

A GAUNT'S GHOSTS ANTHOLOGY

SABBAT CRUSADE

EDITED BY
DAN ABNETT

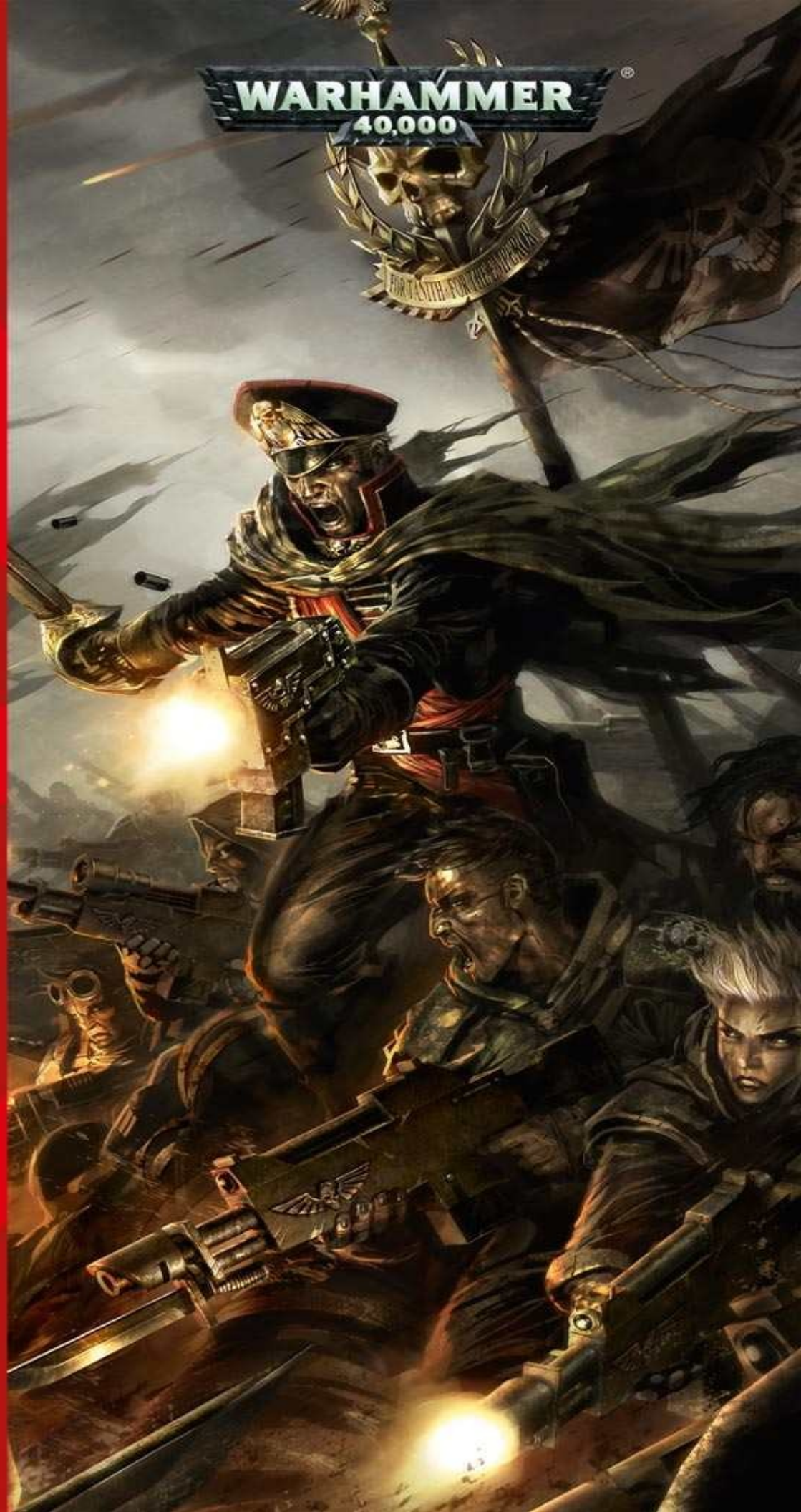


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A WARHAMMER 40,000 ANTHOLOGY

SABBAT CRUSADE

EDITED BY

DAN ABNETT



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

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

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

INTRODUCTION

Welcome back to the Sabbat Worlds.

I said (cups hands), ‘WELCOME BACK TO THE SABBAT WORLDS!’

I realise it’s hard to hear me over all the explosions and shooting. Find yourself a convenient foxhole, dig in tight, and I’ll tell you what’s going on.

The Sabbat Worlds is a vast tract of space in the Warhammer 40,000 universe, and the setting for my long-running Gaunt’s Ghosts novel series. Over the years (since, I believe, 1996) I’ve set fifteen novels and many short stories in its domain, primarily the Ghosts books, but also adventures taking place during the same campaign (*Double Eagle*, *Titanicus*). From something that started out as a vague hint of location in the first short stories, it has grown into quite a detailed territory. It’s been mapped. It has a chronology, and background books have been written.

In 2010, Black Library published an anthology called *Sabbat Worlds*, and it was very well received. All the stories in it were, as the title suggests, set in the Sabbat region, during the years of the massive Imperial Crusade. The unusual thing about the anthology was that I didn’t write all the stories; other Black Library authors were invited to write a tales set in the region. The results were fantastic. The stories were varied in tone, scale and approach, and many found really unusual ways to fit into my established continuity. There wasn’t a weak link in there. I was excited and, I suppose, honoured that the other authors had seized so gleefully on the opportunity to write tales set in a time and place that I have essentially evolved for my own creative purposes.

Four years later, we've decided it's time to do it again, and thus you hold in your hands *Sabbat Crusade*, the second Sabbath Worlds anthology.

There are a couple of reasons for publishing a second anthology. The first is that there has been an unfortunate and unavoidable delay in the publication of the next Ghosts novel, *The Warmaster*. I can only apologise for that; sometimes life turns out that way. *The Warmaster* has been set back by unexpected complexities and demands in both my working and private life. It will be on its way to your bookshelves soon. The adventure will continue.

But because of the delay, we (and by 'we', I mean myself and Black Library editorial) thought it might be nice to get something Gaunt-related out there to tide people over until *The Warmaster* arrives. A little selection box of all things Ghosts and Sabbath Worlds. Another anthology.

The second reason was simply that the first anthology had been really good, and we wanted to do another anyway.

Sabbat Crusade is a little different from the first volume. For a start, its initial publication is in a gorgeous, deluxe special edition, with loads of desirable extras. It sees the return of several authors from the first volume, two of whom are writing follow-ups to their original stories. It also welcomes new writers to the Sabbath Worlds playground, and the contributions they've made are amazing.

The stories are also much more closely connected than the stories in the first volume. Many are set in a tight timeframe (six of them, no less, take place in the same year, and are set between *Salvation's Reach* and *The Warmaster*). Those that are not linked by time are generally linked by theme, most particularly the activities of the Archenemy Blood Pact and Sons of Sek. This volume shows the war from BOTH sides. Oh, and the Adeptus Astartes Iron Snakes show up more than once.

Not every story in this book fits that tight remit, but it's generally far more cohesive than the first. I've contributed three new stories, and they're all Gaunt's Ghosts stories. They are linked, they are presented in chronological order, and they are set in novel continuity, between *Salvation's Reach* and *The Warmaster*. Rather than, as I did in the last volume, going back to explore an incident from the past, I thought it behove me to present stories set in the now – connective tissue between the last volume and the next. And they're not just minor side incidents, either. For loyal readers of the Gaunt series, this anthology will sit on the shelf between *Salvation's Reach* and *The Warmaster*, not alongside them. You really need to read this volume before you start the next Gaunt novel. My

three new stories, and two or three of the other stories in the book, are ‘vital reading’ in the continuity thread of the novel series.

I’ll introduce every story as we go along to supply context.

Okay. Let’s begin. There are still many new worlds to conquer and the fight starts here.

Dan Abnett

Maidstone, June 2014

A Ghosts story to begin with. To me the Gaunt's Ghosts novels have always been as much about character narrative as they have about war. I don't think the series would have lasted fourteen (and counting) books if it hadn't been so strongly character-driven. People always complain when I kill characters off: surely, that's because those characters count for something?

So, despite the fact that the Sabbat Worlds Crusade is a nightmarish sprawl of warfare, I've decided to start with something much quieter. Of all the interpersonal dynamics in the regiment, there is one particular nexus of characters that is especially poignant and complex, and a story examining it is long overdue.

Pay attention. This may be a quieter story, but it's important.

It's set six days after the end of Salvation's Reach.

Dan Abnett



FAMILY

Dan Abnett

*The Highness Ser Armaduke, six days out from Salvation's Reach, 782.M41
(the 27th year of the Sabbat Worlds Crusade)*

I

Earlier that day, in the old ship's canteen, they'd had a conversation.

Gol Kolea and Dalin Criid, father and son.

A father and a son who had been estranged and then brought back together by the fluid circumstances of war, and who seldom liked to acknowledge their blood connection.

The hellweather fight for Salvation's Reach was just six days behind everyone, fresh in the regimental thoughts, fresh as the healing wounds and the grieving memories. The Ghosts were bedded down again, locked into shipboard trudge routines, enduring the span of another long-haul passage to wherever their next home would be.

Nowhere pleasant, that was Gol's guess. No one had told them, not Gaunt, not Hark, not Fazekiel. There had been talk of a resupply stop at some depot, because munitions were fething low, but no one had announced their final destination.

Nowhere pleasant; it never was. That was Guard life. One storm to the next,

with weeks of tedium in between. Hurry up and wait. Wait, then hurry up.

Gol had filled the containers in his mess tray with slab and bean slop from the dispensary, and then looked for a seat. He caught Dalin's eye, saw the boy gesture. There was a space next to him.

Next to his son. The one he had thought dead for so very long. The fight they had waged at the Reach had been bitter and costly, but it had been nothing compared to Vervunhive. Bedded down with the scratch companies, facing the Zoican hordes every hour of every day, knowing your family were dead—

Until it turned out some of them weren't.

Gol sat. He was a big man. Even though there was a spare seat, Baskevyl and Luffrey had to scrunch up to accommodate him.

'How's the food?' Gol asked Dalin.

'Wet, sir,' Dalin smiled.

'Don't "sir" me, Dal,' said Gol, twiddling his fork and looking for a promising target on the tray in front of him.

'You're a major, major,' said Dalin.

Gol shrugged.

'All right. I thought you were doing that "son to father" thing.'

Dalin forked up some beans.

'We've never really done that,' he said. 'Had a chance to, I mean. I'm not being funny. Not blaming. I mean, we just... our relationship is—'

'I get it.'

'All right. Good.'

'How are you, Dal?' asked Kolea.

'Pretty good, all things considered. The Reach. That was a feth-storm.'

'It was a victory.'

'I know,' said Dalin. 'But the people we lost... Merrt. And the Doc. And—'

Kolea put his fork down.

'Something wrong?' asked Dalin.

'This food is terrible,' said Gol.

'I'm sort of getting used to it,' said Dalin, chewing. 'I mean, it *is* shit, but we've been on this hulk so long, it almost feels like home.'

'Won't be home for long,' said Kolea.

'No, I suppose... No.'

'It feel like home to you, Dal?'

'I don't know what home's supposed to feel like, so I suppose it does, sir.'

Gol looked at him.

‘Gol,’ said Kolea. ‘You can call me Gol when we’re not in the line or on parade.’

‘Yeah?’ asked Dalin.

‘Yeah,’ said Gol. ‘My pa made me call him Gyn. Said he wanted me to know his name, not his function. Or something.’

‘Your pa was called Gyn?’ asked Dalin.

Gol Kolea sighed.

‘You didn’t know your grandpa’s name? So much you don’t know.’

‘You should tell me some time,’ Dalin said. He paused. ‘You should tell me some time, *Gol*,’ he corrected.

Gol nodded. He resumed eating. He stopped again after a few moments.

‘This stuff really is shit,’ he said.

Dalin moved beans around his tray.

‘Tona—’

‘What?’ asked Gol.

‘Tona, she’s cooking tonight,’ said Dalin. ‘She can proper cook, too. Family meal. Why don’t you come along?’

‘Ah, I don’t think—’ Gol shrugged.

‘Why don’t you?’ asked Dalin.

‘Tona and I, we have an understanding,’ said Gol. ‘I stay out of it. She’s your family now, and she won that right.’

‘Caff was my family, too, and he’s gone,’ said Dalin. ‘We’re all family, aren’t we? Us Ghosts? All of us. Hey-hey! Major Kolea’s coming for supper. Where’s the harm in that? I’ll have a word with mum—’

‘Mum? You call her mum?’

‘Yeah? Why?’ asked Dalin.

‘No reason you wouldn’t,’ said Gol. ‘Sorry.’

‘I’ll have a word with *Tona*,’ said Dalin. ‘She’ll be fine about it. Decent food, all right? A nice conversation. Yoncy will love to see her Uncle Gol.’

‘I’m not going to step back into something I was better off staying out of,’ said Gol.

Dalin looked down at his food, disappointed.

‘You won’t be,’ he said. ‘You’d be very welcome.’

‘Well, I’ll come then,’ said Gol.

Dalin looked up, smiling.

‘Mum serves up at fifth bell, sharp,’ he said.

‘Check with her, for gag’s sake,’ Kolea said, ‘and let me know if I’m not

welcome. I'll understand.'

Dalin nodded. 'You will be,' he said.

Gol sighed.

'Dal?'

'Yes, sir?'

'Does Yoncy know?'

'She was too young. I didn't even know my grandpa's name till just then. You're her Uncle Gol.'

Dalin got up.

'Gonna police my tray,' he said. 'I'll see you at fifth.'

'Unless you tell me otherwise. And for feth's sake tell me otherwise.'

Dalin nodded and walked away.

'Couldn't help overhearing that,' said Baskevyl.

'Really?' asked Gol.

'Well, you're practically sitting in my lap,' Bask smiled.

Gol smiled back and shook his head.

'Go have supper with your son, Kolea,' said Baskevyl. 'He'd like that. If you want my advice.'

'I really don't,' replied Gol Kolea.

II

Fifth bell. There was a distant thrum of the old ship's engines, labouring, propelling them through the empyrean. The hab bays smelled of stale, recycled air and disinfectant. They smelled like armpit.

Kolea hesitated, then knocked on the compartment door.

Tona Criid opened the hatch and looked out at him. Kolea suddenly smelled the cooking. It made his mouth water.

'Hello, Gol,' she said. 'Dal said you were coming.'

'If it's not an imposition.'

'Are you a fething idiot? Come in.'

The cabin was warm and steamy. Criid was wearing combat-issue trousers and a white tee-shirt.

'Larks and Varl, they both come here all the time,' she said. 'Rerval too. And Shoggy. It's ridiculous that you don't. And regularly, too. You should see them,

Gol. You should be in their lives, at least a little.'

'Food smells good,' Gol said.

'I've got actual ground meat, and actual legumes. Plus actual spices. Scared them all up from the Navy mess. To be fair, Gaunt put a word in. The Navy eats better than we do.'

'Gaunt put a word in?' asked Gol.

'He takes an interest in morale.'

'I've got this,' said Gol, producing a bottle of amasec.

'Oh, good boy,' Tona smiled.

'Stole it from the Navy wardroom.'

'Even better.'

She was a handsome woman, tall and lean, with short hair. She had been a ganger on Verghast, and had somehow managed to save and look after Gol's kids during the siege. The siege had killed Gol's wife, Livy, and occupied Gol's entire attention. He had believed he had lost his whole family in the murder-war until, by odd chance, he had discovered that his children had not just been rescued, they had actually been adopted as part of the Ghost entourage.

A child ran into the room, zooming a doll. She was small, pretty, oddly intent, her hair in pigtails.

Yoncy.

'Hello, Yoncy,' said Gol.

'Hello to you, Uncle Gol. Are you coming for supper?'

'I am.'

She laughed, and screamed out of the room again.

'She... she seems very small for her age,' Gol said.

'I feed her well enough,' said Criid, stirring something in a pot.

'I wasn't saying you didn't,' said Gol.

'All right.'

'Dalín is a grown man now,' Gol said. 'Yoncy's only a few years behind him, but he seems like a child.'

""He""?

'What?' said Gol.

'You said "he",' said Tona, confused.

Gol paused.

'Did I?' he asked.

'Yes.'

'Then I misspoke,' said Gol. '*She* seems like a child still.'

‘That happens with girls,’ Criid replied. ‘They seem young... then a sudden growth spurt. Six months from now, you mark my words, she’s going to be a nightmare. The young troopers will be dying at her feet. I’ll be fending them off with a crew-served weapon. Every mother’s nightmare.’

‘Tona?’

‘Yeah?’ she replied.

‘I think we’ve all seen enough nightmares in our years together to know what a real one looks like,’ said Gol.

She nodded, shrugging. ‘That’s the fething truth,’ she replied.

‘That said,’ Gol smiled, ‘I’ll be right beside you with an axe-rake.’

She laughed.

‘Tona?’

‘What?’ she asked.

‘I’ll never be able to properly thank you for what you’ve done,’ he said.

‘Saving my children. Looking after them.’

‘*Don’t*, Gol.’ Tona put the wooden spoon down and looked away.

‘I mean it.’

‘Gol—’

‘That’s why I stay apart,’ Gol said. ‘I was no father to them. Ever. I worked long hours, then the war came... You did all this, Tona. You built this, despite the circumstances. You know I need to stay away so as not to spoil everything you’ve done.’

‘Eat with us, once in a while,’ said Tona. ‘Be present. It doesn’t have to be like this for you. And they will benefit. After all, Dalin knows who you are.’

‘Dal’s a grown man,’ said Gol.

‘Yoncy will be grown, too, very soon,’ she replied.

‘I just wanted you to know that I appreciate everything. More than I can say.’

He hugged her. It was involuntary.

‘Uncle Gol? Are you mum’s boyfriend?’ asked Yoncy from behind them.

The embrace broke quickly.

‘I’m not,’ he said.

‘Of course he’s not,’ laughed Tona, turning back to the stove.

III

They were a third of the way down the amasec. Gol had just taken second helpings of the stew.

‘Swear to feth,’ he said. ‘This is the best food I’ve eaten in years.’

‘Told you,’ said Dalin.

‘It’s ’ummy,’ said Yoncy.

‘So I hear Gaunt has put you on companion duty with Meritous,’ Gol said to Dalin.

Dalin nodded.

‘That’s a career advancement,’ said Tona.

‘Just doing my job,’ Dalin smiled.

‘Watching over Gaunt’s son?’ asked Gol. ‘There’s an advantage there. You should exploit it.’

‘Just doing my job,’ repeated Dalin.

‘You like him, though?’ asked Tona.

‘He’s all right.’

‘Opportunities don’t come often,’ Gol said, forking up another mouthful. ‘Use every chance you get. Be visible. Be conspicuous. Be vital. Felyx Meritous Chass is going to be a big noise in the Guard one day. Bloodline. Father and son. Use that to your advantage. Rising officers remember those who help them on the way up.’

‘Father and son, bloodline,’ Dalin nodded. ‘All right then.’

Gol put his fork down.

‘Sorry, Dal,’ he said. ‘I... That was feth-dumb of me. I see the irony.’

‘No, it was good advice,’ Dalin smiled back, ‘for everyone to take.’

Gol returned the smile.

‘I stand corrected,’ he said.

‘Here, here,’ said Tona quietly. She picked up her glass.

‘To bloodlines,’ she toasted. ‘To the fething bloody Guard and the family it makes for us.’

Dalin, Tona and Gol clinked glasses.

‘Bloodlines,’ said Dalin.

‘Family,’ said Tona.

‘May the Guard guard them all,’ said Gol.

They knocked the drink back. Yoncy watched them, then picked up her water glass, mimicked Tona’s toasting gesture, and guzzled a mouthful.

‘May the Guard guard them all,’ she declared, sing-song.

Tona smiled. Gol poured more amasec.

‘Yon?’ Dalin said, looking over at her. ‘Where’s the medal I gave you? The badge of the Sabbath Beati? You always wear it.’

‘It got lost,’ Yoncy said. ‘When the nasty man attacked me. It got torn off. I never found it.’

‘Oh,’ said Dalin. ‘I’ll get you a new one.’

‘I don’t want a new one.’

‘No?’

‘It used to hurt me,’ said Yoncy, eating.

Dalin frowned at Tona.

Tona touched her fingertips to the hollow of her throat.

‘Yoncy sometimes got a rash,’ she said, ‘from the metal. Contact eczema, Dorden called it—’

She went quiet. Gol and Dalin looked down at their plates. The casual mention of the old medicae’s name had reminded them of a loss none of them were yet used to. Yoncy kept eating, oblivious.

