Emperor of Mankind was in the stars, in every one of them, after all.

Directly above him was the tight band of the Reef Stars, a linear constellation to which Ithaka itself belonged. Though the Iron Snakes travelled far and wide in the service of the Emperor, this cluster was their particular battleground. Since the start of Imperial time, the Chapter had policed the Reef Stars and kept them safe, especially against the influx of the dark eldar, their oldest enemy.

'Sometimes the great, old wyrms will submerge for years at a time,' said a low voice, 'but not so deep as your thoughts now, boy.'

Priad turned, and immediately dropped to his knees. There was a sudden, saintly odour of power and electrical machines.

'Chapter master!' he gasped, making the sign of the aquila.

'Get up, boy. The Emperor in his wisdom gave you sturdy legs, so use them.'

Priad rose slowly, his head down.

'Look at me, Priad.'

Priad gradually raised his head.

Chapter master Seydon was just a shadow; robed, mysterious and towering. His cloak was made of broken, polished wyrm-horn pieces linked together like a jigsaw puzzle by gold wire. Slow respiration throbbed from the exchanger tanks under his cloak. His head was cowed, but there was a suggestion of inner light coming from where his eyes should have been.

He was a good metre taller than Priad.

'Master...'

'There are many things an Iron Snake might be allowed to fear, boy. The massed legions of the archenemy... the hordes of the greenpigs... the swarms of the accursed hives... but I am not one of them. Slow your pulse and your breathing, Priad. Be calm.'

'I had not expected to see you, lord.'

'I make it a point to see those Snakes who return after a long absence. Especially those I am fond of. Damocles squad - now, I've been fond of that ever since I told Damocles to form it. One of the finest war-squads this chapter has ever produced. Right up there with Thebes, Veii, Parthus and dear, brave Skypio. And you, Priad, you're Damocles now.'

'Yes, lord.'

'Petrok spoke well of you. On Eidon, you impressed him, and it takes a lot to impress my illustrious librarian.'

'I am not worthy, lord.'

'They tell me Memnes is dead. I will lament that in the temple. A great loss.'

'Lord.'

'Who else?'

'Calignes. Illyus.'

'Calignes... I always liked him. Had an air of old Pheus about him, the way he carried himself. Illyus... now he had the mark of a leader on him. Might have led a squad of his own, one day.'

Priad was quietly amazed. Though the Chapter numbered a thousand Marines, the chapter master spoke like he knew every one of them personally.

'You'll miss the men most in the long run,' said Seydon.

'Sir?'

'A great man like Memnes, everyone will mourn. That'll make the loss easier. But Calignes, Illyus... in my experience, a squad leader will miss the common troopers most. No one mourns them in quite the same way as a squad commander who misses their nuances and moves.'

'I'm sure, lord. But Memnes is a great loss to me.'

'Naturally. You've thought about a replacement?'

Priad nodded. 'I was bold, lord. I wanted an experienced man as apothecary. Khiron-'

'Not Khiron, boy. Forget about him. Khiron won't be joining a squad again.'

'Lord, I... I heard what happened on Cozan. All of Ridates Squad lost except for Khiron the apothecary. It surely wasn't his fault.'

Seydon turned and looked out across the moonscape.

'No, it wasn't. Men die in war, and Ridates Squad fell valiantly. Khiron was lucky to survive, and I know for fact he wishes he hadn't. I'd have liked to have him back in a squad quickly. But it is more recent events that bar him from consideration.'

'Lord?'

'Look elsewhere, Priad. Look to your heart. I know you'll make a good choice.'

'Thank you, lord. I will try, but...' Priad's voice trailed away.

As silent as a phantom, the ancient chapter master had gone.

BROTHER NATUS grunted and shifted his weight onto his left leg as the petitioner put his full force into the swing. The cnokoi he wielded whistled over Natus's right shoulder, and Natus pivoted around and brought his own

staff up skilfully into the petitioner's rib cage, doubling him over and dropped him onto his backside on the straw mat.

Xander and Andromak laughed broadly and applauded. Natus grinned, and leaned over, reaching out with his augmented left arm to pull the gasping petitioner to his feet.

'Nice try,' Natus said, 'but your reach was wide and it left you open.'

'Sir,' the petitioner nodded, limping back to the edge of the mat where the other petitioners were waiting. At least three of them were sitting, nursing bruises and contusions.

Priad stood with Pindor, Kules and Scyllon on the far side of the sparring hall. Like all the Iron Snakes in the chamber - Damocles veterans and aspiring initiates alike - he wore a flexible bodyglove of dark grey hide, his feet, hands and head bare. The bodyglove was form-fitting, sculpted to the contours of the powerful physique beneath. Rubberised studs covered the lumps of cutaneous plugs and dermal implants.

Only Lexicanum Phrastus was robed. He wore a long grey euchoi of silk, edged with white and red beading and sat on a stone vaulting block, making notes on a data slate.

'Next man!' he called, flicking his fingers.