‘Contact eczema,’ Dalin said, anxious to break the silence. ‘Well, we can’t have that. I’ll find you something else, Yon. Something else to watch over you and keep you safe.’

Yoncy paused and studied her food.

‘I have everyone to watch over me and keep me safe,’ she said, earnestly. ‘I realised that when I lost the medal. It’s like I woke up and remembered who I was.’

‘What, honey?’ asked Tona, frowning.

‘Like in the morning?’ said Yoncy. ‘When you wake up and remember who you are and where you are? Like that.’

‘What does that mean?’ asked Gol.

‘I’m a ghost, aren’t I?’ the girl asked, looking at him. ‘We’re all ghosts, aren’t we?’

Gol nodded.

‘Can I have seconds, mum?’ Yoncy asked. Her darting mind didn’t seem to stay on a subject for very long. ‘Can I, mum? I like the stew.’

‘Haven’t you had enough?’ smiled Tona.

‘I’m not full,’ Yoncy said. ‘I’m growing!’

Tona grinned at Gol and went off to fetch the pot from the stove.

Yoncy had gravy around her mouth. She tapped her spoon, then looked back at Gol.

‘Uncle Gol?’ she said.

‘Yes, Yoncy?’

‘Are you my dad?’

Gol looked at Dalin, who, with some effort, didn’t react. Tona turned from the stove with a fierce stare.

‘Why would you ask me that, Yoncy?’ Gol asked. He had a tight feeling in his chest.

‘Because people say you are,’ said Yoncy.

‘What people?’ asked Tona, coming forward and dishing out a ladle of food onto Yoncy’s plate.

‘The ghosts,’ said Yoncy. ‘The ghosts I hear around me. They say it all the time. Are you? Are you, Gol?’

Gol Kolea took a breath.

‘No, Yoncy,’ he said. ‘I’m not.’

She suddenly slithered off her seat and ran out of the room.

‘I forgot!’ she cried.

‘Yoncy! You wanted seconds!’ Tona called after her.

‘I will eat them all up! Just wait!’ Yoncy called back.

She returned to the table with a crumpled sheet of paper and handed it to Gol.

‘I made this,’ she said. ‘I made this picture for you.’

Gol took the paper and looked at it. Yoncy resumed eating, with great resolve.

The picture had been done in coloured chalk. There were spiky things, several figures, and two sickle shapes in what Gol presumed was the sky. There was something else too, a triangle and a furious, heartfelt black squiggle inside it. The squiggle had been ground into the paper, and it was clear that the chalk stick had broken several times during the rendering. There was something filthy and malicious about it, as if the child had been trying to punish the paper.

‘Are these trees?’ Gol asked, pointing.

‘Muhm,’ agreed Yoncy, eating, mouth full.

‘Who’s this?’ asked Gol, pointing to the figures.

‘That’s you, silly. You and Uncle Rerval and Uncle Bask and Uncle Luffrey.’

‘What about this?’ Gol asked, indicating the sickle shapes.

Yoncy shrugged, too busy eating.

‘And this?’ Gol asked, pointing to the squiggle.

Yoncy pushed her plate away. It was empty.

‘I didn’t mean to draw that. I tried to scribble it out. I didn’t want it in the picture.’

‘What was it, Yon?’ asked Tona.

‘I was going to draw more trees, but I picked up black instead of green by accident, and it made a bad shadow shape, and I didn’t like it so I scribbled it out.’

Yoncy shrugged. ‘Did I spoil the picture, Uncle Gol?’ she asked.

‘No,’ said Gol. ‘It’s a great picture.’

Dalin reached over and pointed to the squiggle.

‘How can a shadow be bad?’ Dalin asked.

‘It’s just a drawing,’ Yoncy replied, as if that were obvious.

‘Yes, but bad how?’ Dalin asked again.

She wiggled her hands and picked up her dolly.

‘A bit like a monster,’ she replied.

She leaned over on her seat and pointed at the drawing in Gol’s hands.

‘See? Look? You’re killing it. Those jaggy lines? Per-chew chew chew chew chew! You’re shooting it with your gun. Per-chew chew! I used yellow chalk.’

‘Is it dead now?’ Gol asked.

‘Silly Gol! It wasn’t ever alive. It’s just a drawing. I thought you’d like it. I drew it for you.’

‘I... I love it,’ he said.

IV

Tona put Yoncy to bed. She and Gol and Dalin sat up for a while afterwards, drinking the amasec.

‘She’s very creative,’ said Gol.

‘Always has been. Always drawing,’ said Dalin.

‘I ought to go,’ Gol said, rising.

‘There’s still amasec,’ said Tona.

‘I ought to go.’

‘You ought to come back again soon, too,’ said Tona.

‘The food was great,’ said Gol.

‘Hey,’ Tona said. She held out the drawing. ‘Don’t forget this. She’ll be cross if she finds out you left it behind. She drew it for you.’

Gol took the drawing. He folded it up and put it in the inside pocket of his jacket.

It stayed there until the day he died.

‘Goodnight,’ he said.

‘Goodnight,’ said Tona.

‘Goodnight, Gol,’ Dalin smiled.

Gol closed the door behind him. He was about ten steps down the companionway when the tears came.

They weren’t necessarily bad tears.

This is Rob Sanders's first contribution to the Sabbat mythology, and he is a very welcome addition to this volume and the 'Sabbat Worlds Writers' Club' (we have a club tie and a membership card and everything). I admire Rob's work very much (his novels are superb), and he has written a terrific and grisly piece here.

Rob came up with the premise without prompting or guidance, and I was delighted by the idea he hit upon. He also wanted to focus on the Iron Snakes, which suited both me and the context of this anthology just fine. I'm sure it will please all Iron Snakes fans out there too.

Though not a Gaunt's Ghosts story, Rob's tale (for those of you who are keen on continuity) is very much a sequel to the story 'A Simple Plan' in Ghostmaker.

Brace yourselves. A vanquished menace from the past has not gone away after all...

Dan Abnett



THE BLOOD BOUND

Rob Sanders

*Valens 160, 780.M41
(the 25th year of the Sabbat Worlds Crusade)*

I

The Iron Snakes frigate *Serpentra* glided smoothly into the Valens System, the mean lines of its hull dusted with the frost of immaterial translation. A crowded arrangement of super-hot gas giants and secondary satellite systems, Valens was a quiet corner of the Sabbat Worlds – all but silenced by the thunder of old war. The void seemed to echo with the emptiness of horror long past. The Valens System was a ragged wound that refused to heal.

As the frigate slid in-system with inertial silkiness, the wreckage of monitors, mining vessels and entry waystations was pushed aside. Nudging its way past derelicts and smashed orbitals, the *Serpentra*'s progress sent wreckage pirouetting off into the void. The Valens star burned like a dying fire, casting the churn of gas giants and clusters of attendant moons in a rusty light. In the glowering silence, the Space Marine frigate drifted towards the hive world of Valens 160.

‘Try voxmissions again,’ Porphyrian commanded. The Iron Snakes Space Marine stood like a statue before the bridge lancet screen, cutting a silhouette

into the growing orb of the hive world. ‘Short-range capture.’

The bridge serf complied with Porphyrian’s order.

‘Nothing, my lord,’ the Ithakan reported.

As a member of the Adeptus Astartes, Porphyrian’s hearts knew nothing of the silent dread experienced by the lesser beings on the frigate’s command deck. Even Porphyrian had to admit that what they had found – and more importantly what they had not – in the Valens System was disquieting. He feared that was exactly what it was designed to accomplish: system and interstellar shipping hanging like abandoned ornaments in the blackness of space. Communication channels a deathly crackle. A hive world of billions, silent and still. He turned to Andromedes, the only other battle-brother present on the bridge. Only weeks before, Andromedes had been a petitioner. Now he was a battle-brother of Squad Orpheon. Andromedes gave his sergeant raised eyebrows above a mask of grim anticipation.

‘Take us in,’ Porphyrian commanded.

‘Yes, my lord,’ a helmserv acknowledged.

Under the gentle thrust of sub-light engines, the frigate ploughed its way through the abandoned vessels and wreckage. Silent expectation and the rumble of the *Serpentra*’s drives took them past the moons of Dralion, Vortigus Minor and Aeonara. Past great abandoned mining transports and bulk ore-freighters. Past the silent reef-stations and loose, broken belt of orbital installations that rotated slowly around the hive world of Valens 160.

‘There,’ the helmserv called out from the side of the command deck. He stepped forward, grasping the pulpit rail and pointing up at the lancet screen.

‘The *Excommunicado*.’

‘You’re sure?’ Porphyrian asked. He peered at the free-floating vessel to which the helmserv was pointing, but even he couldn’t make out the vessel’s name or designations.

‘Forgive me, my lord,’ the helmserv said. He had spoken before he was certain. ‘From her lines she’s a penitentiary vessel.’

The Commissariat corvette *Excommunicado* had left the world of Sapiencia with its damned cargo – the captured heretic warlord Sholen Skara – bound for the Inquisitorial fortress on Khulan. It boasted a pair of escort vessels and a half-brigade selected from the 123rd Pontifical Strikes. It never reached its destination and neither did its escort of Falchion-class warships. The Ordo Hereticus blamed the loss on insufficient security provisions, while the Departmento Munitorum accused the Inquisition authorities on Khulan of failing

to send ships to meet them en route as arranged. Porphyrian had come to view the loss of Sholen Skara as inevitable under such circumstances. It was a long trip from Sapienca in the war-torn Sabbat Worlds to Khulan and the relative safety of Imperial space. A lot could go wrong on such a journey. Especially transporting a dangerous heretic like Sholen Skara. A ruinous mongrel. A mass-murdering butcher of worlds with the blood of millions on his hands. What were a few more Officio Prefectus officers and storm trooper turnkeys?

Now Porphyrian and his Iron Snakes had the duty to find the magister, to ensure he made it to Khulan. When Apothecary Nemertes had asked if Porphyrian agreed with the mission, the sergeant told him that the Adeptus Astartes didn't have to agree with a mission in order to prosecute it. When the Apothecary pressed him he admitted that he thought that the Militarum Tempestus forces securing Sapienca had made a mistake, that Sholen Skara was too dangerous to be left alive and should have been formally executed. The Commissariat liaison at the mission briefing had confessed to the sergeant that he did not quite know why Skara hadn't been processed in such a fashion, believing that the decision had been made by a superior – a Colonel-Commissar Ibram Gaunt. Porphyrian had never met Colonel-Commissar Gaunt, but took him for a fool nonetheless.

In truth the whole situation was a mess. In a region strangled by bureaucracy as much as scarred by war, it had taken years for Sholen Skara's disappearance to be classed as worthy of investigation and forces assigned to such a duty. Astrotelepathic silence from the Valens System and the disappearance of merchant shipping despatched to the hive world had led the Ordo Hereticus to discover the record of an echo, a brief mayday from the *Excommunicado's* registered astropath. A miserable call for help cut brutally short.

Porphyrian was honour-bound to answer the request of the Ordo Hereticus, but in reality had wanted little to do with such a duty. Sholen Skara was undoubtedly a monster deserving of death, or the worse fate waiting for him at Khulan, but the Iron Snakes Space Marine didn't relish the prospect of the sons of Ithaka being employed as either a glorified escort or the firing squad for a wretched heretic. As he told Nemertes, such duties should have been beyond the Adeptus Astartes, but obligations between the Ordo and the Iron Snakes stood. Porphyrian told Squad Orpheon what Brother-Captain Cules had told him – that they all took their orders from somebody.

'Confirmed,' Brother Andromedes called, moving between a serf-station and a runebank manned by a Chapter servitor. 'Designations identify vessel as

Commissariat corvette *Excommunicado*, out of Sapienca.’

Porphyrian nodded and looked back at the tumbling vessel. ‘Anything from the vessel?’

‘Nothing,’ Andromedes said. ‘Dead.’

Porphyrian suspected that was all they would find aboard the corvette, but still the vessel needed to be searched. It was too much to hope that Sholen Skara would be among the bodies.

‘Brother Andromedes,’ Porphyrian said. ‘Squad status?’ Porphyrian knew that Brother Deucalion would have such matters in hand, but the sergeant was putting the former petitioner through his paces.

‘The Apothecary has met Brother Deucalion on the flight deck,’ Brother Andromedes said. ‘Brother Deucalion reports the squad battle-prepped, observances made and awaiting further orders. Brother Salames has assembled a flight crew: the gunship *Ithakariad* standing by.’

‘Very good, Brother Andromedes,’ Porphyrian said. ‘Summon the ship’s steward, if you please.’

Leodocus, the ship’s steward, presented himself. As the senior Chapter bondsman aboard the *Serpentra*, and a failed initiate of the Adeptus Astartes, it was rumoured thatLeodocus never slept, and that he made use of his cult indoctrination, training and conditioning to make himself available to his Ithakan overlords at all times.

‘Leodocus,’ Porphyrian said. ‘Squad Orpheon is to leave the ship. I want you to enact the usual vicarial protocols. I want the *Excommunicado* under the frigate’s guns at all times. If Squad Orpheon is out of contact for three sidereal rotations you will take the *Serpentra* to Captain Cules.’

‘Yes, brother-sergeant.’

‘Ship’s steward, the *Serpentra* is yours. Remain on station and stand by for further orders.’

‘Yes, my lord.’

‘Do you think this is a good idea?’ Brother Andromedes asked as he left the bridge with his sergeant.

‘No,’ Porphyrian told his battle-brother. ‘This is a very bad idea.’

II

The *Excommunicado* was a floating slaughterhouse. From the moment the Storm Eagle gunship's landing gears skidded across the hangar-bay deck, it became clear to the Iron Snakes that the Commissariat vessel had been overrun. As Squad Orpheon ran from the prow door of the *Ithakariad*, their power-armoured footfalls crunched through the bones of the long dead. From the butchery in the hangar and the small-arms fire afflicting the deck and walls it seemed that the corvette had suffered a boarding action. The las-riddled shells of lighters and humpshuttles sat empty on the flight deck surrounded by skeletal remains. The hangar was littered with the dead. Guard uniforms and carapace had become bags for bones. Shattered skulls separated from spines bore testament to the furious violence of the assault and atrocities committed during or after the conclusion of the boarding action.

Leaving Brother Salames with the serf flight crew in the cockpit of the *Ithakariad*, with engines idling, Porphyrian ordered the Iron Snakes on. Splitting Squad Orpheon into two, the sergeant sent Brother Deucalion and Apothecary Nemertes with half of the Ithakans aft to check the penitentiary section. Porphyrian and Andromedes led the other half of the squad towards the command deck.

Death was everywhere. The corvette had been the site of obscene butchery and celebratory mutilation. Despite the air being musty with murderous violence long past, the floor was sticky with the black sludge of old blood. Porphyrian suspected that during the savage boarding action, the accessways and corridors of the corvette must have been puddle-deep in the blood of innocents. Despite the fact that their auspectra showed no life signs or energy emissions, Porphyrian ordered extra vigilance. The Iron Snakes had fought many enemies across the Sabbat Worlds – creatures like warp-spawned monstrosities – that existed beyond the narrow spectrum of the scanners' parameters.

With Andromedes beside him with his boltgun and Brother Ptolomon's flamer hissing behind, Porphyrian ordered Argius and Hyperenor up front. Mag-locking their boltguns to their belts, the Iron Snakes led with combat shields and sea lances held above their armoured shoulders. The humming lances were power spears that were largely used in cult ceremonies. Each member of Squad Orpheon carried two such weapons slung between their armour and their pack, and Porphyrian could think of little better to have between him and a horde of enemies trying to rush them down the length of the narrow corridor. The kind of horde that must have overwhelmed the Tempestus scions of the 123rd Pontifical Strikes and butchered the Commissariat officers of the *Excommunicado*.

The vessel echoed like a tomb. Black blood squelched and fragments of shattered bone crunched beneath armoured boots as the Iron Snakes moved through the corvette. Through the bodies slammed into the deck. The skeletons torn to pieces. The mounds of bones at bulkheads, smashed barricades and bottlenecks signifying sites where commissars and Pontificals had held their attackers for a few moments at least before paying for such foolish notions with their lives.

By the time the Iron Snakes reached the corvette's small bridge, Brother Deucalion had made his report over the vox. They had found the penitentiary section awash with bodies – both storm trooper sentinels and their attackers. The bones sat in the bloodstained clothing of hive world menials daubed with a number eight with a horizontal line through the middle of it. Porphyrian had found the same on bodies on the bridge and smeared across runescreens and walls.

'Brother Andromedes,' Porphyrian said as he moved through the carnage. Runebanks and servitor stations had been smashed – either by the blood-crazed enemy or by commissars aiming to deny the vessel to their attackers. Their bones sat tangled in leather greatcoats.

'These same symbols were recorded on Sapienca,' Andromedes said, recalling Captain Cules's mission briefing. He snorted the stench of death back at the deck from which it was rising. 'Cultist insignia,' Andromedes confirmed finally. 'Belongs to the Kith.'

'Sholen Skara's Kith?' Porphyrian asked. 'His cult troops? How can that be possible?' The sergeant shook his head at the butchery around his boots. 'They were annihilated at Sapienca, many by their own hand. How can we not be done with the Kith?'

Andromedes shook his head slowly. 'Heresy is a plague,' the former petitioner said, 'a disease that seems to survive despite our best efforts to eradicate it.'

'Still,' Porphyrian said, hauling tangles of bones and shredded clothing from consoles. 'How is this possible?'

'It's not possible,' Brother Andromedes said.

'I want to stop hearing that answer,' Porphyrian rumbled. 'Find an operational databank among this mess and pull some information on what happened here. The ship's systems must know something.'

As Andromedes – aided by Brother Hyperenor – went to work on a functional bridge station, Porphyrian reported back to the *Serpentra*, updating Leodocus and the mission log on their findings. When Brother Deucalion and his Iron

Snakes completed their sweep of the corvette's aft section, the story was the same. Butchery, slaughter, desecration of the flesh. Blood everywhere.

'What about Sholen Skara's cell?' Porphyrian put to Deucalion. The sergeant knew he was hoping beyond hope that the body of the Chaos warlord would be discovered still manacled to the floor.

'*Gone.*'

'Repeat,' Porphyrian ordered. 'I didn't quite catch that. Did you say it was breached?'

'*It's gone, brother-sergeant,*' Deucalion informed him. '*Mesh, bars, bunk, chains – even the sentinel station and pict terminals. All gone.*'

'Gone?'

'*Torn to pieces, brother-sergeant.*'

'We've got it,' Andromedes announced. Having restored the bridge station to partial operation, Brother Hyperenor stepped back and recovered his shield and spear.

'Stand by,' Porphyrian told Deucalion. He heard Brother Andromedes grunt as he read the runescreen.

'Well?' Porphyrian demanded. 'What happened here?'

'Ship's log confirms that the *Excommunicado* dropped out of the warp and put in at the Valens System as a result of a medical emergency,' Andromedes told the bridge.

'You're getting this?' Porphyrian asked, opening a vox-channel to Brother Deucalion and the other Iron Snakes.

'*Receiving, brother-sergeant.*'

'Sholen Skara suffered some kind of episode or affliction,' Andromedes went on, reading from multiple logs and records. 'Convulsions. Ruptures. An embolism. He started bleeding from mouth, ears and eyes – internal bleeding that could not be corrected with surgery. The corvette's chief medicae officer believed that Skara had found a way to harm himself. This contradicted Colonel-Commissar Gaunt's orders that he should reach Khulan unharmed and certainly not realise his cult ambitions and take his own life. When the officer reported that Skara's afflictions were life-threatening and beyond his skill, the commanding commissar ordered the *Excommunicado* put in at Valens 160 in search of assistance.'

'But instead of receiving medical assistance...'

'The corvette was boarded by lighters and humpshuttles from the planet surface and overwhelmed,' Brother Andromedes told him.

‘Why didn’t they request assistance from system ships of the defence forces?’ Porphyrian asked.

‘I presume because they were either dead already or the ones attacking them,’ he answered, as though completing a test for his sergeant. ‘This is not the first time Sholen Skara graced Valens 160 with his presence. Captain Cules’s briefing indicated that for the longest time, Lord General Bulledin had Skara and his Kith on the run. Skara’s forces beat a fighting retreat through this region. The magister held Bulledin’s forces here before regrouping on Balhaut.’

‘Leaving his taint here,’ Porphyrian said.

‘And no doubt a few lieutenants to see to the cult’s continuation,’ Andromedes said. ‘He timed his symptoms to coincide with this leg of the journey. The Valens System is the obvious choice for assistance – Valens 160 the only choice for Officio Medicae facilities and personnel. By then, the Kith would already have their hooks into the hive world. The *Excommunicado* would have simply been another victim.’ Brother Andromedes found himself lost in the horror of such a possibility. ‘Imagine the celebratory slaughter to follow,’ the former petitioner said, ‘upon discovering their ruinous magister on board. If Valens 160 wasn’t doomed before then, its fate was sealed that day.’

Porphyrian bit at his lip. There was nothing else to be done. His assigned mission was to find the heretic Sholen Skara. The monster had left a trail of blood and butchered bodies in his wake.

‘We don’t need to imagine,’ the Iron Snake told Andromedes. ‘Brother Deucalion, your work is done. Fall back to the *Ithakariad*. We shall meet you there.’

‘On our way, brother-sergeant.’

‘Does the log contain the course signatures of the departing lighters and shuttles?’ Porphyrian asked.

‘You intend to—’ Andromedes began, turning away from the runescreen.

‘I intend to follow the carnage wherever it leads,’ Porphyrian told them. ‘Since it will, Emperor willing, eventually bring us to the heretic Sholen Skara.’ The sergeant changed vox-channel. ‘Brother Salames?’

‘Standing by, brother-sergeant.’

‘Prepare for an orbital insertion,’ Porphyrian told the Space Marine pilot. ‘Our search continues on the planet surface.’

‘Aye, brother-sergeant.’

‘Course signatures?’ Porphyrian pressed.

‘The capital hive,’ Andromedes said. ‘Plethorapolis.’

Porphyrion made to leave the bridge. The Iron Snakes did likewise. 'It waits for us,' the sergeant said, 'and no doubt Sholen Skara with it.'

'Yes, brother-sergeant,' Andromedes said.

'Leave the bridge as we found it,' Porphyrion said, striding across the command deck. 'And Brother Andromedes...'

'Yes, brother-sergeant?'

'Good work.'

III

In a free fall, the *Ithakariad* descended through the hull-staining cloud cover of the hive world. With storm-racked nebulosity churning around the Storm Eagle and a poisonous upper atmosphere of caustic chemicals eating away at the armour plating, the Iron Snakes gunship dropped out of the sky.

Crafting a shaft of sunlight through the rusty layers of smog, bilious yellow vapours and oily smoke, the *Ithakariad* punched down through the underbelly of the permanent cloud cover, allowing the light of the Valens star to reach the industrialscape beneath. Below the thick cloud was a murky twilight, dungeon-like in quality. Only the sheet lightning that seemed to pulse perpetually from the tumultuous clouds provided anything approaching illumination.

Brother Salames engaged the gunship's wing thrusters to slow their descent before firing the main engines. They picked up speed over one of the satellite hives before slipping down into the colossal forest of tower factoria, manufactorum mills and smokescrapers. Banking left and right at high speed through the gargantuan architecture, the *Ithakariad* made short, blazing work of the conurbatia between the satellite cities and the capital hive. Plethorapolis reached up through the ramshackle dereliction of its own foundations, a wonder of unchecked accretion, mindless engineering and trembling hive quakes. Like a single, yellowing tusk it punctured the toxic heavens.

Slowing and bringing the gunship up through the insanity of rising architecture – the factoria vent nests, hab-stacks and tottering cathedra – Brother Salames fired the prow door. Behind it stood Brother-Sergeant Porphyrion. The Iron Snakes Space Marine took the hive world in. A world devoted to death, pledged to one of the dark powers of the galaxy – the abyssal appetite for slaughter and suffering that was known from planet to planet simply as the Blood God. Here

on Valens 160, the Kith and their magister, Sholen Skara, had found a world ripe for sin and sacrifice.

Even from the gunship, with the doomed hive streaming by, Porphyrian could see the simple horror of the choice the heretic warlord had presented to the rancid billions. His monstrous god demanded blood. Every man, woman and child – from the lowliest underskavs to the clean-breathing Spireborn – owed Sholen Skara an end, a death-pledge that could be settled in the savage taking of one's own life or the limitless taking of others.

Porphyrian saw a cityscape decorated in chemically mummified cadavers. Like the fruits of damnation hanging from warped trees, thousands of bodies swung from cords, chains and improvised ropes, hanging from every available ramshackle structure, balcony and walkway. Steeples, chimneys and scaffolding leaned with the weight of the dead hanging from them. Forests of cadavers swayed with the roaring passage of the Iron Snakes gunship. Aerials, wire walkways and hab-stack-spanning power cables were draped with the dead.

Some had launched themselves from great heights, making a broken descent through the busy architecture of the hive. Those not cut into pieces by high-tension suspension cables or scarecrowed on spires and vox antennae, who reached the rockcrete, became one with it, turning the avenues, elevated freightways and labyrinthine thoroughfares leading out of the hive into rivers of blood.

The copper tang of slaughter was so thick that, like the hull of the *Ithakariad*, Porphyrian's armour began to mist red.

Beyond those who had taken their own lives and the lives of their dependants in the Blood God's name, and those who had willingly pledged themselves to his service in the cult ranks of Sholen Skara's Kith, there had been many unready for such an impossible choice. They had become the sacrificial millions offered up by swelling numbers of the Blood God's newest and most ardent servants.

There were bodies everywhere, and everywhere the dazed, idle monstrosity of those who had shed their blood. Murderous mobs and hordes of emaciated savages waited on the magister's word – gathered in quads, on roofs, along the ooze of blood-slick freightways and in the devastation of hab-stacks. Around the bloodbound Kith, on every surface, wall and floor was the sigil of Sholen Skara smeared in gore.

As the Storm Eagle howled by, the Kith howled back their murderous intent. They watched the *Ithakariad* weaving in and out, up and around the web of cables, walkways and towering dereliction, but all they really saw was a delivery

of victims, unfortunates who would honour the Blood God with their deaths or join the blessed ranks of his butchers.

‘Let’s get their attention,’ Brother-Sergeant Porphyrian voxed to the cockpit.

‘*Affirmative*,’ Brother Salames voxed back.

Porphyrian felt the gunship buck as a hellstrike missile blasted free of its wing-mounting and streaked away. Watching the missile sear ahead of them, Porphyrian followed its progress until it slammed into a colossal sub-spire. Reaching for the polychromatic underbelly of the polluted heavens was a shaft of sweat mills, rickety hab-stacks, smokescrapers and tower-top villas that formed a prong on the crown of sub-spires that encircled the Plethorapolitan capital spire. Porphyrian could not help admiring Brother Salames’s aim. It wasn’t just hitting the tower; the *Ithakariad*’s machine-spirit could help a pilot achieve that. It was knowing where to hit the sub-spire. As the missile thudded into the towering monstrosity, and ripples of infernal destruction blasted through the floors and superstructure at the spire base, the architecture couldn’t decide whether it wanted to topple over or collapse in on itself. Attempting both, the excruciating sound of shearing girders and pulverised masonry drowned out the screams of thousands of cult warriors. The Kith savages flailed to their deaths, their broken bodies destined to be buried beneath thousands of tonnes of falling rockcrete.

As a plume of dust rocketed up in place of the sub-spire, the Iron Snakes gunship punctured straight through it, swooping through the labyrinthine reach of hab-stacks and tower factoria. Banging a gauntlet on the troop-bay ceiling, Porphyrian heard Brother Salames respond by unleashing the nose-mounted heavy bolters on the hive. As the gunship expertly weaved through the tottering architecture, the heavy bolters above the prow door chugged away with a monstrous, rhythmic insistence that was felt throughout the length of the craft. From shredding away the sides of habs and mulching the cult warriors within to chewing up hordes of Kith and the elevated avenues upon which they were idling, the *Ithakariad* visited a maelstrom of destruction upon all who fell under its guns.

Punching the last of the gunship’s hellstrike missiles into a forest of slum-stacks, and watching the tapering tower blocks tangle and topple one another over in a net of contorted suspension wires, the gunship emerged from the mess with little room to manoeuvre. As the *Ithakariad* slowed and its progress became increasingly frustrated by crowded architecture, snapping cables and the shattering structures of rusted walkways, Porphyrian ordered Brother Salames to

land.

Turning a furious mob of Kith roaring at the gunship from atop a sweat mill into a red smear of bolt-punctured plasteel on the rust-stained roof, Brother Salames drifted the *Ithakariad* down. Gently landing the gunship on the creaking roof, Salames cut the engines and idled the wing thrusters in preparation for – if required – an immediate take off.

‘Squad Orpheon,’ Brother-Sergeant Porphyrian said over the helmet vox, turning to address his Iron Snakes, who were gathered for departure behind him. ‘We are here to hunt a monster. A dangerous foe who, like the water wyrms of our distant Ithaka, churns up the world around him into storm and violence. We are the Iron Snakes. We shall ride out the storm, cut through the chaos and bring this monster down. Just like Ithaka. Just like home. Is that understood?’

‘Yes, brother-sergeant!’ Squad Orpheon returned.

‘That’s what we are here to do,’ Porphyrian said. ‘The heretic warlord Sholen Skara is your target. We take him alive if circumstances permit. Brother Andromedes, the honour is yours. Begin the Rite of Giving Water. Bless this undertaking with Ithakan water from your flask. Prepare this world for the blood to be spilled. The blood of the Emperor’s enemies.’ As Andromedes came forward with his copper flask and anointed the rust-stained roof – the closest they could expect to get to the hive world surface – Squad Orpheon remained silent. When Brother Andromedes rose back to full height, Porphyrian voxed, ‘Brother Salames, await our return. Stand by for further orders.’

‘Affirmative.’

‘Squad Orpheon,’ the Iron Snakes sergeant said. ‘For Ithaka.’

‘For Ithaka!’

‘And for the Emperor.’

‘The Emperor!’

With that, Porphyrian led the Iron Snakes out of the troop bay and onto the roof. Their power-armoured footfalls boomed across the rust-eaten roof and onto a byzantine staircase working its way down the side of the sweat mill. Kicking the rickety railing from out of their path, Squad Orpheon dispensed with the zigs, zags and spirals of the staircase, instead dropping the distance from one mesh landing to another, shaking the structure with the rhythmic impact of each descent.

One of the landings was level with an elevated avenue stretching between hab-stacks and tower-factoria that lined the progress of the stilt thoroughfare. Thick, corroded cables running between the rockcrete path and the buildings held it

steady on its stilt structure. Still, like the staircase, Porphyrian swore he felt movement in the metal and stone beneath his boots.

The elevated avenue was slick with old blood oozing downhill at a glacial pace, carrying a mesh of bones and mummified remains with it. Crunching and slushing through the muck, splashing their boots and greaves with the Blood God's sacrifice, the Iron Snakes' progress did not go unnoticed. If explosive detonations and the demolishing of skyscrapers and sub-spires hadn't announced their arrival, the sight of armoured figures on the elevated thoroughfare, working their way spireward, drew hatred from the surrounding architecture like an applied salve drawing infection from a wound. The Kith were everywhere. They roared from factory balconies, smashed the plasteel from habs and gathered in rooftop throngs to screech their demented blood lust. There were lives unpledged in the city. Deaths that belonged to Sholen Skara. Ends to honour the magister's Blood God. Like savage primates in the treetops, the alarm spread through the hab-stacks, along the thoroughfare and up through the insanity of the hive. This was not the identification of a threat or a warning to the group. The monstrous cacophony of voices roared hoarse – hundreds, thousands, hundreds of thousands, millions even, for all Porphyrian knew – unified to announce a hunt.

The hive seemed to come alive around the Iron Snakes. Cult warriors, who moments before had been wandering in a blood-hazed malaise, now gathered in crazed mobs, their broken minds filled with purpose and the roaring hatred of their fellow Kith. The savages climbed up through the stiltwork, leapt from balconies and catwalks, and shattered through the avenue-adjacent habs. They gathered in growing hordes, splashing up through the gore, intent on being the first to honour their magister and offer sacrifice to their dark god.

As the crazed masses flooded the thoroughfare, their number washing up behind the Iron Snakes as well as running down to meet them, Porphyrian could hear the sound of the *Ithakariad*'s thrusters taking the gunship off the mill roof. No doubt the hordes had swamped the landing site, intent on overwhelming the Storm Eagle with sheer numbers.

'Remain on station,' Porphyrian voxed to Brother Salames, instructing him to circle as best he could.

'Affirmative,' the pilot voxed back. '*Brother-Sergeant, the Ithakariad registers many thousands of enemy targets closing on your position.*'

'Aye,' Porphyrian said grimly. 'We are going to make them regret such a fantasy.'

‘Enemy in range,’ Brother Deucalion reported, prompting Brothers Phrenius and Urymachus to bring up their boltguns to meet the oncoming Kith.

‘Negative,’ Porphyrian decided. ‘Conserve your ammunition. Spears and shields, brothers. Formation High-Tide. Brother Ptolomon, be the storm at our backs.’

As the roaring masses came at them, the Iron Snakes coolly mag-locked their boltguns to their belts. Sliding combat shields down onto their forearm plate and drawing a sea lance each from between their backs and packs, the Ithakans brought the blades to crackling blue life. Clutching the power spears by their grips and balancing the shafts of the weapons between their tapering tails and the sizzling blades, the Iron Snakes assumed formation.

Like a stormy sea of human detritus crashing up against ceramite cliffs, the frontline cult warriors of the Kith broke themselves against the Iron Snakes combat shields and immovable armoured forms. Batting back the shattered bodies, Squad Orpheon thrust their power spears through the roaring madness of the degenerate Kith, skewering heretics three or four deep on the shafts of their lances, before withdrawing the weapons and clearing the spears of screaming bodies with the rims of their combat shields. Stamping forth through the demolished lines of bodies, the Iron Snakes turned their power spears around above them in unison, bringing the crackling blades sweeping down on the next line of frenzied savages. As the heads of heretics rolled and bodies collapsed with theatrical choreography, Squad Orpheon brought their combat shields up to begin the meat-grinding manoeuvre again.

For the longest time, the Iron Snakes’ world became the roaring of blood-crazed cultists, red-rimmed eyes and faces contorted in hatred, in frustration and in agonising death. Working their way up the crowded thoroughfare, the progress of the Iron Snakes would not be denied. Shields shattered bone. Lances seared, swept and thudded through blood-daubed bodies. Armoured boots granted the Emperor’s peace to cult warriors whose expertly butchered forms still screeched their magister’s fell name from the rockcrete.

Squad Orpheon left a mulched carpet of the fallen in its wake. As Kith warriors surged up behind the Iron Snakes, Brother Ptolomon bathed them in a sweeping stream of flame, forcing advancing cultists to fight up through an inferno of thrashing, fiery forms. As cult warriors hauled themselves up onto the elevated avenue from the stiltworks below, and leapt to the rockcrete from surrounding balconies and habs, the Iron Snakes cut them down with the sharp crack of single bolt-rounds delivered with cool vengeance from their weapons.

Blasting Kith off the thoroughfare and into the abyssal underhive below, the Space Marines kept the squad's flanks clear of hostiles.

It started with the crack of a single beam. Then the bark of a single stub gunshot. A shotgun plucked at the rockcrete of the thoroughfare before being drowned in the chatter of an autogun. Hives were towering armouries of low-grade weaponry: stubbers crafted by underhive weaponsmiths; cheap, mass-produced autocarabines; lasguns liberated from militia storage depots. The balconies, roofs and thoroughfare-facing habs were suddenly flashing with furious fire as Sholen Skara's Kith soldiers flooded the surrounding stacks and towers to create a gauntlet along the path of the elevated avenue. With rockcrete plucked around them, the air searing with wild beams and rounds sparking off their plate, Squad Orpheon were pinned down.

'Iron Snakes,' Porphyrian commanded, 'strike!'

Bringing their power spears above their heads and shields, the Space Marines launched their lances at the oncoming cultists. Spearing their way through heretic ranks, Porphyrian watched as the mobs ahead were skewered into the rockcrete.

'Formation Tempest!' the brother-sergeant ordered, prompting the squad members to snatch up their boltguns from where they were magnetically dangling from their belts. Assuming positions on opposite sides of the thoroughfare and allowing the patchwork balustrade of crumbling rockcrete, corrugated sheeting and suspension cables to soak up the worst of the wild assault, Porphyrian called, 'May the Emperor grant us speed and accuracy. Make every bolt count. Open fire!'

From crouches and from cover, the Iron Snakes brought up their boltguns and took aim. Lining their helmet optics up along the sights of their hallowed weaponry, the Space Marines blasted single bolt-rounds at targets hammering the thoroughfare from above. Amid the fury and waste of hive weaponry chewing up the avenue around them, the Iron Snakes took cold and certain aim, blasting apart the Kith gunmen firing down on them from catwalks, balconies and shattered hab-stack vistaports. Round after round erupted from the muzzles of the Iron Snakes boltguns, dropping cult gunmen, blasting them back through habs or from their positions among the busy architecture of tottering towers.

As the Space Marines advanced up the thoroughfare at a cover-hugging crouch, Apothecary Nemertes and Brother Ptolomon drew bolt pistols and cut down cultists still intent on suicidally rushing them from the front and the rear. This allowed the rest of Squad Orpheon to concentrate the unrelenting accuracy

of their bolt blasts on the Kith gauntlet.

The switch to such a tactic – the suggestion of formations and a plan of attack – led Porphyrian to the belief that they were getting closer to their objective. Without guidance, the Kith moved between the languid torpor of exhaustion and the idle practice of torture, mutilation and murder. In agitated numbers they could form savage hordes of wild warriors, drawn to the stench of sacrifice. In the presence of heretic lieutenants, however, a cult command structure and perhaps even a magister, the Kith managed to achieve singularity of purpose and a spiritual discipline that gave the appearance of rank and file organisation, when in truth they simply felt the predacious presence of the Blood God in their hearts, filling them with a sacrificial urge so powerful that they might end their own lives in unison to appease the whims of the monstrous power's mortal prophets. Prophets like Sholen Skara.

As progress up the avenue was made, boltgun magazines were exchanged and ammunition ran low, Porphyrian needed the heretic warlord to show his hand. The sergeant assumed that he must be near – drawn to the destruction sweeping through his city and reports from his savages that the Emperor's Angels were in the hives. Porphyrian was counting on the assumption that the Iron Snakes were too tempting an offering to pass up.

The brother-sergeant was not to be disappointed.

Suddenly, the din of assorted gunfire died away to a ghostly echo that bounced around the perversity of the hive architecture.

'Hold your fire,' Porphyrian ordered.

'What's happening?' Brother Andromedes called. The silence of the guns was unsettling after the fury of the previous onslaught. 'What does it mean?'

'It means that he's here,' Porphyrian told the battle-brother.

IV

'Here you are...'

They were sickly sweet words on the air, pouring from every caster, every channel and every vox-system in the quarter. The voice proceeded from everywhere. It echoed over itself and filled the open space between the hab-stacks and towers with mellifluous, static-laced poison. 'The Emperor's snakes, slithering into my nest. I know not whether to be honoured or insulted.'

‘I want optics on Sholen Skara,’ Porphyrian said over the vox. ‘Now. He’s here. I’m sure of it. He would want to see this. Full scan.’

The Iron Snakes looked around endless floors of the hab-stacks and the busy architecture of tower-factoria, rotating through optical filters and engaging their auto-senses in a silhouette-scanning search of the gathered thousands of Kith forming the gauntlet.

‘There were serpents,’ Sholen Skara continued, the poetic poison of his words cursing the air. ‘In the fields, where I lived as a boy. Cowardly creatures. Low things of the decrepit earth. Death without meaning. They would hide, they would strike and they would kill the workers in the fields. Men trying to earn an existence for themselves and their families out of an unforgiving land. At my father’s insistence, I went out early, every morn and walked the rocky furrows, searching for serpents, that my father might not suffer them in his back-breaking work. I was terrified at first. When I found my first serpent I pelted it with stones and crushed it beneath a heavy rock. Its venom and the scales of its slithering body afforded little protection against gravity. The others came easy after that. Of course, they hid, they hissed and they struck when they could, but I came to enjoy their lowly, petty resistance. I gave their deaths meaning. I saved the man I loved as my father – the harsh and perhaps cruel man – for a significant end. A meaningful death at the hands of his miserable specimen of a son. My mother could not accept what had happened. I helped her to understand. I didn’t lay a finger on my mother. I loved my mother. My words simply took her to a place from which she wanted to escape. A place where taking one’s own life is a blessed release. A death with meaning. A sacrifice of spilled blood and significance. But it all started with the snakes.’