The next petitioner in line stepped onto the mat and picked up the discarded cnokoi. Two metres long and made of bronze, the cnokoi was a practice weapon designed to simulate the weight and balance of a sealance. There was no blade tip, but one end flared slightly into a blunt, spatulate flatness.

'Name?' asked Phrastus.

'Dyognes,' said the petitioner. He was tall and slender, his hair tied back behind the crown of his head in a short knot.

'Begin,' said the Lexicanium.

Natus settled into a casual crouch, legs planted wide, the classic laoscrae or deck-stance that kept a man upright on a wake-rocked boat. He held his pole across his chest, upper tip angled out to deflect, lower pulled back ready to snap out an underhook from the waist when it was least expected. Dyognes, the petitioner, took up a similar but less stooped stance and they circled. He'll soon be knocked off his feet, Priad thought, his centre of balance is too high.

Dyognes swung his pole tip down at Natus, who deflected it with his own raised tip, immediately pushing out the underhook in response. But Dyognes blocked the hook with a bell-like clang of metal, swept in with his upper tip and, as Natus parried that, deftly slid both his hands to one end of his cnokoi and hooked it like an oar behind Natus's knees.

Natus landed on the mat hard, his breath barked out of him. Now it was the petitioners' turn to clap. Andromak and Xander laughed again.

'Good,' said Natus grudgingly as the petitioner helped him up.

'Again?' asked Dyognes.

'My turn,' said Scyllon, stepping forward onto the mat and taking the cnokoi from Natus as he withdrew. Next to Priad himself, Scyllon had the best record of any in Damocles when it came to wurm-hunting, and he was a master of lance-craft.

Priad wandered over to Phrastus's side as the bout began.

'Interesting,' said the Lexicanium. Dyognes was the first petitioner to have won a bout against the members of Damocles since the session had begun that morning.

Scyllon moved in without formality, barely seeming to prepare himself. He spun in with a flurry of blows, high and low, that had the younger man lurching back across the mat. The air rang with the strokes of bronze on bronze.

Just when it seemed he was going to be driven across the red out-of-bounds border around the edge of the mat, Dyognes rallied and threw a series of thrusting strikes that forced Scyllon to first duck and then back off. What marked the petitioner's ability particularly was his unorthodox style, Priad noticed. Dyognes frequently changed grip, so that many blows were readdressed and swiftly reversed, and he wasn't afraid to swing the cnokoi one-handed, increasing its reach.

Taking one hand off the staff in a bout was frowned upon, of course. Half as much grip... twice as much likelihood of having the weapon knocked from your grasp.

Dyognes blocked three expert thrusts from Scyllon, and then tore in with an underhook so well-timed Scyllon had to leap back to avoid having his ribs broken. But he was wrong-footed. Dyognes drove on the advantage, scything his pole out one-handed to clout Scyllon around the head.

But Scyllon had fainted. He brought his pole up and intercepted Dyognes's wrist. The petitioner's cnokoi went spinning away through the air. Scyllon then butted Dyognes in the chest with the tip of his pole and dropped him onto the mat.

There was general applause.

'Bout, Scyllon,' said Phrastus.

'No,' said Priad. The applause died down. Priad pointed to where Scyllon's left foot was squarely planted in the red border.

'Out of bounds. Bout, Dyognes.'

Scyllon cursed at his own error good-humouredly and helped Dyognes up.

'There's one,' said Priad to the Lexicanium. 'Mark him down.'

HE KILLED Brother Krates of Phocis Squad.' 'He what?' Priad snapped in disbelief. 'Lower your voice, brother. It's not a popular topic in the Chapter House these days. Khiron's disgrace has astonished everyone.'

Priad couldn't believe what he was hearing. He stood with his old friend, Brother-sergeant Strabo of Manes Squad, in the atrium of the Chapter House temple just at the end of twilight prayers. The columns of the portico rose above them, entwined with bas-relief wyrms. Priad was almost choking on the scents of the smouldering incense. His nose just wasn't used to such broad, unfiltered odours.

'Ridates, Phocis and Thebes were deployed on Cozan, so I heard,' Strabo whispered. 'The archenemy was there in force, protecting some foul shrine or other. Ridates squad were wiped out, except for Khiron, and Phocis took some casualties before Thebes managed to turn the day and destroy the foe. They shipped back here with the wounded.'

'And?'

'Two days after they got back, Khiron walked into the Apothecarium and put his boltgun to the head of Brother Krates, one of the wounded from Cozan. Just like that.'

'But... why?'

Strabo shrugged. 'They say Khiron claimed Krates was an instrument of the warp, and that he was protecting the Chapter. But there was no proof. It seems more likely that Khiron's mind had gone. The loss of his squad and

everything. He's been locked away, raving, so I heard. There may be a trial, but more likely just... oethanar.'

Priad shook his head. It all seemed so unlikely. Khiron was one of the most levelheaded and respected apothecaries in the Iron Snakes. To lose his mind...

'You wanted him to take Memnes's place?'

'Yes,' said Priad.