‘Target acquired,’ Brother Hyperenor reported, peering up the length of his boltgun. ‘Hab-stack south by south-west. Four hundred and thirty second floor.’

Porphyrian stared along the boltgun’s line of sight. His helmet optics magnified the dark figure – one standing among many Kith cultists in the open space of a hab-stack under further tottering construction. Standing in the skeletal guts of the accretion, with plastek sheeting whipping about in the breeze, Porphyrian could make out the silhouette of a muscular figure with a shaved head. Like the sheeting, his hive robes tangled around him in the wind. He held a vox-thief in one hand, while behind him a humpshuttle sat precariously on the half-constructed roof of the hab-stack. Porphyrian swore that even at this distance he could see the murderous glint in the magister’s eyes.

‘I have a shot,’ Hyperenor informed his sergeant. Porphyrian’s lip began to

curl. He could have Hyperenor end this madness with one pull of the trigger. The Kith were nothing without their magister.

‘He’s got to go back,’ Brother Andromedes said. ‘It’s the mission.’

‘The mission,’ Porphyrian agreed bleakly.

And then something hit the thoroughfare, something that had fallen from the sky. Something drawn to the rockcrete by the irresistible force of gravity. Something fleshy and unrelenting. It died as it struck. Three more bombs of flesh, blood and bone hammered around them.

Bodies were raining from the sky.

Looking up, Porphyrian witnessed the impossible. At some secret signal from Sholen Skara – a trigger word or hand signal that formed some kind of sacrificial, suicidal insistence – the Kith had launched themselves from balconies, roofs and murderous heights on both sides of the thoroughfare. They were falling with impunity, rocketing towards the Iron Snakes with lethal force.

‘Take the sho–’ Porphyrian managed, but it was too late.

Bodies were hammering down all around them, smashing into the rockcrete, but many were hitting the Iron Snakes. Hyperenor’s weapon had been smashed from his grip by a thunderbolting Kith, who broke over the edge of the balustrade. The raining bodies were an enemy against which a boltgun or spear were useless, and Squad Orpheon were forced to hold their combat shields over themselves. Even beneath a shield, the servos, hydraulics and fibre bundles of the Iron Snakes’ power armour struggled with the relentless impacts of flailing bodies from above. Flesh forms broke over shields and splattered across plate. The Space Marines struggled to keep their footing, being smashed from one side to another by the suicidal descent of cultists.

‘Formation Phalanx,’ Brother-Sergeant Porphyrian ordered, but the Iron Snakes could not make it to one another. They were knee-deep in shattered bodies and bloody remains, while some of the Kith leaping from the lower floor were, horribly, still breathing. Screaming. Roaring. Clawing at the Space Marines’ plate. Drawing their warblades, the Iron Snakes slashed at grasping limbs and cut their way free of the growing cadaver mounds.

The suicidal onslaught had become a torrential downpour of flesh and bone. A deluge of sacrificial offerings, rocketing down from the heavens. Porphyrian could barely see his squad. He had been knocked to the ground several times, and although he had heaved himself back up against the cascade of bodies, he had lost his boltgun and shield. Slashing about him with the warblade while being bounced left and right by sickening impacts, Porphyrian tried to wade

through the limbs and smashed cadavers.

‘Climb!’ he ordered, hauling himself up the blood-slick mountain of dead flesh. He saw Brother Urymachus buried in bodies, his gauntlets clawing out for assistance. He saw Nemertes, the Apothecary, crawl free only to be slammed aside by a tumbling Kith that knocked him off the elevated thoroughfare and into the abyssal depths of the underhive. ‘Deucalion. Andromedes. Report in!’ Porphyrian called, but all he could hear over the vox were the exertions of Iron Snakes Space Marines buried alive.

Smashed this way and that by bodies that hit like mortar shells, Porphyrian hauled himself desperately up the side of the cadaver cliff-face. Using his warblade like a pick, he stabbed purchase into the mound and climbed, working his way clear. Leaping from the thoroughfare, across to the crumbling wall of the opposite hab-stack, Porphyrian climbed for his life and those of his trapped Iron Snakes. Stabbing the warblade into decrepit masonry and clawing at ramshackle balconies and smashed vistaposts with his gauntlet, Porphyrian made an indomitable, powered ascent. Kith had started to hurl themselves down the face of the building, bouncing off architecture and tumbling onto the Space Marine. Holding on tight, Porphyrian’s strength and will were tested by the constant stream of suicidal cultists smashing off his pauldrons. Kith warriors attacked him from catwalks and balconies, and the Iron Snakes sergeant was forced to tear them from their purchase and launch them out into open space.

With his squad drowning in death below, Porphyrian finally hauled himself onto the roof of the towering hab-stack. Exhausted, he dropped his warblade and pushed himself to his feet. When he turned around he found that Sholen Skara was watching him from the opposite hab-stack with great amusement. His Kith acolytes were spitting and roaring at the Iron Snakes Space Marine, while the magister simply brought the vox-thief to his lips.

‘This snake can climb,’ Sholen Skara’s silky syllables boomed across the open space above the thoroughfare. ‘Where do you think you’re going, serpent?’

Porphyrian unclasped his helm and dropped it to one side. Skara smiled as though he were supposed to be impressed. Brother Hyperenor had had the magister in his sights, but he had not fired, and now Porphyrian had no boltgun with which to deliver justice. Surrounded by death and destruction, there was one thing of which Porphyrian was certain. Sholen Skara was too dangerous to be allowed to live. He was a monster, and on Ithaka there was only one thing to be done with monsters.

Slipping his second sea lance from his back, Porphyrian brought the power

spear to life and balanced it in his grip. It was an incredible distance, but with several heavy steps and a power-armoured launch from the roof of the hab-stack, Brother-Sergeant Porphyrian hurled the crackling spear across the impossible distance between the two towers. The Iron Snake watched the magister's smile contort into an ugly, horrified snarl as the lance sailed home, slamming through the heretic's muscular chest and impaling him against the side of the humpshuttle.

As Sholen Skara stared down in disbelief at the spear shaft protruding from his chest, his Kith acolytes fought frantically to remove the sea lance from the shuttle, or their magister from the lance. The impact of the power spear had been just enough, however, to knock the craft from its precarious perch on the hab-stack roof. With Sholen Skara staring on in disbelief and the Kith screaming around him, the humpshuttle tipped and slid from the roof's edge. Porphyrian watched with satisfaction as the tumbling shuttle crashed down the side of the building, tearing Sholen Skara with it until finally both shuttle and Skara erupted in a ball of furious flame as the wreckage hit the elevated thoroughfare below.

Porphyrian heard the roar of engines. Behind the hab-stack, Brother Salames had managed to work through the spider's web of cables and walkways to bring the *Ithakariad* level with the roof. Jabbing a ceramite finger down at the thoroughfare below and Squad Orpheon buried alive in dead bodies, Porphyrian directed Brother Salames and the Storm Eagle down to offer assistance. The Space Marine recovered his helmet and cycled through the vox channels.

'Patch me through to the ship's steward,' the sergeant ordered.

'My lord?'

'Leodocus,' Porphyrian said. 'I need you to send an astrotelepathic message to the Inquisitorial fortress on Khulan.'

'Yes, my lord.'

'Inform them not to expect the heretic Sholen Skara.'

'Yes, my lord.'

'Send another to the Warmaster,' Brother-Sergeant Porphyrian said grimly. 'Tell him... Tell him that he's lost another world.'

My turn again. This is another small, quiet piece, but there's plenty of menace. I just imagined an unlikely conversation between two very different characters from the Ghosts books, then realised it probably was a conversation, and a relationship, that was far from unlikely after all.

Some of the stories in this book are from the Imperial perspective, and others see the Crusade through the eyes of the Archenemy. This is, I suppose, the still point in that vast storm where those two things meet. And it features two of my favourite characters.

This story is set nine days after the end of Salvation's Reach.

Dan Abnett



YOU NEVER KNOW

Dan Abnett

*The Highness Ser Armaduke, nine days out from Salvation's Reach, 782.M41
(the 27th year of the Sabbat Worlds Crusade)*

‘Where are we?’ asked Mabbon Etogaur.

Sergeant Varl waited until the cell’s heavy, armoured shutter had finally closed behind him, then glanced around the tiny cell, his eyes narrowed in concentration, his lips pursed.

‘I can’t be sure,’ Varl replied, ‘but I *think* it’s the brig.’

‘Oh, Sergeant Varl,’ said Mabbon. ‘I had almost forgotten your rapier wit.’

Varl grinned. He slung his lasrifle across his back, then gestured with both hands, palms up, fingers flapping.

‘Up, *pheguth*,’ he ordered. ‘You know the drill.’

Mabbon sighed. He put his book down on the bare cot, and slowly rose to his feet from the metal stool. He raised his arms. Shackles clinked, dangling from his wrists. The chains around his ankles were secured to the deck by a steel floor-pin.

Varl reached forward to start the search. He hesitated at the last minute.

‘Play nice, all right?’ he told the prisoner.

‘Don’t I always?’

Varl started searching. Pockets, hems, seams, cuffs. He was meticulous. He was practiced. He’d done it many times before.

‘Really, sergeant?’ said Mabbon patiently, arms wide. ‘Do you think, in the six hours since that cell door last opened and this pantomime last occurred, that I have somehow managed to obtain and conceal a weapon?’

‘You never know,’ said Varl. ‘You might have finally worked a splinter of metal off the deck plates. Or forced a screw out of the bed-frame and cunningly sharpened it.’

‘Oh, I wish I’d thought of either of those things,’ said Mabbon, looking up at the ceiling as Varl worked.

Varl started checking the manacles and the ankle hobbles.

‘Or picked the lock of my shackles?’ Mabbon added.

‘You never know.’

Varl moved behind him.

‘You might have dismantled the bed and the stool,’ Varl said, ‘and ingeniously fashioned them into a lasweapon.’

Something akin to a smile passed across Mabbon’s scarred face.

‘You really overestimate my abilities, sergeant,’ he said.

‘Well, that was an exaggeration for illustrative purposes,’ replied Varl.

Varl came back round to face him.

‘Open,’ said Varl.

Mabbon opened his mouth. Varl peered in. Then he slid his index finger inside.

‘No closey-closey,’ Varl said. Mabbon said nothing. Varl ran his finger around Mabbon’s gums, around his cheeks, and under his tongue.

When he was done, Varl removed his finger. Mabbon closed his mouth. Varl moved to the side, and scrutinised Mabbon’s ear.

‘No autocannon concealed in there?’ Mabbon asked.

‘Ha ha,’ said Varl. ‘Oh, wait.’

‘What?’ asked Mabbon.

‘I think I see light shining in through the other ear,’ said Varl. Mabbon did not react to the quip.

Varl stepped back.

‘All right. Sit.’

Mabbon sat. Varl began to sweep the room.

‘This really isn’t necessary,’ said Mabbon.

‘You know the drill. Standing order. A search every six hours.’

‘I know the drill,’ said Mabbon. ‘I have remarked on its pointlessness before.’

‘Yet, as you can see, we are still going to do it,’ replied Varl, busy.

‘And I am still going to remark,’ said Mabbon sadly. ‘I have reached a point at which I am prepared to both criticise and mock the practice.’

Varl was checking the cot.

‘Look, you know fething well,’ said Varl, ‘it’s not really shards of metal or sharpened spoons we’re worried about. You could get up to all sorts in here when you’re unsupervised.’

‘All sorts of what?’ asked Mabbon.

‘Badness,’ said Varl, gesturing vaguely. ‘Crazy Archenemy badness. Ritual shit. I’ve seen shit in my days, mister, and I know what’s possible. You could summon something.’

‘*Summon* something?’

‘Yeah,’ said Varl. ‘We could open the hatch and find you’ve conjured up some daemon-spawn of arsebag to sick on us.’

‘I am a soldier, Varl,’ said Mabbon. ‘An officer. I have commanded hosts of men. I am not, however, a warlock.’

‘You never know,’ said Varl. ‘We’ve only got your word for that.’

He picked up the book Mabbon had been reading and leafed through the pages. Then he shook it to see if anything would fall out. Nothing did.

Varl studied the spine.

‘*The Spheres of Longing?*’ he read.

‘It’s an intriguing read.’

‘Never heard of it,’ said Varl.

‘I’m improving my mind. I am trying to learn the mindset of the Imperium. To... understand and remember its ways.’

‘What do you mean, “understand and remember”?’ Varl asked.

‘To better assist you,’ said Mabbon.

Varl paused.

‘When you were a man—’ Varl began.

‘I am still a man,’ Mabbon said.

‘Not so much. When you were a man, why did you... I mean, how... How does a man become what you are?’

‘The blood claimed me,’ said Mabbon.

‘The blood?’ asked Varl.

‘Sergeant, for all the “stuff” you claim to have seen, I assuredly know that you have no grasp of what life is like in the Sanguinary Worlds. I was Astra Militarum once, just like you. Then the Archon took me, and the blood claimed me, and I became an officer in his Pact.’

‘Then the Sons. You change sides a lot, don’t you?’ asked Varl.

‘Every chance I get,’ replied Mabbon. ‘Every effort I make is to reclaim my humanity. To purge the blood. To make amends. To become again the person I once was. That is why I read. I am gradually remembering what it is to be a human of the Imperium.’

‘You say that like it’s a good thing.’

‘You never know,’ said the etogaur.

Varl pulled a face.

‘You know the real reason this search drill is pointless?’ asked Mabbon.

‘Surprise me.’

‘It’s pointless,’ said Mabbon, ‘because if I wanted to escape, I would have done so by now. And I *could* have done. You do not have to search me, because I want to be here. I am willingly assisting the Imperium, because it is the only thing I have left in my life that means anything. I will not destroy that one last, fragile thing by doing something stupid or disruptive.’

‘Well, you would say that, wouldn’t you?’ said Varl. He took out a pack of lho-sticks, lit one and, after a pause, offered the pack to Mabbon.

Mabbon shook his head.

‘Whatever happens,’ said Varl, exhaling smoke, ‘I mean, whatever you do, you know things aren’t going to end well, right? Things are not going to end well for you at all.’

‘Things are not going to end well for anybody,’ replied Mabbon.

‘I’m just saying.’

‘Apart from some small measure of redemption,’ said Mabbon, ‘death is the only thing I have to look forward to.’

‘What’s that?’ asked Varl abruptly. He stepped forward, studying the wall.

‘What’s what?’

‘These scratches here. These marks. Did you do that?’

Mabbon hesitated.

‘Yes,’ he said.

‘With what?’ asked Varl, sharp.

Mabbon raised the heavy cuff of his manacles.

‘Why?’

‘I make a scar on the wall every time I am searched,’ said Mabbon. ‘You search me every six hours, thus I have some measure of the passage of time.’

‘What good is that?’ asked Varl.

‘I am no man,’ said Mabbon. ‘I am no thing. I have no liberty. No self-

determination. No comfort. No knowledge of where I am or what I am any more. But I can at least know *when*.'

'This is just a tally, then?' Varl asked, touching the row of scratches.

'Just a tally.'

'Not the fethed-up markings for some ritual?' asked Varl, looking at him sharply.

'No, they are not the fethed-up markings of some ritual,' said Mabbon.

'I'll have to tell Rawne,' said Varl.

'I understand,' the etogaur replied.

'He'll probably—'

'Move me to another cell and have a servitor grind the wall-plate smooth again. I understand.'

Varl nodded.

'Sorry,' Varl said.

'Thank you,' said Mabbon.

'For what?'

'Sorry is the most human thing anyone has said to me in a very long time,' said Mabbon Etogaur.

Varl stared at him for a moment.

Then he turned to the shutter and banged on it.

'Open two!' he yelled. 'I'm coming out!'

The shutter began to grind open. Varl looked back at the seated etogaur.

'It's 0417, day 18, 782. Just ask me. Just ask.'

'And you'll tell me?'

'You never know,' said Varl. 'See you in six hours. You'll still be here, right?'

'You never know,' replied Mabbon Etogaur.

I love John French's writing. I really do. There is a grim poetry to it, and he handles the dark themes and content of Warhammer 40,000 with great confidence and insight. I was so pleased when he agreed to write a story for this anthology. As with Rob, this is John's first visit to the Sabbat Worlds (now he gets a club tie too).

I knew what John was going to write about, but when he delivered the story, I realised that it absolutely had to sit next to 'You Never Know' in the running order, because it was such a thematic companion piece.

Prepare yourselves for an intoxicatingly dark and immersive experience...

Dan Abnett



SON OF SEK

John French

*Sartusa Shrine City, Cabal Epsilon, 777.M41
(the 22nd year of the Sabbat Worlds Crusade)*

*'All the sons and daughters, rolled down the red river,
When will they return?
When will they sing again?'*

– from the Song of Founding, Vervunhive

I

I will hear his voice.

Knowing this remakes me. There are many deaths and doors which wait for our souls. I will pass through them all, bright and shining, because of what he has already given me. And now I will hear the voice. I will drown in it. I will have no voice. I will come to this existence anew. I will be a son for a second time.

I am waiting. I have waited for many markings of time. The bowls of oil have burnt dry seven times since I came to this antechamber. The smoke from the

flames is sweet. It is the smoke of Sartusa, taken from it while it was newly quieted. The first jars of oil drawn from the render-pits are brought to him, so that he can smell the worlds his sons have quieted. That this oil burns now, for me, is an honour.

Sartusa's silence was a thing of beauty. The flames cupped in the bowls send their shadows shivering up the walls. Each red and golden tongue is a child of the fire we made on that blessed world. We took the city's voices one by one, cut by cut, shot by shot, until there was red flowing free of the doors, and the streets were red mirrors to the pyre. Its people fought. Oh, how they fought. Bullets and flashes roared at us from windows, from the trenches topped with bags of sand, from the pits that shells had dug in the earth. Many of us fell. Many became the meat that is all that life is when it has no voice. I can see them now, the heaped bodies made red and wet. Their voices are one now, and they no longer hear the lie of their hearts, the lie that life is more than passing instants sliced into seconds by a pulse. We came on, though, and the unshriven tried to hold on, to deny us, not to cry out even though smoke hid the sky, and the horizon was flame. Ignorance is not without resilience. They fought until it was just one circle around a statue to their god.

The pyre had stolen all sound, and we stood in the magnificence of what we had done, in the rain that fell black with ash. We looked in at the few that still resisted, water running from our blades and from the mouths of our guns. They looked back, and shouted as though fury can banish futility: such defiance, such deafness. Their faces were skin masks painted in dust and soot, their eyes wide windows into fear.

Except one.

One figure stood tall, a sword still in his hand, head unbowed. They call such creatures heroes. He called on us to come to an end by his hand, cursed us in words that have no meaning, spoke of the armour of contempt, and the shield of the soul. His words bought him nothing, though. He ended there, beneath the eyes of his indifferent god. He died by my hand. He deserves nothing, but for now I will remember him. He is why I am here. His death brought me here. The fires of the world he failed to save touch my eyes, and do me honour. He Whose Voice Drowns Out All Others will ask me of this dead man, because I was the one to end him. I heard the last words from between his teeth.

I alone know him.

II

He was born on a world which ate its young. The fume-stacks reached halfway to the sky, and their smoke joined soot-streaked earth to blank, grey clouds. The sound of hammers was the music of this world. Great blank slabs of iron, brushed panels of plasteel, bright wafers of auric, all came from beneath the blows of men and women too old to walk the streets, and children too small to lift a gun. Crammed into honeycombs of workshops at the edges of the foundries, they breathed air spiced by coal and mineral dust.

He was one of them, one of the grey world's children: his eyes turned to a squint by the forge light, which was never more than a glow, his skin greyed by dust and his hands cooked to pink gloss by forge heat. He never knew his parents. They had gone beyond the smoke, to the wars fought in the stars. He thought of them, though, huddling around the memories of hands holding him, and hair brushing his cheek as he fell into sleep. He slept in the workshop. He would curl up in a rockcrete niche at the back, behind the stacked sheets of finished metal, and exhaustion would drop him into oblivion as the hammers rang on and on.

People faded and vanished from his life. Time took some. Jacobin, the workshop's master, went in a season of coughs that brought black sludge from his lungs. His death took something away. It took away the voice that screamed louder than even the hammers. It took away the whip of oiled wire. It took away the only face that had stayed the same for as long as he could remember. He had cried when the old man died, and had not known why.

The hammers rang on.

Nothing remained for long, except the turning of seasons marked by smothering heat or burning rain. Children grew and vanished to the stars. Others came, ragged people who had travelled from far away, men and women with broken bodies, who screamed through their sleep. Some worked, some tried to work and then just stopped, and some never tried and were taken by the overseers. He supposed that they went somewhere where it did not matter that they stared into space, tears gathering in the corners of their eyes. He hoped that was where they went. He did not think too much on it, though. Nothing lasted, and nothing needed to be part of tomorrow, no matter how much it had been part of yesterday.

And more new people came, as others around him grew and vanished. That was how Hekadia came to him. She had half a face. Scars cratered the right-hand

side. The left half was not there. She covered it with a shell of green plastek. Underneath the mask her skin was like fat left close to a flame. All the way down to the bone. He saw it once, when a beam caught the top of her head and knocked the mask off. He saw, and she saw that he had seen. She did not shout. She just hit him hard enough for him to wake minutes later in a pool of his own vomit.

Eventually, when she had drunk a jug of tar-liqueur, he asked her half the question he had been holding inside since the first newcomer had arrived.

‘Where are you from?’

‘Not here.’

‘But you... you were somewhere before you were here?’

‘I was... serving the Emperor.’ She laughed. It was the same laugh she made when the preachers walked the streets outside the workshops, calling out the rites of service above the clangour. He did not like the priests. He did not dislike them either. They were just another layer of noise that came and went.

‘Where was that?’

‘Out there, Anarkos, Khan II, Nyzon... Take your pick.’

‘Are they... in the stars?’

‘Yeah,’ she nodded.

‘What are stars?’

‘You want to see them? You want to know?’

‘Yes.’

‘How old are you?’

He shrugged.

‘You will find out soon enough,’ she had said, and took a long gulp of black liquor. ‘I guarantee it.’

Hekadia went later. One day she did not wake up. They took her out to the wagon on its first pass of the day.

She was right though.

He grew older, stronger. The cycles of work, and sleep, and grey gruel were his breath and the beat of his heart. The hammer in his hand was as much a part of him as the spark burns on his face, or the soot shading his skin. He learnt enough to know that when people went away they went somewhere to die in a war that sucked up each generation as soon as it was old enough. He knew that he would go to the stars himself one day, just like the rest. And, though he never made it real by saying it, he wanted to go.

At least then it would be over.

III

There are many steps to silence, from birth to death, from death to revelation.

We begin as creatures, not as humans – creatures whose existences are a shell of falsehoods. We wear our lies as scales over our true skins. Our voices and thoughts are the noise of confusion and desperation, and fear. We hold tight onto the thread of hope that we believe is our soul, and we babble on, not realising that each syllable of sound, each note of every thought, means nothing.

I do not know if all who serve He Whose Voice Drowns Out All Others became his sons as I did. Perhaps it is different for each of us, perhaps not.

My revelation began with the Room of Voices.

Hands dragged me there, hands and hooks. Stitches held my eyes shut. I wanted to scream, but a spiked tongue of iron held my own tongue still, and kept my mouth closed. They pulled me across floors of warm metal, and bare earth. At last they took the bridle from my mouth, and left me on cold, polished stone.

For a moment I breathed, and did not move.

Then I called out.

The sound cut through me. My cries were all around me, rising higher and higher, echoing and combining until they were a flock of needles and hammers. I tried to press my hands against my ears. Iron thorns had been bound to my fingers. I tore my hands away from my face. I cried again, and the sound of my pain crashed back over me. My own voice was deafening me. The shriek dragged through me like razor wire. I bit my lips closed.

Slice by slice the echoes faded. I bathed in the silence, so relieved that I wanted to weep, but I made no sound. The silence deepened.

It was so quiet, so utterly quiet. It was wonderful. It felt like freedom, like breathing after drowning, like...

My heart beat in my chest. I could hear it, each dull, thump beat, rising, rising, hammering through me from within. My breath quickened as the drum beat rose, each inhalation a saw edge, each exhalation a bellow. I pulled my limbs closer, trying to slow my heart. The rags I wore rustled like a forest in a gale.

And on and on, each beat and breath a crack of thunder.

It has to stop.

It has to stop.

Please let it stop.

‘Please make it stop!’

And my own weak plea ripped me apart. My eardrums burst. Blood ran from

my mouth, and ears, and eyes.

The sound did not stop. It roared through my skin and bones. I wanted the silence again, its agony forgotten. The thought of it was everything. I shivered, and bit blood from my lips, until the tormenting voice was fading.

Fading...

Fading...

And there was silence, and for a second it felt like everything.

Then the quiet crowded close again, and the pleas for mercy began to bubble up to my mouth.

And on it went, until I could bear it no more, and the seconds between silence and cacophony were everything I lived for, and then not enough to live for. And I remembered the iron thorns bound to my hands.

That last time – as the beat of my heart faded to softness, pure, nothing – they came for me, and they dragged me back into life.

Someone put a hand on my skull, as other hands lifted me. The fingers on my scalp are warm, resonating metal.

‘Do you understand?’ asks a voice, which vibrates through my skull. ‘Do you hear it now?’

‘Yes,’ I said. ‘I... I understand.’

IV

Las-fire laced the air above him. He dived low, and the soft mud smacked up into his face. He got a mouthful, a full thick taste of the swamp-mulch. It tasted of chemicals, of things dissolving slowly in still water. The whack-snap of energy bolts was thick in his ears. He pulled his head up, and his eyes hit the strobing sheet of fog above.

‘Frag.’

A black geyser of mud exploded ten strides behind him. Las-bolts smacked into the falling mud in flashes of steam.

Fizz-thump, fizz-thump, fizz-thump...

Voices rose against the gunfire. He did not recognise them. They just all sounded raw, ripped from dry throats. They all sounded like sudden and complete terror.

‘Castyuran! Gord! Anyone!’

Fizz-thump, fizz-thump, fizz-thump...

‘Medic.’

‘Where are they?’

‘Left flank.’

Fizz-thump, fizz-thump, fizz-thump...

‘I can’t see them.’

‘Medic!’

‘Dead ahead.’

Fizz-thump, fizz-thump, fizz-thump...

‘Sacred Throne.’

‘Medic!’

Another weapon started up, something heavy, something that began to tear up the damp folds of ground with lumps of metal.

He had hold of his lasgun, but it was half buried under him. His helmet was gone, too. He had to move. Fact. No doubt. White-hot certainty ran down his spine.

He had listened in training. Had done all the drills, and thought through what was likely to happen once they were on the ground. They had been walking that ground for a week, and had seen the corpses of those who had come before them. He had tried to see the lessons in their blank eyes and slumped shapes. He would have read the manuals, too, but he could not do that, never learnt how. All of the training said stay still, work with the squad, look for officers to tell you what to do, and keep hold of your gun.

Apart from the last part it all now seemed like picking the patch of ground to die on.

Fizz-thump, fizz-thump, fizz-thump...

He rolled over, slithering across the black ground. His breath sucked hard between his teeth. The swell of gunfire grew. Earth pattered down on him. People were still shouting. His world was a slit of sight just above the ground. Neon-stitches passed just above his head.

Fizz-thump, fizz-thump, fizz-thump...

He rolled over, looked up. A lacework of light covered the sky above.

Fizz-thump, fizz-thump, fizz-thump...

Left to right, left to right, always left to right.

Fizz-thump, fizz-thump, fizz-thump...

He rolled back over. The world had squeezed in around him. The shouts and gunfire had slid backwards in his mind, like the hammer ring of struck metal.

‘Fall back.’

‘Fire at will.’

‘My hand, they got my hand!’

Fizz-thump, fizz-thump, fizz-thump...

He could see a ridge of broken bricks poking up from the mud ten paces in front of him. Ten paces.

The heavier gun opened up again, its base note blending with the cackle of las-fire.

Ten paces.

‘They are moving!’

‘What?’

‘I think...’

Fizz-thump, fizz-thump, fizz-thump...

The heavy gun’s stuttered beat slackened, paused.

He pulled his legs under him, came up to a crouch, and ran.

Fizz-thump, fizz-thump, fizz-thump, fizz-thump, fizz-thump, fizz-thump...

His heart was a fist punching his ribs. Something whipped his legs. Stinging pain, bright sharp.

He reached the scrap of wall. There was shouting behind him, voices he recognised. He dropped over the wall, pressed himself to the ground, and began to crawl forward. He could see now. The enemy was on his left, a ragged line of muzzle flashes among a stand of splintered trees. He could see something moving, las-light glinting on a fat barrel as it was dragged around. He pulled his gun up, fingers sliding and slapping on the catches.

Sight, look through the damned sight.

He looked, paused, breathed, and pulled the trigger. Las-bolts flickered out. Wood puffed to splinters and steam. He heard more shouts. The enemy gunfire weakened. Someone dropped over the wall next to him. He heard heavy breathing, and then the crack of a gun firing right next to his ear. He flinched, swearing, his finger coming off the trigger.

A figure rose from the stand of trees. He saw mud-smudged ochre fatigues, and a face of stitch scars and bright inked feathers. It looked almost comical. It was not a joke though, except perhaps a cruel one.

For a second, he watched the painted man scuttle forward, hugging the ground, buckles and hooked knives jangling and jumping. Then a blurt of gunfire stung the wall in front of him.

He ducked, rolled, and came up a pace from where he had been. The painted

man was closer, much, much closer. He could see tiny teardrops of bone hanging on loops from the stitched face. There was a fat, dull green sphere in the painted man's hand, its pin already a silver glimmer on the ground behind. He brought his gun up, and pulled the trigger.

Nothing.

He looked down. The empty charge light winked red from the gun casing. The gun of whoever was next to him had gone silent too.

He looked up in time to see the painted man throw the grenade. He ducked. The grenade hit the soft earth behind the wall and to his left.

'Holy—'

The grenade detonated. The blast wave juddered through him. His head slammed against the back of his gun. Wet particles pattered down his back. His ears rang. He was breathing.

He was breathing.

He looked up. A hump of ripped fabric and wet meat lay next to him. He saw teeth, a string of white shards in mashed pink. A breath sawed out of his mouth. He was still staring at the teeth.

The painted man came over the lip of wall and landed in a crouch. They stared at each other, as though surprised to meet. The painted man had grey eyes.

He lunged forward, trying to hit the painted man's face with the gun in his hand. The edge of the casing hit something. He was aware of hands scrabbling at him, of the clink of a knife slipping from a hook into a hand. The man smelled of sweat and blood and sugared cinnamon. Something punched him in the thigh, hard. The painted man's eyes were wide in their setting of scars and feathers. Another punch, another numb deadness, like being hit by a hammer. He pulled back, and his legs folded like soft jelly. The painted man rose, a long, dirty needle of a knife in his fist, fresh blood thick on the ochre fatigues.

He brought his gun up. The painted man flinched. The trigger snapped back. Nothing. The painted man lunged. The lasgun barrel hit the painted man's patchwork face, and spread his nose into a pink smear. The side of the casing came next, crashing into cheekbones and jaw; once, twice, a number that was lost in the slippery, bloody roar that had become the world. The man was no longer painted, he was a slack bag of split skin and streaming crimson. Blood was everywhere, and he could not tell whose it was. He had it in his eyes, on his cheeks, on his lips.

Las-bolts whizzed above his head, and slammed into the scrap of wall. He glanced up as he dropped between the two corpses, one a comrade, one an

enemy.

Three, maybe more figures in ochre were closing in, firing as they moved. His vision was smudging at the edges. He did not want to look at his legs. He could taste metal in his mouth. The two grenades were heavy lumps as he pulled them from the painted man's corpse. He was breathing hard. The pins ran free in his fingers. He turned, raising his head above the wall as he threw. He got it wrong, his arm suddenly weak, his vision softening to dizzy grey. It was a perfect piece of luck.

The grenades hit the soft ground, rolled away, and detonated just as the charging figures ran over them. The lead man punched into the air, flailing, legs gone under the knee, body a pincushion of shrapnel. The rest just vanished.

He waited, fighting to keep his eyes open as the smoke drifted over him. He waited. Nothing happened. His ears were ringing. He waited. He tried to shake his head, but the movement began, and did not end. The ground rocked as he moved. Bright, chequerboard bands ran across his eyes.

Bright...

Lights...

Stars...

He woke again, but the world was different, made of sharp pain, stitches and tubes. For a few days, maybe weeks, he thought about the sound of the guns, about the painted man, about seeing a figure cartwheel through the air without legs. Then they reduced something in the tube feeds, and the pain of healing stole much of his memory. He was almost grateful.

An officer came to see him. She acted as though they had talked before, but he had no idea who she was, or why she was there. She wore a different uniform from his regiment, matt black with red piping, cap tucked under her left epaulet. Her pips said major, but everything else about her said 'much more important than that, thank you very much'.

She started talking, rattling through words like a crank gun swallowing rounds.

'Good thing is that you are going to be training-ready in four weeks. Field-ready... Well, we will see. Not enough left of your outfit to send you back to, and that is probably not the best use of your profile now. Zerdian Heavy 101st is looking promising, lots of punch on paper, but... lacking the polish of battle. You are just what they need. Fine scarred hero of a platoon leader to send a signal, pull the rest up. Once you're fit that is, and once you've got through training to fill the gaps.'

'Gaps?'

‘Tactics, leadership, all the tricks of the trade, all the things that you didn’t need at the baseline of things.’ She handed him a sheaf of parchment. The paper was thick, weighted and textured with importance. A phrase she had said surfaced in his pain- and drug-fogged mind. *Platoon leader*... That meant, presuming she was serious – and the paper in his hand had all the look of seriousness – that he was being promoted, straight from the lines, and his first action, into the officer ranks.

He turned the paper over in his hands, carefully slowly. After a moment she started to speak.

‘Three platoons went into that area. You and ten others came out. You stopped an ambush becoming a rout. The enemy stopped dead, when they meant to keep going. They would’ve been Throne knows how much further by now, maybe even to the supply base at Talimanx.’

He didn’t know how to say that she was wrong. He had just tried to stay alive. He was not a leader. He was alone, no matter how many people stood next to him. You could not hold on to anything, everything went away sooner or later. The only thing that was his was the beat of his heart, and he had to fight to hold on to that.

‘It’s not a reward,’ she said, after he still said nothing. ‘It’s another way for you to serve.’

‘Why?’ he asked, and looked up at her.

‘Haven’t you heard, soldier? The Emperor’s magnificent Guard runs on bullets, blood, and heroes. Finding the first two can be tricky, the third, Throne near impossible. Live ones at least.’ She smiled, grey eyes sparkling like polished gunmetal. ‘Plenty of the other kind.’

He looked down at the dockets in his hands. No choice... There never was a choice, ever.

She straightened, nodded to the papers in his hand.

‘It’s all in there, timings, posting details, all the stuff that the ink drinkers want.’ She gave another nod, which said not to bother saluting – in case he was thinking of it – turned and began to walk away, boots clicking on the plastek coated floor.

‘I can’t read,’ he said, throwing the only thing he could think of at her.

‘Learn,’ she said, without looking back.

There is a majesty in desecration, a truth in horror. As I kneel here, I am clad in the stuff of nightmares. My head is bare, the skin the gloss pink of scar tissue. My mouth is masked, and the hand that covers it came from an unwilling sacrifice. The skin of the hand has withered, but the nails still grow; their hooked tips claw at the skin of my cheeks. I cut my own ears from my head. They hang around my neck, knocking softly on my breastplate. My armour is plasteel, bronzed, and the dried crust of blood blessings cling to its carving. Ink, scars and brands mark my arms, and tell the gods that I am theirs, and that my master raised me to them. Bones gather at my waist. Fingers, fragments of skull, and teeth, looped on wire or held on chains beside the knives of sacrifice, flaying and mortification. I know each bone, and made the sharpness of each blade edge. They are bound to me, though I do not own them. They have their own souls, their own silence.

I can see the terror in the eyes of those who look on me. That is as it should be. They are weak, and lost in the din of their delusion. They look on the marks of the Dark Beyond, hear the clatter of bones on sharp iron, and they think these devotions are for them. They think that their fear is why I took the finger bones of the priest who ended in a pyre on Noor, why I burnt the eightfold star on my hands, and why the first blood of battle wets my eyelids. I do not do these things to be feared, and the unshriven do not fear me because of them.

They fear me because I am everything that they fail to be.

I wear the truth of the universe as my skin.

VI

Sartusa's rain drummed on the visor of his helmet. He had pushed it up so that it could shield his eyes, and his breath would not fog his vision.

'Any word from command?' he asked.

'Nothing, sir. Just the same as before.'

'Try again, keep trying,' he said. He did not look at the sergeant standing at attention, water pouring from the gilt and green of his chest-plate. The golden lions were wet and bright in the flash of lightning. 'Get the rest of the irregulars down to the southern edge. Sandwich them between whatever is down there from the Circanian and Kenrenith.'

'Sir,' said the sergeant. In less than three hours he would be dead, the left half

of his head sheared away by a flake of shrapnel the size of a food plate. Blood would replace the water running over the gold of the lions on his chest.

‘Tell the provender-at-arms to get every cell we have next to a soldier with a gun.’

‘Sir...’ began the sergeant. He is an older man, seasoned, experienced, he knows when it is best to question an officer, and how to do it when he feels he must. ‘Sir, what was the last order we had from command?’

‘Last thing they said was that we were to sit tight, and wait.’ He met the sergeant’s eye, and gave his best version of a grin. It looked real. He had had long years to practise. For him, and for the sergeant, it was part of the expected form in the situation, part of the drill among soldiers who know that they might have reached the end of the odds. ‘That was before command went silent, and every other unit outside the city limits became unreachable. But they said sit tight, and we are following that order.’

He left the fact that command said nothing about going to full battle readiness unsaid.

‘Yes, sir,’ said the sergeant, and saluted.

‘Get moving,’ he said with a nod. The sergeant went, and the rain and gloom filled the space where he had been.

The rain kept falling, thick and unrelenting. Sartusa lay before him, its low sprawl of plastered walls and tangled streets swallowing the wet curtains from the sky above. The spires of temples rose here and there, sharp fingers pointed at the storm-shrouded heavens. The city should have been called a town, but a disciple of Saint Sabbat had drunk from a spring here, or some such, and so it clung to the ancient title, even while it refused to grow to fit it. It was a long way from Khulan, or Urdes, let alone Balhaut. Too many people lived here, though, too many for a world which was now on the front lines, too many to keep safe, and far too many to just leave here in the hope that the Archenemy would not come.

And they were coming. That is what the silence meant.

He looked around. There were eyes watching him. He could feel them, and knew that what he needed to do was not look for them. People want their leaders to look to destiny, to hope, to the future which they pray will still come. Look into their eyes and they see that those they follow feel the same fear. Dreams of salvation die in that look. He knew this; he had followed its wisdom many times. It was part of what he had become, a lodestone for the weight of others.

He unsheathed his sword. He did it casually, turning it over so that the rain ran

down its fuller. He could read the words etched in the blade, but did not; they were not intended to comfort. He gave the blade a lazy swipe, like a child hitting grass, and allowed a tune to whistle from his lips. He made a smile with his mouth as he sheathed the blade. The eyes watching beneath helmets and above sandbag walls saw the smile, and for some it was enough to stop their fingers rattling against their guns. It was what was needed of him, one more act of futility in a lifetime without meaning. Above him the statue of the Emperor looked down with empty eyes from a cast bronze face.

The sergeant ran to his side.

‘Everyone’s in place, sir.’

‘Thank you, sergeant,’ he said, but kept his eyes on the darkening boundary between storm sky and shadowed ground.

They will come. They always come, in the end.

He wondered why he was there. He knew every step of his life, but they did not feel like his. He had seen the stars he craved to see as a child, he had been called a hero, and been given rank. He had learnt to read, so that now the words on his sword and the marks on prayer books could mean something to him. They don’t, though, and they never have. He stood there not because of the will of a distant god, or because he had risen to greatness. He stood there because he had never seen a choice, other than the quick oblivion of a gun barrel in the mouth.

So he waited, and the rain fell, and high above the clouds the approaching bombers roared with the thunder’s growl.

He will meet the end that he craves, but does not have the courage to embrace.

He and I will meet when the men and women who looked to him for courage are corpses. The sword in his hand will be shaking with the fatigue he is fighting to control. We will meet then, the Son of Sek and the hollow son of the Imperium. The chemical fires will billow in the rain, and we will save him for last, so that he can hear the sweet cries from those he tried to save and failed. We will let him watch as we take offerings from them. He will think then that he never wanted any scrap of his life, that he has done nothing that has been his own choice since he first breathed. He will see us, our knives, and the tatters of skin hanging in our fingers. We will let him see all this, and then, at last, slowly – because it is important how such things are done – we will come for him. *I will come for him.*

All this will happen. I know because I was there, under the rain, with the smell of burning flesh and dead civilisation in my mouth and on my tongue.