'I'd leave it alone, brother. Look elsewhere. Khiron is no longer of the phratry.'

AFTER THE evening bell and a brief break for nourishment, the routines of combat practice recommenced. Damocles squad returned to the sparring hall to put some more petitioners through their paces.

Dyognes was a certainty now in Priad's mind, and there had been two others with promise. Now, in the evening session, two more performed well, especially a thickset youth called Aekon.

Lexicanium Phrastus had also brought one of his suggestions for apothecary, a blunt, grey-haired man called Sykon. Priad didn't take to this Sykon much, thought it had less to do with the man's bearing and more to do with Priad's state of mind. Khiron was going round and round in his thoughts.

He'd known and admired Khiron since his own days a petitioner, and indeed had been intending to try for Ridates Squad when Raphon called him to Damocles. The selection to one of the Chapter's most prestigious squads had shocked and honoured him. Priad had not then recognised his own worth. Only afterwards did he discover that he was one of the top petitioners of his year and that several squad commanders had argued over him. Priad had been unusual in that he had not joined the Iron Snakes with any burning ambition for advancement. Many of the petitioners dreamed of induction into Skypio, or the Terminator elite. For Priad, it was enough just to be an Iron Snake. A place in one of the standard tactical companies like Ridates would have been more than enough for him. In hindsight, he wondered if that very lack of ambition had got him to where he was. Perhaps the Chapter commanders noticed him because he had been more concerned with solid warcraft and service than on promotion or glory.

It was certainly what he had seen as appealing in Dyognes and Aekon. They came to the mat with none of the strutting bravura of others. And those others usually left the mat on their hands and knees.

Priad conducted the last few bouts of the session himself. He tried not to take out his exasperation on the poor fools who came up against him, fumbling with the cnokoi like they'd never held one before. He tried to remind himself that every one of these men had taken at least one water-wyrm single-handed. They were Ithaka's best. Priad left them gasping and spitting blood on the mat.

'That's it,' Priad called, and the group broke up. He handed the cnokoi to one of the petitioners to return it to the wall rack. Phrastus came over.

'I don't think I have to ask...' the Lexicanum began.

'Unless you've got something better to show me tomorrow, sir, my choices are Dyognes and Aekon.'

'Good choices, I believe,' said Phrastus. At your word, I'll confirm the selection with Captain Phobor and then prepare the induction rites. They will be Damocles by the end of the month.'

He paused. 'About the apothecary. His induction should take place at the same time.'

'Let me meet both candidates here tomorrow at seven, and I'll give you my choice after that. Bring the inductees too - Dyognes and Aekon, and the others we have marked as possible. I'll review them all one last time to be sure.'

'There is still time tonight, brother-sergeant.'

'Tomorrow, sir, please.'

THE THOLOS lay beneath the Chapter House, founded deep in the rock crust of Karybdis. A punishment blockhouse it was, thanks to the meticulous discipline of the Chapter, seldom used. Its most common residents were prisoners of war, held pending interrogation under the watchful eyes of the archons.

Phybos, the night's duty-archon, was a grizzled veteran who had lost both legs and an arm on Kinzia five decades before. He wore a long, grey beard and tied back hair, and his augmetic carriage grumbled as it carried him down the cold stone passage.

'This is irregular, brother-sergeant,' he complained.

'But permitted?'

'Yes. I suppose. Do you have a reason?'

'Do I need one?'

'You're the leader of Damocles Squad, brother. No, you don't,' Phybos paused and tutted, shaking his head at something.

'Has he said much?'

'You're joking!' Phybos replied. He tutted again and yelled, 'Shut up, in the name of the Primarch!'

Priad frowned. He had heard nothing.

'He's raving, raving night and day,' Phybos said, moving on. 'You hear that?'

Priad couldn't.

'You won't get any sense. And don't get too close to him, either.'

Phybos stopped in front of a heavy bronze door and slowly unlocked it, using the chain of keys around his scraggly neck. The door swung open to reveal an inner cage door, and beyond that, a gloomy cell containing Apothecary Khiron.

'There,' said Phybos. 'Raving, like I said.'

Khiron wasn't raving. He was seated at the back of his cell, silent, staring out at the open door with intense eyes. His face was bruised and purple around the nose and cheek.

'Leave us,' Priad said.

'Don't be too long, brother,' Phybos answered, and trundled away.

'Priad.'

'Brother Khiron.'

'No brother now, I'm afraid,' said the older man. 'I am cast from the phratry.'

'Why did the archon say you were raving?' asked Priad, approaching the bars.

'Am I not raving? Am I not hurling abuse and torrents of blasphemy at the cage?'

'No.'

'I see. That's what most men think I'm doing.'

'Why?'

'Because th-' Khiron paused. 'It doesn't matter. I'm grateful you see men and not a deranged monster. But there's no point trying to explain it to you. It wouldn't do any good, and they'd just claim I was trying to deceive you.'

'I-' Priad began, but didn't really know what to say.

'Let me ask you a question,' said Khiron. 'Why have you come?'

'I couldn't believe the stories. I wanted to see for myself.'

'I'm a curiosity now, am I?'

Priad shook his head. 'I didn't mean it like that. Damocles lost Memnes on Ceres. I was hoping to induct you as a replacement. My choice has been... blocked.'

'Memnes... dead?' Real sadness clouded Khiron's wise, swollen face. 'Then we have both suffered our losses this season.'

'Ridates will be mourned. Brave brothers all.'

Khiron rose to his feet, but did not approach the bars. 'Crossfire. In a gully. Dead, all of them, in less than six minutes. Only some cruel chance spared me. Stray shots brought down the gully wall and I was buried in rubble. The impact broke my cheek and nasal bone, as you can see. The archenemy thought I was dead too.'

He fixed his stare on Priad. 'I wish I could have done more for them. More than just dig their progenoid glands out of their cooling bodies, one by one.'

'You did all you could.' Quietly, Priad was trying to goad Khiron. If the loss of his squad really had snapped his sanity, these raw questions might expose that and convince Priad. But Khiron remained calm.

'Have they decided on a trial?' Priad asked.

'No. I have asked for oethanar. It is set for two sunsets hence.'

Oethanar. Trial by wyrm. The worst fate a man of Ithaka could undergo. Left alone and unarmed on a stilt rock, he would face the wyrms as they were summoned. If he was alive at the end of six hours, his guilt was determined. The water-wyrms would not touch the tainted. If they took him, he was one of Ithaka's and his innocence would be celebrated in funeral songs and grief-rites.

'May they take you cleanly and quickly,' Priad said.

'Thank you, brother.'

Priad turned to leave and stopped. 'If you are facing oethanar anyway, tell me.'

'Tell you?'

'The truth of it as you know it.' 'The truth of it, eh?' Khiron sat down again. 'Aren't you afraid I'll taint your mind?'

'Just tell me.'

A daemon, Priad. A thing of the warp. It was on Cozan, in the air, in the foliage, haunting us and directing the enemy beasts. It orchestrated the massacre of Ridates Squad. But it was a cowardly, feral thing. When Thebes Squad overran its minions, it fled and it hid.'

'Where?'

'Where? In Brother Krates. It was inside him when they brought him back, wounded. No one could see it. No one knew it was there. It blinded them all with its daemon glamour. But I knew it was there.'

'How?'

'I could smell it. I'd been close to it, remember. It had passed right by me after the massacre, believing me to be dead under that rockfall which smashed my face. I will not forget the smell.'

'What smell?'

Khiron looked up at the cell roof for inspiration. 'It has no equivalent. Once you smell it, you know it.'

And that scent was on Krates?'

'Yes. It wasn't Krates any more. It was that thing, cackling and jubilant to have been brought inside the Chapter House, ready to strike at our heart. That's why I took my gun to poor Krates.'

At least you can go to the wyrms knowing you stopped it.'

'No, Priad,' said Khiron, his face alarmingly serious. 'It's still here. I killed Krates but I didn't kill it. Like a fool, I used a gun instead of flames. It's moved on, into another host.'

Now Priad felt uneasy. This did seem like mad-talk to him. 'I haven't smelled anything.'

'Of course you haven't. It's gulled the whole Chapter House. But it's still here, be sure of that. Tricking you all.'

Phybos reappeared suddenly and slammed his baton against the bars. 'Cease your raving, scum!' he shouted, though Khiron's voice had been low and soft. The old archon turned to Priad. 'Haven't you heard enough?'

'I think I have,' said Priad.

THE HALL OF the balneary was quiet and dark, lit only by the lamps along the inner kolonos. The main bath pool was fifty metres square and filled with sacred sea-water imported from Ithaka itself.

Priad stripped off his bodyglove and dived into the water. He swam a lap or two hard and then floated on his back, looking up at the starlight filtering in through the circular window in the domed roof.

He suddenly realised he wasn't alone.

Above the soft lapping of pool water against stone, he could hear the faint pat of bare feet on the kolonos.

He waited for a call of greeting or a splash, but none came. After a minute or two, he folded at the waist and cartwheeled down under the water. Submarine noise roared in his ears. In the low light, he saw the legs of men moving through the pool towards him on all sides.

Priad surfaced. Six men surrounded him, standing where the pool was shallow enough, confidently treading water where it was deeper.

They were the surviving members of Phocis Squad.

'Priad of Damocles,' said one. 'You injure us.'

'I what?'

'We are wounded by Chaos and you take Chaos's side.'

'No! Why would you think that?'

'We know you spoke with Khiron,' growled another. 'That bastard is warp-scum! He slew Krates! He did a daemon's work!'

'Why would you show him pity and talk with him?' asked yet another.

'I showed him nothing. I wanted the truth.'

'The truth?' snarled a man to his right.

'You would scorn Phocis Squad so?' said the warrior next to him.