But those moments were still to come to this man, this hero. The rain rolled

down, and the eyes of those who would soon die watched him, and he waited, not knowing what he waited for.

VII

The door will open soon, and I will be called to rise and go to meet Him. He will ask me of the man that ended in Sartusa, of his last words, of the plea that the universe cannot grant.

‘No... no... no...’

I will tell him of that long fall to the ground, of the thoughts which had turned in his skull since the stars took his parents, but which had never found a voice.

Make it stop.

Please make it stop.

Please.

‘Please.’

I will tell him all that I know, and all that can be known, of a life that is now not mine, of a life that was another man’s, a man who is no more. I will tell him what he already knows, for he is the mouth of the gods, and his voice is the voice that drowns out all others.

He will speak then.

And I will be his son.

In the original Sabbat Worlds anthology, Nick Kyme took on the arrogant and aristocratic Bluebloods, an Imperial Guard regiment historically at odds with the 'inferior' Ghosts, and showed that they possessed a heroism all their own. He managed, with great skill, to deal with characters who had essentially always been villains and make convincingly honourable men out of them.

Here, he returns to those characters for a powerful sequel, in which the vaunted Volpone Bluebloods find out what it's like to be the underdogs for a change, cowed by a vastly more brutal force... and, at the same time, get caught up in a thoughtless, thankless, merciless storm of battle.

In all his Warhammer 40,000 writing, Nick has managed to conjure up the bleak and nigh-on overwhelming atmosphere of the battlefield to great effect. I think he's outdone himself here.

Get ready for some serious warfare...

Dan Abnett



TEMPEST

Nick Kyme

*Titus City, Lotun, 775.M41
(the 20th year of the Sabbat Worlds Crusade)*

In the year 774.M41 Slaydo's crusade to reclaim the Sabbat Worlds from the grip of the Archenemy had reached as far as Lotun.

Little more than a dirt world, Lotun possessed sparse natural resources, provided little in the way of industrial hive production, and its tithes to the sprawling military of the Imperium were meagre.

Wracked by storms, monsoons resulting from its aberrant atmospherics, Lotun was a poor world for a war, and would probably have been overlooked but for the fact of its clandestine importance to the Archenemy.

But despite our gathered intelligence, none of us, not even great Slaydo himself, could have predicted what we would find there.

– Personal journal,
Major Vasquez Regara, 'Royal' Volpone 50th

There are many traits that distinguish the Volpone from the regular

rank and file of the Imperial Guard. Even Scions enviously regard our proud history, our discipline and lengthy honour roll.

One trait stands out above all others: breeding. Our bloodlines are pure and undiluted. Lineage and heritage are everything. Legacy endures. Are there those who come from Volpone unions who could be deemed 'imbalanced' as a result of their shared, pure blood? Don't be utterly ridiculous.

– General Noches Sturm

I

Corporal Stuber struggled for his life. The strong hands clenching around his neck were trying to crush his larynx. Slowly, incrementally, the grip of those thick fingers intensified like an iron trap overcoming the inertia of a rusted spring. One snap and it would be over.

He turned his head, and came face to face with the scarred visage of his enemy. Dead eyes rimed in deep arterial red glared back. Stuber had been watching for the wrong kind of threat. Too late, he had realised the Blood Pact were not the only foes to fear in the ruins of Titus.

A gasp, little more than a whisper of breath, escaped the flailing corporal's lips, but drew nothing back. Stuber was no medic. Had he been, he would have known his larynx and trachea were being crushed. It took strength to do that to a man, strength and the sort of determination and stamina born from the desperation of survival or some deeper mania. Stuber's face was ice-blue from the bitter cold, but began to purple under slow and painful asphyxiation. Hypoxic blemishes had already formed around his mouth and nasal cavities. They ringed his eyes like violet-coloured kohl, intensifying his dying stare.

He kicked, and in the deluge raining down upon the two men wrestling in the mud trench, the strangler lost his grip. Fenk snarled, trying to regain his dominance as Stuber flailed, but a savage punch glanced the side of his head, dislodging his officer's cap and cutting a shallow gash that immediately started bleeding into his right eye. Stuber was a fighter, but he was starved of oxygen and therefore weak. It only took a few seconds for Fenk to reassert his iron grip around the other man's throat.

Stuber thrashed one more time before he grew still, and Fenk could feel the man's lungs spasm in instinctive panic. Stuber's eyes bulged, trying in futile impotence to convey his shock, betrayal, anger and... ultimately, *fear*. Then they shrank, the pupils narrowing to pinpricks and the lids drooping as if to presage some hypnagogic state.

All life left Corporal Julius Stuber, and as Fenk sank back onto his haunches, exhausted and utterly spent, he shuddered, savouring the deed, fulfilling the deep, abiding need within and staving off the monster cleaved to his psyche.

A monster, but not a daemon, though such things had possessed men of this dark millennial age. Nor was it a foul xenos parasite Fenk harboured. It was much simpler than that, much more pervasive and inescapable. It was his bloodline, his own abnormal mind. No rites of excoriation, no invasive surgeries would excise it, for how could a man cut away something that was an integral part of himself?

With the retreat, the sounds of war receded on the monsoon wind: the diminishing cracks of lascarbines, the lower, more distant and plosive sounds of mortar and heavy cannon. Defeat would have stung Second Lieutenant Fenk's Volpone pride were it not for the exhilaration of the kill to take the edge off.

He sagged, and allowed gravity to carry him off Stuber's body and dump him in the mire of the trench, among the dead and the damned. A vox-unit crackled, spitting out dead air and silent curses. The 66th platoon was gone. Fenk was it.

Sole survivor.

Stab-lamps intruded on the monsoonal gloom, limning the trench spikes, the bayonets and the wire in magnesium white. Bodies were rendered into frosty monochrome, bleached of what little colour remained in them.

Fenk gazed up into the light as it strafed and searched the long trench ditch. He hid his eyes behind his hand, struggling to see against the bright glare of the lamps.

Voices resolved; voices that became silhouettes; silhouettes that became uniformed men.

Royal Volpone 50th. My regiment.

Their urgency cut through Fenk's pathological torpor.

'This one's alive!'

The speaker was dressed in mud-splattered Volpone grey and heavily dented gold carapace with an indigo aquila clasp to seal the armoured gorget. It was ornate, better suited to the parade ground than the battlefield, but the Volpone took great personal pride in their attire. With his high crimson collar and gilded

brocade, this one was most certainly attached to the officer cadre. His eyes were hidden in the shadows of his regal helmet. Fenk barely noticed the face, fixating on the scratched paint instead. A lascarbine hung on a strap over his shoulder. Other men, above and outside the trench, were firing their weapons. Flashes lit the darkness.

‘Throne... It’s Bertram Fenk.’

A hand was thrust towards him.

‘On your feet, second lieutenant!’

Fenk took the proffered hand and felt the strong, certain grip of a career soldier. Then he was hoisted out of the ditch. Twenty-something men were strung across the high side of the trench. Two crouched by the vox; one the operator, the other an officer with the receiver cup pressed to his ear taking fresh orders.

The rest lined up with their carbines, some standing, some on one knee. A pair of troopers frantically set up a heavy cannon on a tripod. The thrum of its energy coils powering up was deeper than the carbines. Fenk flinched as a las-bolt shrieked from its barrel, tearing open a distant enemy transport.

‘Must be in shock,’ said another, stepping into Fenk’s sight line to shine a light in his eye.

The medic saw fading rapture, not shock. The second lieutenant let him draw his own conclusions. He followed the index finger as requested. He nodded when prompted with his fallen company’s name. He clasped his hands behind his back and raised his chin, just as the Volpone drill-sergeants had taught him. Stuber’s ident-tag fell into Fenk’s back pocket. He had snapped the chain when he wrenched it from the dead man’s throat.

The officer returned just as the cursory examination concluded.

‘Full retreat,’ he told what Fenk first assumed was his aide. ‘Regara’s pulling us back to the Iron Line.’

‘He’s doing what? We’re almost in.’

No, not an aide. A fellow officer.

‘I think these poor swines would beg to differ.’ The first officer gestured to the dead piled inside the trench line. ‘Conditions have changed. We’re being reinforced.’

Overhead, the muffled explosions of landed mortar shells thundered. The fire exchange that had begun sporadically grew in intensity and purpose.

The second officer ducked reflexively as a fiery bloom lit the horizon into no-man’s-land. Jagged silhouettes appeared in the flare of bright, violent light.

Several brigades. Hundreds of men, and that was just on this side of the wall.

‘Reinforced?’ he asked. ‘By whom?’

The first officer licked his lips.

‘First Sons,’ he said.

‘What the—’

‘That’s right,’ the first officer interrupted. ‘Scions.’

The medic clapped Fenk on the shoulder, and the second lieutenant had to suppress the urge to strike him.

‘Looks like you’re coming with us, sir,’ said the medic. The first officer nodded his confirmation and the 50th, which had swelled to sixty men but were probably in much greater number overall, began to withdraw from the field.

‘You can give your full report to Major Regara as soon as we’re back behind the Iron Line,’ added the medic. ‘He’ll want to know what happened.’

Fenk nodded.

The rain continued unabated, hammering the Volpone as they struggled through the mud, bent-backed and battle-weary. But far from being cleansing, the deluge only smeared the dirt, begriming their armour. It failed to wash the blood from Fenk’s hands.

II

Regara paced. He was good at pacing. Part stalking feline, part parade drill officer, the major had turned pacing into a form of theatre.

He paced in silence, with only the sound of creaking boot leather and the low whine of servos from his bionic leg to disturb the peace of the landing strip. In truth, it was little more than a square patch of flattened earth. An armoured blockhouse squatted nearby: the Volpone barracks. It was one of several iron-wrought structures that had weathered the early stages of the incursion into Titus, now dubbed the ‘Iron Line’ for ease of reference.

Regara was not alone on the landing strip. Five men in Volpone grey stood nearby. They also watched the skies, but didn’t prowl as the major did.

Like the others, he wore the colours of the Volpone, only his attire was less ragged than that of his comrades. His breastplate was wrought with filigree, and shone dully in the ambient light. Clean-shaven, Regara sported an obvious scar on his right cheek. Most notable, however, was his left leg. The entire limb was a

bionic, gilt and ornate like the rest of the major's armour.

'Here they come,' he muttered, craning his neck as the air throbbed with engine drone. The shadow of a heavy aircraft came into view.

The Valkyrie was painted slate grey and had the clenched fist around barbed wire icon of the First Sons daubed on its flanks. Prow lamps strafed the gloom, leading the way as the gunship knifed through the driving rain. Hellstrike missiles jutted aggressively from both wings. A heavy bolter poking from the nose cone tracked the targets on the ground with slow, idle sweeps.

'Friendly,' remarked Lieutenant Culcis, though the sarcasm in his tone suggested he thought the First Sons were anything but. He stood to the side of the landing pad with the other four men in the major's retinue. The man next to him was called Drado, a pug-faced corporal who was also Culcis's aide.

'They're fegging taking over, is what they're doing.'

'Manners, Drado,' warned Culcis, despite the fact he agreed with him. 'Remember your breeding.'

Downwash from the Valkyrie's descent thrusters blew dust and debris across the landing pad, the high-pitched whine from the assault craft's twin engines drowning out any forthcoming apology from Drado.

Regara watched the Valkyrie all the way down, not moving from his chosen spot. Buffeted by the skirling katabatic draughts, he didn't blink once or reach up to steady his cap. The major looked proud and defiant. He was determined to meet the newcomers with the proper air of imperious authority.

As soon as the landing stanchions met solid earth, the rear access hatch descended, but the sound of grinding servos was obscured by the engine turbines slowing to a stop. A single scion stepped out, his slate-grey greatcoat matching the hue of his transport and flapping in the fading engine wash. He wore a black beret, the same clenched fist icon rendered in silver and pinned to the fabric.

His armoured carapace was black too, and the high gorget that rose up around his muscular neck carried a silver chain to denote his rank. As the greatcoat parted, Regara got a look at the holstered plasma pistol and vibro-knife the scion wore on either hip.

When he met Regara, he gave a crisp salute, which the major reciprocated.

'Ardal,' said the scion. 'Tempestor Prime of the First Sons.'

Though both dressed in grey, the two men were a contrast in styles, one functional and cold, the other intricate and gilded.

'Regara, major, Volpone 50th,' Regara replied. 'Are you planning on taking over my command, Prime Ardal?'

Ardal smiled thinly.

‘Bold.’ He nodded and smirked. ‘I like that. Not planning, major, *am.*’ The engine noise died away to nothing, so the two officers could lower their voices. It did nothing to drive away the tension.

‘We have bled out here, sir,’ said Regara. ‘I’ve lost nigh-on a hundred men to this grind.’

‘Your orders were to breach the east wall of Titus,’ said Ardal genially. ‘Those orders have not changed. The difference is, *we’re* the ones who’ll be making the breach now. You just need to provide the opportunity.’

Regara scowled, his hands bunched into fists by his sides. He knew better than to strike a Tempestor Prime. Not because he feared disciplinary reprisals, but because he knew Ardal could probably snap his neck before Regara had thrown the first punch. The man practically sweated lethal menace.

The major turned to address his aide.

‘Corporal Speers,’ he snapped, ‘get Colonel Gilbear on the vox.’

‘Major,’ said Ardal, ‘I can have the colonel on the vox right now.’

Regara turned his angry glare back to the Prime.

Ardal continued. ‘He said you wouldn’t like it. He also sanctioned this mission and gave me assurances you would do as required.’

Gritting his teeth, it took a supreme effort for Regara to maintain his composure. Escorting scions was a death sentence. Ardal wanted a punching bag to get the enemy’s attention while his commandoes did whatever they needed to in Titus. Moreover, the major didn’t like his authority being usurped.

‘And what, sir, do you require of us?’

‘Two things,’ said Ardal flatly. ‘Engage a full-scale assault against the east wall of the city, and escort a Militarium asset into the warzone.’

At the mention of the word, the ‘asset’ walked from the Valkyrie’s hold with two scion bodyguards, one at either side of him.

The asset was male, thin-faced and clearly not a soldier. He wore a long, tan cloak and soft fatigues. He was hooded, and leaned heavily on a brass staff, adorned with an Imperial eagle as its apex.

‘This is Juba Klaye,’ Ardal informed the major.

Not bodyguards, Regara realised as soon as the man introduced as Juba Klaye removed his hood to display the sigil-warded metal collar around his neck, *gaolers...*

Juba Klaye was a battle-psyker.

‘Telepath,’ Ardal explained. ‘There’s a Blood Pact communications hub

somewhere behind the east wall. Mister Klave is going to help us locate precisely where. Soon as he does, you're to hold position and let the First Sons do the rest. Simple.'

It was far from simple, but Regara had little option. He settled for spite.

'And where are your men? Or are you going to breach the east wall with two thugs in black carapace?'

Prime Ardal leaned closer to intimidate Regara, who didn't flinch, despite the scion's obvious threat.

'Already out in the field,' he rasped, daring the major to respond.

The First Sons had witnessed the rout, and probably seen most of the 66th, 18th and Fifth platoons cut to ribbons by the entrenched Blood Pact.

'Now,' said Ardal, leaning back to observe Regara's impotent rage with detached amusement, 'show me to operational command. I think we've been squatting in the dirt long enough.'

Regara gave the order to Speers, who immediately escorted the Prime and his small entourage, including Juba Klave.

'I need a word with my lieutenant,' Regara told Ardal, who shrugged dismissively. He didn't care two stones. He was in charge now. Regara could do what he liked so long as he did as he was told and didn't feg up the mission. Ardal went on without him.

Regara summoned Culcis with a curt gesture of the head.

'Is that Fenk?' asked the major, noticing, for the first time, the dishevelled officer wedged between Sergeant Drado and Lieutenant Coen.

'Yes, sir.'

'He looks like hell.'

'Sole survivor of 66th platoon, sir.'

'Throne of Earth,' Regara murmured. 'Can he fight?'

'Coen gave him a clean bill. Said he seems surprisingly cogent, all things considered.'

Regara nodded, pleased that something was going right for the 50th. 'Good. Find him a command, then get him cleaned up and back in the field. Our officer cadre is thin on the ground, lieutenant, and if we're going to live through what that bastard Ardal has planned, we need cool heads and discipline.'

'Yes, sir.'

Culcis went to his duties, taking the others with him and leaving Regara alone on the landing pad with the Valkyrie.

Titus stood to the east, beyond the Iron Line. The city was a ruin, but its walls

still held. The communications hub the Blood Pact was using to coordinate its efforts in the sector could be anywhere in that warren. Regara didn't like their odds of finding where before they were all facedown and bloody in a ditch, even with a fegging psyker.

The rain intensified into a deluge, hammering Regara. It was like standing in a blockhouse ablutions cubicle. The major looked up into fathomless clouds, blinking as the rain got into his eyes.

'Not content to merely dump these First Son bastards and their wyrd, you have to piss on us too, eh? Ave Imperator,' he said snidely, heading off for the blockhouse.

III

Fenk would not mourn the 66th, though he had not wished destruction on his comrades either. After his 'episode' in the trench, he was feeling better adjusted again. He actually recognised Culcis, who had told Fenk he was being placed in command of the newly amalgamated Fifth and 18th platoons. The majority of the survivors and officers had come from the 18th, so it was actually the Fifth and 66th platoons that had gone, the latter subsumed in order for the 18th to maintain minimum military efficacy.

Subsumption was an all too familiar feeling for Fenk. It happened every time the 'grey host' took him and exerted its will. It drove the need in him, the hunger to commit murder. For now, it was dormant, but Fenk knew it would stir again, sure as anger stirs in any soldier when you put a rifle in his hands.

His uniform was cleaned and pressed, the dirt of the trench, if not the deeds committed in it, washed away. It felt good to be cleansed of one kind of taint at least.

Darkness smothered the officers' barracks, and Fenk was alone. Everyone else was mustering for the push on the east wall. It didn't disturb Fenk as it had others. Fear of discovery, not death, kept him awake in the cold light of dawn.

A telepath, that's what the Scion officer had said. Fenk hadn't been close enough to hear the exchange, but he could read lips. A mind-reader in their ranks, one whom the Volpone had to escort to the wall, complicated matters. The mere thought of it sent a spike of anxiety into Fenk, whose hands shook as he opened the small wooden chest he kept hidden under his billet.

Stuber's ident-tag was in the palm of his left hand. The feel of it steadied Fenk's nerves as he placed it reverently on the deep green velvet lining of the box's interior. Eight other trophies shared the chest with it, some tags, others locks of hair, a rank pin, a cigar stub.

The tempest unleashed on Titus and, perhaps, all of Lotun was the perfect cover for Fenk's indiscretions, but now he would have to be careful. He needed to find a way to remove the telepath. Until he did, he resolved not to get too close. He had heard they could pluck a man's thoughts right out of his head like reading parchment.

Quelling a second bout of mild panic, Fenk shut the chest.

A sudden knock at the door disturbed the moment, making him scowl.

'Sir...' ventured a voice beyond the frosted glass.

'I'm ready, private,' answered Fenk, his voice carefully neutral.

Villiers was the only non-com available to act as Fenk's aide. He seemed young, but diligent.

'Shall I wait outside for you, sir?'

'Thank you, private. Yes,' said Fenk, and secreted the chest before taking up his freshly brushed officer's cap and heading out to join the muster.

IV

Just fewer than six hundred took to the field, marching east towards the city boundary wall of Titus. They went on foot, the terrain too rugged and befouled by trench works, wire and cruciform tank traps for vehicles.

The rain hadn't let up since the landing strip, Regara noted as it poured off the command tent's bulging awning. Spread on the table in front of him were reconnaissance maps of the region, including all known trench works, minefields, choke points, bottlenecks and geographical vantage points. None of it mattered one iota if they couldn't breach the wall.

Another four hundred Volpone stood nearby, arrayed in their ranks, awaiting the order to move out. Regara intended to hold them until the scions had identified their ingress vector, then he would lead the rest out himself to reinforce whatever was left of his men and his regiment.

Tempestor Prime Ardal had declined the offer to oversee operations from the command tent. Instead, he roamed overhead in the Valkyrie, keeping a low

profile until his men had successfully completed their mission and required extraction.

We are just fodder to them, Regara thought bitterly, turning his attention to the vox-unit that stood on the table, holding one corner of the maps in place. The wind had picked up in the last few hours, and Regara almost didn't hear the unit over the din.

After the ubiquitous static, he heard Culcis's voice.

'Major, we have reached the trench line, and are proceeding.'