'Brothers... I have nothing but respect for Phocis Squad. Why have you come here like this? What is your intent?' Priad tensed. Inter-squad fighting was unheard of in the Iron Snakes, but he knew that in some rowdy chapters, rivalry sometimes led to brawls between brothers.

Was Phocis honour so damaged they had turned on him now? At the least, this was intimidation.

'Speak!' Priad persisted. 'What is your intent, brothers?'

'Enough!' A strong voice echoed from the pool side. Priad squinted, and made out the tall shape of Captain Skander, leader of Phocis Squad.

'We've said what we needed to say,' Skander announced. 'Do not insult my squad again, Priad of vaunted Damocles.'

The members of Phocis withdrew, climbed out of the pool, and followed their commander out of the balneary.

Priad was left alone in the shadowy water.

IT WAS JUST after seven, three hours after I dawn bell. Priad had rested badly, his I mind more troubled than ever. Now he stood in the centre ring of a combat mat in the sparring halls, a cnokoi in his hands.

'Sir?' asked petitioner Aekon, edging out onto the mat to face him.

'Aekon?'

'You seemed to be elsewhere, sir.'

'As you where.'

Priad set the pole down and paused for a moment. On the mat next door, Xander was sparring with Dyognes. Near the arched doorway, Lexicanium Phrastus was introducing the apothecary candidates Sykon and Eibos to Andromak and Pindor.

Down away, down the length of the sparring halls, Priad could see Captain Skander leading the men of Phocis through hand-combat drill. Beyond them, Sergeant Strabo was conducting flamer practice with the men of Manes Squad.

Priad's superhuman senses could smell burning prometheum, sweat, furze and, from Phocis, the background taint of salt water from the pool the night before.

He had almost told Andromak and Pindor what had happened in the balneary, but didn't want to be responsible for a squad feud.

Shaking the thoughts off, Priad swung his cnokoi up.

'Let's begin,' he told Aekon.

They exchanged a few, paltry pole-to-pole hits. Priad knew he could block everything the youth hooked at him.

'You'll have to do better,' Priad said, adopting the laoscrae. His attention was caught by Captain Skander, yelling at one of his troopers while looking Priad's way.

Skander glowered.

'Sir?' Aekon asked, faltering.

'Let's begin, I said!' cried Priad and brought the bronze pole up at Aekon's face. The boy turned, and deflected Priad's follow up.

Priad circled again, and blocked with his cnokoi.

He glanced sideways and saw Skander was staring at him, as if he wanted Priad dead.

Priad fumbled.

Light and pain exploded behind his eyes. Taking advantage of the sergeant's momentary distraction, Aekon had struck him squarely across the nose with his cnokoi.

'Sir! Sir, I'm sorry!' he could hear the petitioner gabbling. 'I thought you'd block, I thought-'

Priad got up onto his knees, his head swimming. The boy had got a sound blow home. Priad's vision was fogged, and blood was pouring from his cracked nose, splattering across his chin and chest. There was a fuss of voices around him, and beyond them he could hear scornful cat-calls and jeers from the men of Phocis and Manes squads.

He put his hands to his face. His nose was broken, and his left cheek bone too. The blow would have crushed a normal human skull.

'It's all right, Aekon,' Priad slurred, spitting blood. 'It was my fault for not concentrating. You saw an opportunity and took it. I'd have been more offended if you'd pulled the blow. There's no room in Damocles for men who show quarter to the enemy.'

He got up, blinking tears out of his eyes, feeling the soft tissue of his face beginning to swell. Now he could smell nothing but the iron scent of blood, potent and stifling.

'Golden throne, brother! The boy's hurt you worse than all the scum on Eidon ever managed!' chuckled Andromak, steadying his arm.

'Let me attend the wound,' said Sykon.

Priad shook them all off. 'Stop fussing over me like pack-mothers! Enough!' He could see better now and the self-sealing mechanisms of his augmented blood-vessels, along with the genetic clotting agents in his blood, were already staunching the flow. 'I'll go to the Apotheracion when this session is finished. Right now, Aekon and I were conducting a bout.'

He wiped his face with the back of his fist and left a smear of blood across his knuckles. Apart from the stink of blood, his sense of smell was

registering nothing. Aekon's blow had probably damaged the olfactory augmetics too.

'Go, go!' he snapped, waving the anxious Aekon back to his starting place on the mat.

Blood. And more than blood.

Priad realised it suddenly. There was a smell, a strong scent behind the lingering dominance of his own blood. Sweet, yet stale. Soft, yet strong. It was...

It was like nothing he'd ever smelled before.

It has no equivalent. Once you smell it, you know it.

The smell of murder. Of obscenity. Of insanity. The smell of the warp.

'Brother-sergeant?' Aekon was staring at him, puzzled.

Priad ignored him, turning to scan the chamber. Close, so close by...

He could hear his own pulse beating in his temple like a drum.

Where? Where?

Priad started to move. To run. He left Aekon standing on the mat. Over his shoulder, he yelled, 'Damocles, form and cover, hades spread!' Stunned, reacting, the men of his squad broke from their bouts and conversations and leapt to follow him.

One bound took Priad onto the practice platform where Phocis squad was drilling. He shoulder-barged one of the men who had intimidated him in the balneary and sent him sprawling. Another half turned, and Priad elbowed him aside.

'Skander!' he bellowed.

Captain Skander's eyes were wide in surprise.

Priad's cnokoi smashed him to the floor.

Dazed, Skander had wit enough to roll as Priad's next blow clubbed down. The bronze pole made a dent in the wooden platform.

The men of Phocis howled in rage. One made to grab Priad, but he wheeled and smacked the man backwards with the flat of his practice lance. Two more moved in, but suddenly the rest of Damocles were there, striking out, grappling, covering their leader's back.

Damocles were all dressed for cnokoi drill in grey bodygloves, carrying the metal poles. Phocis were all in half-armour, exercising with small oukae batons and small bucklers. Priad's men had the advantage of reach and hitting power, but Phocis were much better protected.

Andromak and Scyllon laid in with their poles, breaking shields and forearm-guards. Natus smashed a baton from one man's hand and then caught him neatly on the chin with the head of his whirling pole. Xander, Kules and Pindor were wrestling with opponents of their own. One of Phocis cracked Natus hard across the clavicle with his baton and was about to do so again when Dyognes dropped him with a cnokoi-flat to the forehead.

Priad's attention was entirely on Skander. The captain expertly kicked away Priad's footing, and they crashed together over the edge of the platform and into the practice area of Manes Squad. Priad could hear voices - Strabo's amongst them - shouting for them all to desist. Men from Manes put down their flamers and ran to try and break up the fight. Several found themselves drawn into it.

Priad would not desist. Struggling hand to hand with Skander, he was almost suffocating in the warp-stink oozing from the man.

Skander threw Priad over onto his back and heaved in with his oukae. The short hardwood pole shattered against Priad's cnokoi but Skander followed in with a savage kick that broke two of Priad's fingers and sent the pole skidding away across the decking.

Priad ducked back and threw a punch that cracked Skander's head sideways. Pain flared up Priad's arm from his broken fingers. Skander undercut and punched Priad in the throat and then broke the edge of his buckler across Priad's reeling head.

'Enough! In the name of the Primarch, enough!' Strabo screamed.

Breathing hard, Priad paused. For a moment, he wondered if he had indeed gone mad. Rage was pounding in his head. He glared at the bloody-faced Skander.

If this was all madness, then he would lose his command. Lose his place in the Chapter most likely.

Skander was raving at him, oaths and abuse. Priad couldn't smell the warp any more. He had made a fool of himself and disgraced the squad. He had-

He looked into Skander's eyes. There was something there. An after glow. A shadow. A corona of darkness around the pupils.

Like a fool, I used a gun instead of flames. It's moved on, into another host.

Priad stepped back and bumped into Strabo. His old friend was trying to hold him back and pin his arms. Priad wrenched free, and tore the flamer unit from Strabo's shoulder.

He swung back. Thumbed the toggle. A cone of flame engulfed Captain Skander. He twisted and screamed as he was engulfed.

Alarms started ringing.

All the fighting had stopped. Damocles, Phocis and Manes alike, and all the petitioners, and the Lexicanium, stood in utter shock, staring at the collapsed human fireball.

And the man who had burned him.

'What... what in the God-Emperor's name have you done..?' Strabo stammered.

'Look,' said Priad weakly. 'Look.'

Something disengaged itself from Skander's burning corpse. A small thing, leathery, flapping smouldering bat-wings as if it hoped to fly away. It shimmered, like it was made of smoke. Its fingers were tendrils of articulated bone and it had nothing but a hundred blinking eyes for a face.

The sound it made chilled the souls of every one present.

'You see it?' asked Priad.

'Y-yes...' murmured Strabo.

'Good,' said Priad, and hosed the daemon-thing with flame, annihilating it.

'I SAW IT WITH my own eyes,' Lexicanium Phrastus was telling Captain Phobor. The veteran Iron Snake was glaring at Priad, who sat on the edge of the practice platform, dabbing at his nose.

'I thought Sergeant Priad had gone mad at fist, assaulting the captain like that,' Phrastus continued. 'But I saw it. A thing of the warp. A thing from inside Skander.'

'Priad!' growled Captain Phobor.

'Sir,' Priad said, getting to his feet. The men of Damocles fell in behind him, bruised and bloody-lipped from their brawling. Priad was impressed to see that Aekon and Dyognes took their place in the line.

'There will be questions, Priad. A lot of questions.'

'Sir.'

'But from what the worthy Lexicanium here says - and the other men besides - you may be exonerated. Praised even.'

'Sir. I hope that what has happened here might assist in the case of Khiron too.'

Phobor paused. 'It's too late for him.'

'Sir?'

'At Captain Skander's personal request, Khiron was taken to Ithaka at first light. I'm sorry. Oethanar is already underway.'