Amid the crackling audio, Regara could make out the sporadic snap of las-fire and the deeper boom of heavier, more distant cannon.

Taking a sip of the spice wine in the goblet to his left, the major nodded to Speers, who marked Culcis's position on the map.

'Keep an eye on their wyrd, lieutenant. Proceed with caution. Ave Imperator.'

'Received, sir. Will do. Ave Imperator.'

Clipped and efficient, just like the man himself. Culcis would have to lead the men from beyond the trench line.

In the darkness, in the rising tempest, he would need to lead them well.

V

Three companies of Volpone, twelve platoons, had barely crossed the second trench line when the Blood Pact fell upon them. They came out of the shadows through the driving rain, their iron grotesques glistening as if drenched in a fever sweat. In many ways they were.

Jags of light stitched the gloom, so hot and numerous they ionised the air. But rather than draw the night together, they tore it apart and laid the faces of the enemy bare.

Wraiths emerged from hidden trench works, gulleys and emplacements, gunnery nests, razor-wired foxholes and dirt-smeared awnings of dead flesh. Wraiths dressed in the trappings of men the colour of old blood howled in the darkness.

Half a Death Brigade.

Blood Pact.

After a withering hail of collimated las-fire and automatic solid-shot, the Blood Pact opened up with a volley from their heavy guns. Tripod-mounted,

slung over the shoulder and braced at waist height, the din of chugging autocannon and shrieking lascannon met in an unholy chorus.

The screams of the Volpone were this dark symphony's refrain.

Ordinance followed, mortar teams and hand-held launchers.

Men in Volpone grey were sent skywards in plumes of displaced earth, their limbs limp and ragged, torn up by the blasts.

It took almost six seconds for the Volpone to respond. During that time they lost nearly a quarter of their force, and their fighting efficacy was irrevocably damaged.

A vanguard of grenadiers roamed ahead of the Blood Pact fire-platoons. They went by the name of *Jaegans*.

Culcis, his ears still ringing from a close shell impact, caught sight of them through the mist and debris.

'Throne have mercy,' he breathed, eyeing the knife the grenadier held in one hand and the krak charge he brandished in the other.

The lieutenant had already drawn his pistol, a conditioned reflex, his soldier's instincts overcoming the inertia of fear.

In some, marksmanship was learned; in others, it was a gift. Culcis sat in the latter camp. He shot three grenadiers through their eye sockets. All single shots, no bursts, no profligacy.

Dead men released dead men's triggers. Three explosions ripped up the night in front of him, and shredded apart the rest of the hunter-pack that had been coming to carve open Culcis and his command squad. The resulting detonation was loud and filled the air with acrid smoke.

Lieutenant Culcis raised his sabre, bellowing a Volpone war cry, and led the men through the vile pall.

A quick glance back revealed that four men were dead. Mercifully, the telepath still lived, kept safe by the only soldier Culcis trusted with the task – Corporal Drado. The pug-faced brute was spattered with blood, but none of it was his own.

Return fire blazed from the Volpone platoons, growing fiercer and more intense as the line advanced.

'How close?' asked Drado, needing to shout to be heard above the fire exchange.

They had found cover in a shallow shell crater. After the sudden and brutal Blood Pact assault, Culcis was taking the few snatched seconds to assess the battle situation.

Bleak was his initial impression.

‘What?’ Culcis replied, searching for enemy targets in the gloom. ‘Speak up, corporal.’ He glanced over his shoulder to see Drado jabbing a thumb in the direction of his charge. No man dared touch the psyker. Even in a regiment such as the 50th with its ingrained and indoctrinated discipline, suspicion of the wyrd almost approached paranoia.

‘How close do we need to get to the wall?’

Drado couldn’t even bring himself to speak the psyker’s name, but it was the telepath who answered.

‘Need you to take this off,’ he slurred, the cadence of his voice that of a man under some strain. Perhaps he was afraid? He would have to be a wyrd *and* insane not to be, so Culcis fervently prayed that he was scared.

The telepath tapped a finger against the metal clasp around his neck.

Unsure, Drado looked to his lieutenant.

After a few seconds of indecision, Culcis nodded. ‘Remove it, corporal.’

Hesitating, Drado turned back to the telepath. His hands were trembling slightly and he nervously licked his lips.

Culcis hustled Corporal Drado aside. ‘I’ll do it, damn it!’

He took off the clasp, but handled the null-collar as if it were an unexploded bomb.

The telepath suddenly appeared lighter, stronger, though he still had the appearance of a man under a tremendous burden. Culcis caught the faint flare of power behind his eyes. The lieutenant’s hand strayed instinctively to his pistol.

‘You still with us?’ he asked, wary.

The telepath nodded.

‘Then I’ll repeat the corporal’s question. How close?’

‘We need to keep going,’ replied the telepath. ‘You’ll know when we are close enough.’

Drado’s expression suggested he didn’t want to know what that meant, or to ever find out.

Despite his officer’s breeding, Culcis couldn’t help but echo the corporal’s sentiment. He laughed. It was an empty sound, a gallows laugh.

‘Then we advance, corporal,’ he said, but his eyes were on the psyker. ‘For Volpone glory, by the Throne.’

Scurrying from the crater, Culcis led the line.

The east wall of Titus loomed a short way off in the darkness. Black, rain-slick, its featureless rock reminded the lieutenant of a tombstone.

VI

Sporadic vox reports came in from the field. Regara's scowl deepened after each one. They made for grim listening.

As far as he could tell, Culcis and his men had crossed the tranche of no-man's-land between the trenches, and were entering enemy territory. Speers marked the relative positions of each platoon on the map with coins. He did so silently. Some of the coins had not moved in a while as the vox traffic from the platoons in question had died, probably along with the men.

There was an actinic charge in the air; Regara could feel it all the way back at the command tent. It was thick, cloying and sickly. Ever since the engagement had begun and Culcis had advanced farther away, Regara had felt it intensify.

He heard the throb of the Valkyrie's engines overhead, drowning out the most recent vox report, and decided to open up a line to Ardal.

'I thought the Volpone were known for their exactness and precision, major,' the Tempestor Prime began icily, *'and yet here I find evidence to the contrary. Your timing could not be worse.'*

Across the vox-link, the drone of the gunship's engines was even more pronounced.

Regara had lost patience with Ardal. He opted for blunt. 'Your wyrd? What is he here to do?'

'Locate the hub, just as I told you not an hour ago.'

Regara replied through gritted teeth. 'What else?'

'Nothing else.'

He was lying. Even with the ambient noise distortion, Regara could tell. He had received Commissariat interrogation training and knew when a man was dissembling. But Ardal was trained too, highly trained. He wasn't about to confess, so a different approach was needed.

'Where are your men?' Regara asked.

'In the field.'

'So are mine. Except mine are dying, sir.'

Ardal didn't answer, but the engine noise told the major the link was still open.

A sick feeling rose in Regara's gut, and not just from the prospect of losing Culcis and his men.

'Have you ordered my men into a trap, Ardal?' asked Regara, increasingly angry. 'Tell me what else your psyker is here to do... Ardal, damn you!'

The link went dead and would not soon be re-established.

‘Bastard,’ Regara murmured, gripping the table so hard his knuckles turned white. He had a bad feeling. It was Sagorrah Depot all over again.

Regara met Speers’s gaze. The corporal was trying to look studiously neutral and composed, but the empathy in the man was almost palpable.

‘Get the men ready to move out. As soon as humanly possible, corporal,’ Regara told him, reaching for the strap of his ceremonial sword.

Speers nodded pugnaciously. ‘At once, sir.’

VII

Fenk was sweating, and not just from the weight of his armour and the thick layers of his uniform. The night was hot, despite the rain. Las-beams burned the air, shivering molecules that warped Fenk’s view in a shimmering haze, but the second lieutenant’s only concern was Juba Klaye. He didn’t look much, shrivelled in his cloak, a hood to mask his eyes, but to Fenk the telepath was the most dangerous man on the field.

‘Sir...’ It was Private Villiers. His young voice drew Fenk back from his thoughts. The ‘grey host’ was near, and he had to fight to keep that part of him quiescent.

Thirty-three men waited in the trench behind Villiers, heads down, crouching against the rain. They needed orders.

Culcis had given his. *Advance.*

The black walls of Titus looked impregnable, and Fenk saw only an invitation to oblivion in their depths.

‘Squads forward,’ he said, having to shout. Led by their sergeants, the men climbed from the trench and were hit by unremitting salvos of las-fire. Nearby, a dirt plume mushroomed with its carriage of Volpone bodies. ‘Villiers.’ The private had been about to go over the top when the second lieutenant’s voice stopped him. ‘Vox. We must report to Major Regara.’

Struggling in the wind and rain, Villiers turned the crank to charge the unit. All the while, Fenk regarded Juba Klaye down the scope detached from his rifle.

‘Can you feel that, private?’ asked Fenk of Villiers, the only other Volpone left in the trench.

‘Sir?’ Villiers didn’t look so good. He looked as if he was about to puke.

‘Like an ion charge, but more than just the las.’

‘Oh... Throne...’ Villiers nearly fell, and had to steady himself against the wall of the ditch. A nosebleed drenched his lips and chin in crimson.

Through a trench-dug murder hole, Fenk nodded towards the psyker. Culcis was pressing hard, and some distance fell between Fenk and his commanding officer in the field.

Villiers held up his bloody fingers, the torrential rain already washing them clean. His face likewise.

‘Him?’

‘Yes, private,’ said Fenk as the ‘grey host’ returned with greater insistence. ‘Tell me, son,’ he asked, just as he made vox contact, ‘how much do you trust a wyrd?’

VIII

Culcis took a glancing hit to the shoulder and staggered. Drado reached out in support but the lieutenant waved him off. He grimaced.

‘Just a flesh wound. Already cauterised.’

They had advanced maybe fifty metres, hunkered down behind a barricade of sandbags that had been long abandoned, when the telepath raised his hand.

Culcis didn’t catch the signal at first. He was too busy firing into the darkness, watchful for another assault by Blood Pact Jaegans. At first, he thought the psyker had just stumbled. When the man’s eyes began to spark with fulgurant energies, he realised it was something else.

‘Close enough,’ the telepath murmured, slurring again. Beneath the folds of his hood, his expression looked even more pained. ‘I can feel her now...’

Drado looked at Culcis between retaliatory bursts of las-fire.

‘Her?’ they asked of each other in unison.

IX

Regara was ready to move out when the vox crackled. Twice. The first message came from Second Lieutenant Fenk.

‘Sir, something is happening out here.’

Regara frowned, struggling to make out the poor audio. ‘Define what, second

lieutenant.'

'The wyrd, sir,' replied Fenk. *'He's... affecting the men. It's—'*

'What?'

The link broke up. Speers tried to get it back, but the storm was making communication difficult. When the vox crackled to life again a few seconds later it was Culcis on the other end of the line.

'Tell Ardal the telepath has found what he was looking for.'

'You've located the hub?' For a moment, Regara was tempted to tell Culcis to take whatever men he had left and neutralise it before the scions could even get a look. What the lieutenant said next stole that thought and crushed it.

'Yes, but it's not what we thought. It's something else. Another psyker.'

Regara masked the receiver cup with his hand.

'Holy Throne of Earth,' he breathed.

What in the damned Eye had Ardal led them into?

X

A cascade of energy like arc lightning speared from the mouth of Juba Klaye in a jagged, violent parabola that struck the outer face of the east wall and split it. A ragged fissure ran down the black stone, reminiscent of a wound.

Culcis and Drado were thrown back, their hair standing on end and their armour scorched by the sudden flare of psychic power.

'I thought he was meant to be a telepath, a mind-reader,' yelled Drado, struggling to his feet.

'He's a primaris,' uttered Culcis.

Primaris was the name given to alpha-class psykers as described during his Militarum training. Exponents of several mental disciplines, primaris were also extremely dangerous.

A second bolt followed the first, as if the wizened wretch was vomiting up all of his psychic strength in a single punitive deluge in order to force a breach. A third, then a fourth crack of lightning split the night, and brought something eldritch to augment the natural storm that had grown around the Volpone and their enemies.

Desperate, retaliatory fire stabbed at the psyker as the Blood Pact recognised the principal threat in their midst. Both bullets and las-bolts flared, then

disintegrated against an unseen shield, a kinetic ward that denatured energy, turning solid mass into an etheric mist that the barrier simply absorbed.

Overhead, the sound of a gunship's turbines cycling up to attack velocity overwhelmed the percussive exchange of the battle and the shriek of arc lightning.

Ardal had his signal and was sweeping in to assist his already entrenched scions.

Another flash rendered the battlefield in grey monochrome, and caused Drado to jab a finger in the direction of a silhouette revealed in the brief illuminating flare.

First Sons... Culcis saw them too, the predatory scions advancing on their prey.

The fissure became a cleft, then a chasmal opening in the wall. Death Brigade swept out, cradling heavy-gauge 'tritons' – semi-automatic self-loaders. Staccato discharges ripped thunderously from the combat shotguns.

In the carnage, Culcis thought he saw a scion take a hit and fall from sight. The riposte was swift, merciless. Despite his breeding, Culcis recognised the superiority of the Tempestus soldiers. They gutted sixteen of the Death Brigade, emerging from ambush positions barely three metres from where the lieutenant had advanced and was now taking cover.

More Blood Pact were moving up to fill the breach. With the shadows, the rain and their iron grotesques, they had the aspect of true daemons.

The scions did not flinch.

They charged.

Each soldier of the Tempestus carried a hot-shot as part of his standard loadout, a considerably more powerful version of the basic las-carbine or las-lock, and wielded it with the kind of accuracy and purpose Culcis had only ever seen in Throne-sworn Angels.

When the vanguard squad of scions encountered their first real impediment, Culcis saw something else. She was tall and lithe, her body clad in form-fitting leather. Her iron grotesque was slighter and more angular than those of her kin and only masked the upper half of her face, leaving the mouth uncovered for incanting.

She performed an incantation now, inciting a formless mass to manifest before the charging scions like a pall of black cloud. It was hard to see at first, especially in the darkness, a slowly billowing essence of darker black on black.

Culcis did not understand warp-craft. Few men did, and even some of those

wished for blissful ignorance. Sagorrah Depot, against the blood-witch, had been his first true encounter with the unnatural arsenal of the Archenemy. Although at times the Blood Pact bore the trappings and the bearings of men, when they unleashed their horrors that falsehood was ripped away and exposed as a convenient mask.

Several names sprung to the forefront of Culcis's mind, those taught to him when he was a child.

Wirewolf

Graylok

Sebajinn

They were things drawn of darkest myth, *diabolus daemonicus*, names and manifestations unknown to men. For to know such things would mean knowledge of a half-world, the one that existed beyond the invisible veil, a place of never-born creatures and souls trapped in eternal torment. Here, only the deranged or the supremely pious would dare tread. Mere mortal men had no business knowing the true terror of the warp. But Culcis knew death, and saw the cloud and the half-glimpsed forms within it as the physical incarnation of that primordial fear. And it was coming straight at the scions.

XI

‘Damn it, Ardal! Answer me!’

Regara had marched out of the Volpone camp and into the shadow-haunted trench line with all four hundred men in the reserve. By allowing himself to be ordered around by the scions, he had failed Culcis and he had failed those men under the lieutenant's command.

Never venture into battle without knowing one's enemy.

It was virtually creed where the major had undergone his training. Volpone were not just the best because their drill-sergeants were tougher, because they had the finest equipment their royal houses could afford or even because their superior breeding elevated them above ordinary men.

Victory was second nature to them, it was *expected* of them, because they left as little as possible to chance. The Volpone were a pragmatic people. Fate did not shape their destinies, *they* did, and their arrogance concerning that fact was wholly justified.

In kowtowing to Prime Ardal, Regara had not only ignored his better judgement, he had gone against his very heritage and culture. That required redress. It would be enacted now.

‘Ardal, you whoreson!’ Regara yelled down the vox, spitting fury. He had been at it for several minutes, his voice reduced to a grating bark. Speers stayed by his commanding officer’s side throughout, carrying the vox and maintaining lockstep with the major. So far, static was his only response, the growing sense of impotence only fuelling Regara’s deepening ire.

‘You lied about the hub. I know about the blood-witch, Ardal. Prove to me you’re a real soldier and–’

Ardal’s voice manifested on the other end of the link, interrupting Regara’s impassioned tirade.

‘I suggest you hold your ground, Regara. That’s a bludvayne out there in the darkness, not some Sanguinary tribal hag, but something the likes of which you will never have faced.’

‘You bastard, Ardal. You knew that and let me march my men in there without proper warning.’

‘*You have Klaye,*’ Ardal replied, dismissively. *‘The primaris will keep your men from dying too quickly.’*

‘And yours won’t take a scratch.’

‘Oh, I doubt that, major, but they appreciate the risks. You’re not seeing the broader perspective.’

‘Perspective? I see perfectly well, both broad and narrow.’

Ardal scoffed.

‘No. You don’t. The bludvayne is a priority alpha target, and I would gladly sacrifice every First Son I have in the field to effect this mission. I have twenty-five men deployed in four strike squads. Just so we understand each other, each First Son is the equal of fifty of your Volpone. Perspective, major. Now, do your job and hold back the men you still have.’

‘With respect, sir,’ said Regara genially, ‘up yours.’

The major severed the link.

‘Corporal Speers,’ he said, removing his cap to smooth down his hair in order to affect an air of absolute command and composure, ‘bring us out, double-time if you will. I’m not leaving Volpone to die in this crap hole.’

Speers bellowed down the line. Trumpet clarions answered a moment later, and the Volpone marched with all haste.

XII

Juba Klaye unleashed his gifts, spewing arc lightning at the cloud as if a storm had somehow reversed its polarity and attracted bolts instead of expelling them.

The First Sons that touched the cloud convulsed. Even with their full-face rebreathers, the vapours wormed their way insidiously into their bodies and onto unprotected flesh.

Seeing the effects of the dark contagion was grossly disconcerting for Culcis and his men. One scion had the misfortune to tear off his mask, revealing the acid-flayed skin beneath, tendrils of his partially dissolved flesh strung out like soft wax, clinging to the inside of the rebreather cup.

Juba Klaye took a step, leaning heavily on his staff. The lightning storm intensified, throwing off heat and furious incandescence.

‘Bludvayne...’ Culcis heard him cry. From the psyker’s scorched black lips it resonated like a curse, and the lieutenant assumed he was referring to the other witch. She recoiled, revealing a cloak of dark flesh wrapped around her feminine form. So too did the cloud... until the rifle shot rang out, impossibly clear and loud, like a death-knell clarion against the tempest.

Blood fountained from Juba Klaye’s chest as he was spun hard and wrenched off his feet by the impact of a high-calibre round. He fell heavily, half smothered by mud. With his concentration brutally severed, the psyker was powerless to prevent the storm from fading.

Almost lying on his back, eyes shielded against the dying lightning with one upraised hand, Culcis reached out for the vox with the other.

‘Major’ – he began, hoping desperately that Regara was listening.

XIII

Villiers lowered the rifle. His hands were shaking with a potent cocktail of fear and adrenaline. He had missed the kill-shot, so difficult in the scything crosswind and the rain, but at least the wyrd was down.

The emergence of the lightning storm had terrified him, his commanding officer enlightening him on the dangers psykers presented to good, honest soldiering men, and their propensity for summoning sorcery from beyond the veil.

Being here, on this battlefield; Villiers had no desire to worsen it.

Relief and exhaustion at a deed committed in fear and loathing made him sag. The rifle fell loose in his grasp. He felt small, weak, but at least he was alive. For now.

He desperately wanted to remain in the trench and not move, to bury his head until the storm had passed and the killing was done.

Stupidly, he wondered if Second Lieutenant Fenk would let him. Fenk seemed like a good man, someone who understood that in order to survive the horrors of war hunkering down was sometimes necessary. In those fleeting seconds between taking the shot and lowering his weapon, Villiers believed that, he believed Fenk might spare them both, until he felt the hands clamp around his neck.

He struggled, but by the time he realised what was happening and just how terribly wrong he had been, his already bleak world darkened further until only oblivion remained.

Fenk dropped the lifeless body of Private Villiers into the mud. As the ‘grey host’ faded, his appetites partially sated, he crouched to catch his breath.

The psyker lived, and while he did, Fenk knew he wasn’t safe. He had seen Lieutenant Culcis remove the wyrd’s shackles. Unfettered, the psyker’s mind would be free to wander. Perhaps Fenk was already too late and Culcis knew of Fenk’s deviancy. Perhaps he was, even now, voxing Major Regara to inform him of the killer cloistered within the Volpone ranks? Perhaps...