THE SEAS AROUND the Primarch's Causeway were raging. White water maysae bloomed around the line of the stilt rocks, and fierce storm was rolling in from the ocean.

Retyarion. Wyrms-storm. The ferocious squalls that that seemed to follow the movement of the marine serpents. Soon, the seunenae, the folding walls of iron, would rise out in the deep waters and come crashing in, kilometres-high.

'I can't go in any closer!' the shuttle's pilot wailed. 'The wind shear will break us on the rocks!'

'Damn you!' Priad snarled. 'Lower then! Drop height!'

'You're mad!'

'Do it!'

'Look at the auspex, in the name of Seydon!' the co-pilot shouted above the noise of the wind and the rain. 'Hard returns, coming up from the depths! Kraretyer!'

Priad saw the swirling green shapes on the scanner's dished screen. They were big. Perhaps not Kraretyer, the giant bulls. But big. Three, four. Maybe five of them.

'Drop height!' Priad demanded again.

The shuttle's turbines shrieked as it came down over the water at less than ten metres. It was a hunting ketch, sleek and long-bodied, that Priad had virtually stolen from the Chapter House dock.

Priad scrambled back into the cargo bay where two lancing skiffs lay in hydraulic cradles. He ordered Scyllon, Xander and Kules into one, and leapt into the other himself. All of them were still clad in their grey bodygloves.

'Pindor! Andromak! With me! Natus... man the releases!'

Natus hurried to the aft position, pushing past the agitated and bemused petitioners Aekon and Dyognes. Priad wanted a good man at the release clamps. A clean clearance was a key part of a hunt run. And Natus knew that craft well.

Andromak caught Priad by the arm as he was unlashng the fore-tethers. The squad's standard bearer held out his right wrist. It was twisted, broken in the brawl.

'Stand out, brother, you're no use to me. You!' Priad pointed at Dyognes.

'Sir?'

'Can you hand lances?'

'Yes, sir!'

'Take his place!'

Dyognes helped Andromak out of the skiff and took his place midships, pulling the covers off the lances racked under the gunwales.

Priad looked up at Andromak, Aekon and Natus. 'Make sure our brothers don't fly clear away. We'll need extraction.'

'Sir!' the trio chorused.

A bell clattered.

'Drop height!' sang out Natus.'

'Prepare!' ordered Priad. He dropped down on one knee in the prow of his skiff and looped his hands into the side ropes, pain throbbing from his broken fingers. Behind him, Dyognes did the same, and Pindor braced himself at the slim vessel's aft,

In the other boat, Scyllon, Xander and Kules duplicated the stances.

'Go!'

'Belly open!' cried Natus, raising his voice to yell over the engine noise and sea-thrash that boomed in through the opening hold doors.

'Hunt with the eye of the Primarch and the grace of the Emperor!' Natus yelled. With an experienced, unruffled eye, he watched the wind speed indicator and the shuttle's yaw.

'Brace, hold... now!'

Natus threw the release lever. The skiffs dropped out of the shuttle and fell towards the water.

Impact. A swirl of bubbles, and a rush of water noise. Priad held on as the skiff inverted, drowning them, and then slammed upright again as the

thin, helium-filled buoyancy tanks self-righted them.

Kneeling at the back of the craft, Pindor cued the engines and they lurched forward, lifting out of the swell and skipping across the breaking waves like a flying fish. The slender nacelles containing the anti-grav plates extended out from the skiff's sides.

'Turn in! Turn in!' Priad yelled, his voice lost in the roar. But Pindor, at the helm, read his gesture.

Still crouched at the prow, Priad looked back at Dyognes.

'Draw a lance,' Priad said.

Dyognes crouched with his legs wide to ride out the buffets and slid a sealance from the rack. Two metres of polished bronze with a long spine of razor-sharp adamite projecting from the tip. He passed it deftly to Priad.

'Draw another and wait,' Priad said. He settled in the prow with the lance against his hip, the tip projecting out across the bows.

They circled in around Oullo's Stilt, kissing the edge of the marysae that slammed up around the rock tower. Priad had ridden Retyarion before, worse than this. But it was gathering force. And the sky out to sea had gone a fulminous dark yellow. The iron waves were close.

'Around!' Priad cried, circling his fingers so his helmsman Pindor could see. The skiff took off left, bouncing through the incoming breakers, nacelles shuddering.

Priad looked aft. The other skiff was following them in, Scyllon at the bow with a lance in his hands, Xander behind him amidships ready to pass more lances forward, and Kules, sat low, at the helm.

'Wurm-spore!' Dyognes yelled.

Dark, thrashing ulbrumid broke the water two hundred metres to their port side. Priad's hand clenched on the haft of his lance. He was no longer aware of the pain in his damaged hand.

The ulbrumid calmed and faded. A subsurface rising. They're down there, but not breaching yet, Priad thought.

'Auspex!' he yelled.

Dyognes was already on it, wiping flecks of spray from the screen. The auspex scanner was built into the deck just in front of the lance-giver's position in the middle of the boat.

'Deep! Two of them! One below at ninety metres!'

'Others?'

'Three more, out at a space of six hundred metres.' Dyognes adjusted the rangefinder's water-proof dials.

'And anoth- God-Emperor!'

Priad felt the lurch. He grabbed the side ropes automatically. Foam broke around them, an explosion of white water. He caught a glimpse of coiling horn plate sliding under them.

Dyognes had taken a mouthful of seawater. He coughed and spat.

'Sorry! Sorry! That one came from nowhere!'

Right underneath them. But it hadn't surfaced. They were still turning and rising.

'Left!' Priad indicated with his hands. Pindor swung them.

They passed objects floating in the water. Brontoie, the summoning-drums, automatic percussion buoys dropped by the shuttles that had brought Khiron down here at dawn. Their steady but erratic beating mimicked the sound of a struggling prey-item in the water and brought the wyrms in. One brontoie could bring a hunting wurm from a thousand kilometres away.

Priad looked back. He saw his own shuttle hanging off near Splinter Rock, and another hunting ketch swooping down after them. It dropped its skiffs half a kilometre behind him.

Over the vox, Priad heard the battle-chant of Manes Squad. Brother Strabo had brought his men in to join the hunt.

The skiffs of Manes closed up, powering in, and all four vessels cut a wide crescent of white wake as they circled around Boethus Tower and the minor stacks that huddled nearby. Captain Phobor had told Priad that the oethanar duty ships had left Khiron on Lacres Stilt, a thirty metre high column right at the edge of the Primarch's Causeway.

Priad looked about. There was no sign of her. Had the juvenile injured her so badly she had withdrawn?

Priad looked up at Khiron. The apothecary was standing at the lip of Lacres Stilt, looking down.

He disappeared for a second and then reappeared, running.

Khiron threw himself off the stilt top and closed his body into a perfect diving shape. He hit the water like a missile.

A thirty-metre dive into marysae. Into white water. Not even the best... Priad thought.

'Brother-sergeant!' Dyognes called. 'What?'

'Hard return, six fathoms, rising...'

Priad scanned the water. There was a flash of foam. Khiron surfaced, spluttering and coughing, fifty metres ahead of them.

'Pindor! Swing us in!'

'Brother-sergeant!' Dyognes called again. 'Hard return! Huge echo, three fathoms astern!'

Priad looked back. He saw the ulbrumid. Saw the size of it. This wasn't the female returning. This was why the female had fled.

A mature male. A giant bull. Kraretyer.

Priad leaned over the bow and grabbed the floundering Khiron by the arm. Struggling, he heaved the half-dead apothecary up over the gunwale. Scyllon's skiff closed in to assist.

The kraretyer broke the surface behind them.

Even old Pindor cried out in alarm.

It was an old, old bull. A three hundred metre monster. Its girth matched the widest rock stack. Its huge skull was the size of a battle-barge. It towered above them, cascading water from its ancient plates, opened its maw and exposed five metre long fangs.

It sounded. The surface water was blitzed into drizzle. Both crews fell down in agony, holding their ears. The hardwood casting deck of Priad's skiff cracked.

The bull surged forward, forepart raised out of the water. Scyllon threw a lance that bounced off the plate, and then snatched a fresh one from Xander.

He threw again.

It was a perfect cast.

The lance punctured between the third and fourth plates and lodged fast. The old bull didn't even seem to feel it.

Priad dragged Khiron onto the casting deck and turned to pick up his lance. The vast wyrm was right on them.

Priad cast his lance hard.

It struck the bull's nose scales and quivered away.

'Draw me!' Priad yelled.

But Dyognes was leaning back to throw the next lance himself. Cursing, Priad stooped and pulled a fresh lance free from the rack.

Dyognes cast. The lance went clean into the bull wyrm's right eye. It shuddered and writhed back.

Priad had a lance by then. He cast it.

It went right down the wyrm's gaping throat.

As it fell, as it died, the bull wyrm blasted up vast wakes of water that smashed the skiffs aside and broke them on the stilts.

The plume of wyrm-blood spread and marked the water for a kilometre square. The hookbeaks and scale birds rioted down to feed in their thousands.

ITHAKA. PROUD IT?????. Ocean world. Cradle of Snakes. The apothecary kneels in the surf on the beach as the moon rises between the stacks of the Primarch's Causeway. Waves break around his bulky armoured form. He fills the ten copper flasks with the life water of the home world.

It is time to ship out. The battle-barge awaits to carry them to a distant war. This is the last act before leavetaking, the Rite of the Claiming of Water.

The apothecary intones the litany, and the men of Damocles squad, each one in full armour, circle around him at the waterline, making the ritual responses. He hands each one his flask of lifewater. The last two go to the newest inductees, standing proudly in their polished war-plate. Dyognes. Aekon.

The Rite is done. The Apothecary stands, screws up the stopper of his own flask, and slides it into his thigh pouch.

'Ready, brother-apothecary?' asks Priad.

'Im ready, brother-sergeant,' says Khiron of Damocles.