Fenk stopped himself, realising he had to master his paranoia. He had to assume that all was as it had been, that he remained undiscovered.

There was only one way to be certain of that fact, though.

Drawing his pistol, Fenk climbed from the trench and made for the lieutenant’s position. In the killing fields, his men were dying, gunned down by exultant Blood Pact. Fenk never even spared them a thought.

XIV

Juba Klaye was alive. Barely. Culcis and Drado supported the psyker under either arm and dragged him bodily from the east wall. The rest of the platoon, what was left of it at least, followed alongside in a ragged order.

It was over. Without the psyker there was nothing the Volpone could do against the bludvayne. A few had tried shooting the witch, but their ammunition was absorbed into the black cloud and reduced to ash or ions before it could do any harm. Everything that touched it or passed through it broke down, even missiles and shells. She was apparently impervious to every weapon in the Volpone arsenal.

Knowing if they tried to fight on there would be nothing left of his men but their charred skeletons, Lieutenant Culcis ordered the retreat.

Two sharp clarion blasts echoed mournfully across the field, and platoon banners were dipped. Too many Volpone had died needlessly already.

They weren't the only ones.

Exposed, the scions were dying too. Caught by the bludvayne cloud, they had lost a lot of men in a matter of seconds without reply. Realising, like Culcis, that the situation was no longer tenable, several had already turned and were falling back. Some had reached as far as the Volpone vanguard and were exchanging fire with the Blood Pact alongside Lieutenant Culcis's men. Despite their mauling and the proximity of death, they battled like lions.

Culcis caught the eye of one, a thickset trooper with hard eyes and the blood of his comrades splashed across his armour. He nodded to the lieutenant, and a fleeting moment of fatalistic camaraderie passed between them.

Taking advantage of the Imperial army's sudden weakness, the Blood Pact advanced in force. The Death Brigade barked harsh orders to the lesser troops, taking command of blocks of men. The Jaegan grenadiers returned, roaming at the fringes of the killing fields, sowing confusion and mass death with their incendiaries before getting in close with their knives. Culcis briefly saw one grappling with one of the scions, before their struggle took them over the edge of a firing pit and both men disappeared from view.

Before the Blood Pact orders had been to engage, trammel and ultimately defend the wall; now, they were bent on annihilation.

Caught in the midst of extracting what was left of his strike squads, Ardal attempted to balance the scales with suppressing fire from the Valkyrie. Las bursts and the roaring muzzle flare of heavy bolters lit up the night, ploughing a bloody furrow through the swiftly massing Archenemy ranks.

Half running, half turning and loosing snapshots into the darkness, hoping the flesh-eating fog that was spreading across the field wouldn't reach them, Culcis saw the gunship come in low. Screaming turbines kicked out a dense engine wash with a crushing downforce that warred against the tempest. Culcis could

smell blood on it and felt katabatic winds buffet his body like fists, but saw no discernible effect on the dark cloud.

It was as if the essence of the bludvayne's conjuration existed outside of natural laws. Even a psychically manifested flame would bend to the will of the elements, but the cloud simply *reached*. Tendrils of vapour snaked loose from the mass, uncoiling like the tentacles of some undersea leviathan, and began to wrap themselves around the Valkyrie.

Seeing the danger, Ardal wrenched a last man aboard and issued the signal for his pilot to climb. Quickly. Engines burning, the gunship achieved vertical loft, rising into natural darkness. The rain, wisps of smoke unfurling from where the acid-touch of the cloud had grazed it, hammered its burning fuselage.

Not only the Valkyrie bore the indelible scars of its brush with primordial evil, but so did Ardal. His agonised scream at the cloud's barest caress was the last human sound Culcis heard from the gunship as it disappeared into the night and the storm.

'We have to move, sir,' said Drado.

Culcis, who had been almost transfixed by the sight of the escaping Valkyrie, was slowing. The corporal's urging brought the lieutenant's mind back to the present task. Survival.

Every Volpone and Scion on the field still alive was falling back. No-man's-land was a wretched mess of wire, pits and uneven ground. Footing was treacherous. An ankle sprain, a ligament tear or a bone fracture – all now meant death. Hauling a dead weight, even between two, carried a similar sentence.

'Do you think you can carry him alone, sir?' asked Drado.

Culcis nodded, realising what his aide was suggesting. He noticed some of the First Sons led by the hard-faced scion he had seen earlier had also fallen in with the corporal.

'Throne preserve you, corporal,' said Culcis, and nodded to the thickset scion, before taking the psyker's full weight. Juba Klaye could barely stagger, and he was mumbling incoherently. His robes were stained with arterial blood, and there was no medic in sight. Order was on the verge of collapsing. If refuge could be found and the psyker stabilised then maybe... If Klaye was the only weapon they had against the bludvayne then Culcis had to try to save the man.

Field surgery was beyond him, but Culcis thought he might at least be able to staunch the bleeding and bring Klaye around.

'And you, sir,' Drado replied. 'It has been my honour.'

'And mine, corporal.'

Drado nodded curtly, then hollered to a clutch of Volpone, who stopped running to attend to his orders. Together with the few scions, they formed a ragged battle line, turned and ran straight for the Blood Pact.

Culcis headed for the nearest trench line where he knew the snaking network would bring him back into friendly territory. Regara had been warned of the danger, but would be marching to link up with the remnants of Culcis's group.

Barely breathing, Klaye was a leaden weight when Culcis dumped him into the trench. He risked further injury to the psyker, but the fire exchange above would probably kill them both where they stood if he delayed. Culcis leapt down after him. Pausing only to check the man's vitals, which were weak, he heaved Klaye back onto his shoulder, got his bearings and began to trudge through the mud. It was thick and sucked at his boots, but at least it was an obstacle he could face and overcome.

Reaching an intersection that had partly collapsed from a mortar burst, Culcis pulled up sharply. Blood Pact had overrun their position. He could hear them somewhere above, distant but still close enough for him to be able to discern their debased language. He knew a few words and phrases, but was far from fluent. Words, someone had told him once, were dangerous. Even those that seem innocuous bring damnation upon the ignorant or the reckless.

The Blood Pact was hunting.

Drado and the others could be dead, captured or worse. Klaye was flitting in and out of consciousness. Culcis was on his own.

Setting the psyker down, Culcis went ahead to check the junction.

The grunting cadence of Sanguinary tribesmen grew louder.

Culcis drew his pistol.

XV

Something moved through the fog, silhouetted against the fiery radiance of a distant explosion. A veil of heat lay upon the battlefield that turned the incessant rain into mist and transformed the earth underfoot into a mire.

Silently, a shadow slid in through the vapour and the blood-drenched mud.

At first it had the aspect of a wraith, an incorporeal revenant possessed of vague anthropomorphism. It drifted against the hot breeze.

As it drew closer, its maw widened and opened, revealing alabaster white teeth

that curved into a grin. Its projected malice was as palpable as a gunshot, the many lives it had ended resonating in a stir of psychic echoes from the chasms black pits of its eyes.

Unable to satiate its hunger, it would kill again.

Its latest victim cowered before it, and as the shadow of its stultifying presence exerted itself, every last light faded and Juba Klaye knew his own light was about to be snuffed out.

At the faintest disturbance, Culcis turned, expecting to be faced with the grim aspect of an iron grotesque. Instead, he saw a Volpone officer crouching beside Klaye's body. A second lieutenant. His hand was over the psyker's face, gently closing his staring eyes.

Bertram Fenk. Culcis recalled the man he had dragged from the trench earlier, and lowered his pistol.

Fenk slowly shook his head, but Culcis had already guessed the psyker was dead. He tried to shake off another impression, something just beyond his reach. It was the reason he had turned around, a sense of something, a *threat*.

Above the two Volpone, the Blood Pact roaming near the trench line grew louder still, and Culcis threw his body against the inner wall as he realised what he must have reacted to.

Fenk followed his example, though neither spoke.

Their uniforms begrimed with filth, the two Volpone tried to blend into their surroundings.

Rain beat down.

Guttural laughter cut the breeze with dagger sharpness as the Blood Pact caught sight of Klaye's dead form slumped in the ditch. Neither cultist knew Klaye's true nature; all they saw was a slain enemy soldier, slowly sinking into the earth.

Culcis remained still, his eyes on Fenk. His fingers tightened around the grip of his pistol.

Three distinct voices, three men. Higher ground gave them a second advantage. Culcis willed Fenk to be still, but he need not have concerned himself. The second lieutenant was like a statue, a bayonet clenched in his right hand.

If the Blood Pact chose to enter the trench, they would have to kill them and risk others hearing.

Culcis caught Fenk's gaze and tapped the sheath of his own knife with his left

index finger.

Make it quick, he mouthed.

Fenk gave a near imperceptible nod, and looked to follow the Blood Pact.

More guttural exchanges filtered down to them through the storm. There was a moment of silence, charged by the tension in the air.

Culcis dared not move further. He could smell the stink of wet copper, hot and heady on the breeze. It would take two seconds to draw his knife, another two to throw it. He had to trust Fenk to kill the second man, which left the third between them. If they could bear him down into the trench, drown him in the mud before he could shout a warning...

After a few more seconds, the Blood Pact moved on, drawn by distant gunfire.

Culcis remained rigid for a minute afterwards before finally letting himself breathe again. His heart was hammering. He approached Fenk, who had also begun to move, the bayonet held low and easy in his grasp.

As they closed, Culcis looked into the other man's eyes, and for a fleeting moment he saw a cold and pitiless void, a serpent, not a man, staring back at him.

The errant flash of light against Fenk's blade brought an image Culcis had dismissed as mild, psychological trauma back to the forefront of his mind. He was still trudging towards Fenk. They were no more than a few metres apart.

'Second lieutenant,' Culcis began, proffering his open hand.

For a second, it looked like Fenk still had his knife.

A heavy burst of las-fire interrupted the reunion, as Culcis arched his neck at the sudden actinic flash above them.

Voices, Imperial voices speaking Gothic, resolved on the air.

Harsh, magnesium stab-lights penetrated the gloom.

Regara's bellowed orders rose above the storm. Volpone war cries rang out as the Imperium reclaimed the line. Something dark and formidable sped across the clouds, lighting up the edge of the battlefield Culcis could see with thunderous lascannon bursts.

'Seems we live to fight another day, Second Lieutenant Fenk.'

Culcis and Fenk were scarcely a stride apart.

He noticed the knife was sheathed again, and Fenk had lost his viper's gaze and smiled warmly instead.

'To serve Emperor and Throne,' he replied, 'for Volpone glory.'

'For Volpone glory,' uttered Culcis, his thoughts suddenly pellucid.

The image in his mind, the one that had made him turn with its sudden potency

and insistence, was an indigo aquila, spattered with blood. A common enough sight, he supposed, except it perfectly matched the clasp around Fenk's neck. Culcis saw something else, too: first a wooden box, its contents a closely guarded secret, and second the look in Fenk's eyes as if he had just shared the same revelation.

In the darkness and the driving rain before the trench was filled with light and the sound of allied voices, Culcis could not be certain that Fenk's eyes did not narrow.

In the end, the Volpone 50th did not contest the ruins of Titus beyond the night when Tempestor Prime Ardal and the First Sons arrived through the storm.

We were to leave Lotun and its bitter memories behind. Although Titus will live on in Volpone history as an infamous defeat, the intelligence gathered during the conflict concerning the so-called 'bludvayne', and the potential threat this cabal presented to the Crusade, garnered the attention of Warmaster Macaroth.

Records describe how a contingent of Throne-sworn Angels, the vaunted Silver Guard, made landfall and razed Titus to ash.

The part Tempestor Prime Ardal played in the needless and profligate death of three hundred and sixteen Volpone soldiers, as well as the clandestine deployment of an alpha-class psyker, remains a matter of quiet conjecture.

Needless to say, I personally, as well as the Volpone officers who survived the conflict, have a different view and know too well what is owed to us by the First Sons. It is an account we intend to collect in full.

– Personal journal, Major Vasquez Regara,
‘Royal’ Volpone 50th

Over the course of the Gaunt's Ghosts series, I have enjoyed examining life behind the scenes of the regiment: what downtime is like, what day-to-day feels like in the various camps and accommodations, what it's like to be a child, or a wife, or any other part of the non-com entourage. Gaunt is in charge of a large travelling 'family', a large proportion of which is civilian and supporting, rather than military assets. They're his responsibility, too, but sometimes the structures of Imperial and military law do not comfortably apply to the close, intimate society of the entourage, and do not adequately protect it.

My interest in this 'domestic' side of Guard life probably began back in The Guns of Tanith, with the notorious Lijah Cuu storyline, and has been revisited through Dalin and Yoncy, and most recently, Captain Daur's bride, Elodie. The 'back-room life' is now a major theme, and will become, in several different ways, a crucial part of the next two novels, The Warmaster and Anarch.

This powerful and quietly shocking story by Nik Vincent delves into that part of regimental existence. It is firmly set in current Ghosts continuity (beginning six days after the end of Salvation's Reach and, literally, on the final page of the first story in this volume, 'Family'). It is one of the other stories in this volume that presents vital and important connective tissue between the last novel and the storylines of the next. It's a hard story because the subject matter is so gruelling, but I think Nik's written it superbly.

Once again, pay attention and take notes. This story will have significant repercussions in The Warmaster...

Finally, this is the first time I've allowed somebody else to write actual Ghosts characters. Yes, as you know, Nik's my wife, so I trust her. I very much admire her writing, and we work in the same room, so I could look over her shoulder as she composed. We discussed the story at length, and I was close by to advise her about what certain characters would do or say.

Not that she needed hand-holding at all.

Oh no, not at fething all...

Dan Abnett



VIDUITY

Nik Vincent

*The Highness Ser Armaduke, six days out from Salvation's Reach, 782.M41
(the 27th year of the Sabbat Worlds Crusade)*

I

Elodie passed Gol Kolea on the companionway a couple of hundred metres from Tona Criid's compartment. His head was down, and when she tried to greet him, he appeared not to notice her. She kept walking. He probably had stuff on his mind. She did too. Everyone did.

Elodie had spent the afternoon sitting with Ban for as long as Curth and Lesp would allow. It had been six days since he'd been carried out of Salvation's Reach. Six days since the surgeries to his legs and abdomen that had saved his life.

Today, Ban had walked for the first time. It had felt like a miracle. Ana Curth had also told Elodie that there had been *other* damage. Ban Daur would be a soldier again; he would fight with the Guard for as long as they wanted him or until he died for the Emperor. There was only a very small chance that Elodie's husband would ever be a father. There was only a very small chance that Ban would ever be able to give her a child.

Elodie knocked gently on Tona Criid's compartment door. Dalin opened the

hatch.

‘Mum,’ he called, stepping aside to let Elodie in. ‘Someone to see you.’

‘Who is it?’ asked Tona, impatient. She was doing pull-ups, hanging from a maintenance duct that ran the length of the narrow living quarters. She swung one arm free so that she turned in the air to catch a glimpse of the woman entering. She flexed her single supporting arm when she saw Elodie and dropped to the floor.

‘Elodie,’ she said, surprise and regret in her voice. ‘Sorry, I wasn’t expecting you.’

‘No, I’m sorry,’ said Elodie. ‘I shouldn’t have come. You’re busy and it’s late.’

‘I’m glad you did. Sit down.’ She picked up the bottle of amasec that Gol had brought to supper and tilted it. ‘I think the Guard owes you a couple of drinks. I know it owes me.’

‘Thanks,’ said Elodie, smiling for the first time.

‘I’ll get glasses,’ said Dalin, ‘and then I should get back to my bunk.’

‘Are the accommodation decks as bad as they say?’ asked Elodie.

Dalin laughed. ‘We’re Guard,’ he said. ‘Are the non-com hab decks as bad as they say?’

‘Don’t tell Ban, but if I’d had to live there I wouldn’t have waited for him to ask me to get married, I’d have got on my knees myself,’ said Elodie.

‘And they call *me* mercenary,’ said Tona.

Dalin said goodnight and left the women to talk.

‘How is Ban?’ asked Tona.

‘He walked today,’ said Elodie.

‘That’s good news,’ said Tona. ‘Good for us, anyway.’

‘It *is* good,’ said Elodie. ‘Good for all of us. Good for him. I wanted to talk about something else, though. If that’s all right?’

‘What’s going on, Elodie?’ asked Tona, aware of a tone in the other woman’s voice.

‘That’s just it,’ said Elodie. ‘I’m not sure. I don’t really know. Except that I know *something’s* going on.’

‘And you can’t talk to Ban because he’s in recovery?’

‘I can’t talk to Ban because he’s a man... and because he’s Guard.’

‘I’m Guard,’ said Tona.

‘Yes,’ said Elodie. ‘Can we forget that, just for now?’

‘Something’s obviously bothering you, Elodie. I think you’d better start talking,’ said Tona.

II

‘Is this a disciplinary, sir?’ asked Harjeon.

‘Are you being petulant?’ asked Captain Meryn. He didn’t have the privacy of the cabin for long; the ship was crowded and even the captains were doubling up and sharing office space. Besides, he wanted to get this over with.

‘No, sir,’ said Harjeon.

‘I’ve lost half of E Company. If I have to lose one more infantryman, how much do you think I’ll miss *you*, Harjeon?’

Harjeon squirmed. He was an uncomfortable man. He had never learned the social graces that seemed to come easily to other people. He wasn’t funny and he had no small talk. It made him an angry man.

He bent too easily to authority, and then took out his frustrations on the people beneath him. Except that he was the lowest of the low in the Guard. He had never progressed through the ranks. He was not a career soldier. He was barely a competent soldier.

‘I was a solicitor’s clerk,’ said Harjeon. ‘My first lesson was on confidentiality. I know how to keep my mouth shut, sir.’

He’d known how to mock up the paperwork for the viduity scam, too. They’d liked him well enough when they could use him.

‘If it’s not over,’ said Meryn, ‘if the Commissariat starts asking questions again, just remember who falsified the documents for all those pensions. I’m not going down for this.’

‘No, sir,’ said Harjeon.

‘Now, get out of my sight,’ said Meryn.

Harjeon hated his captain’s contempt. He despised the contempt he felt for himself.

Harjeon saluted Meryn and left the cabin, closing the hatch behind him.

It was fifth bell and time for his meal rotation in the canteen, but his stomach was twisted in a hard knot and he could feel the bile in his throat. He descended two decks and took a short cut through the maintenance ducts. He’d done it hundreds of times on dozens of troop ships. Everyone found some privacy somewhere. It wasn’t hard to come up with an excuse for being somewhere you shouldn’t be, especially if you were too old to be a private, but you weren’t dead yet. Especially if you could look stupid.

Harjeon liked the hab decks. He liked the chaos. The Guard were important down here. All Guard. Any Guard. He liked women, too. Not hard women, not

killers like Criid or clever women like that Doctor Curth. He liked sad, soft, lonely women.

He could feel contempt for women like that, more contempt than he felt for himself.

III

‘It’s the women,’ said Elodie.

‘What about the women?’ asked Tona. ‘You’re not telling me anything. You’re going to have to give me something if you want my help.’

‘It’s little things,’ said Elodie. ‘I know a lot of women, a lot of wives, and a lot of girlfriends, and some of the working girls.’

‘Of course you do,’ said Tona. ‘It stands to reason that they respect you, that they come to you. You have status among them, and you’re everyone’s friend. You mustn’t let them use you, Elodie.’

‘No, it’s not like that,’ said Elodie. ‘They’re talking, mostly to each other, but I’m hearing things... Things that worry me.’

‘What things?’ asked Tona.

‘There are a lot of broken women down there,’ said Elodie. ‘It’s a community, and everyone looks out for each other, but a lot of women are alone, struggling to raise kids. Some have got grown kids in the Guard. Some have even lost husbands and children in the campaigns.’

‘It’s always been like that,’ said Tona. ‘I don’t know how they get by, but they always have.’

‘That’s just it,’ said Elodie. ‘Something’s happening. They’re not getting by any more.’

‘What do you mean?’ asked Tona.

‘They’re frightened,’ said Elodie. ‘They’re shutting themselves away. There have been accidents, too.’

‘They’re hurting themselves?’ asked Tona.

‘That’s what some of the younger women are saying,’ said Elodie.

‘But it’s rumours?’ asked Tona.

‘The women are gossiping, and they’re worried, but something’s going on,’ said Elodie.

Tona took a swig of Gol’s amasec.

‘Salvation’s Reach was bad,’ she said. ‘There were big losses. Half of E Company was wiped out. Things are always unsettled for a while after something like that.’

‘You think it’ll be all right?’ asked Elodie.

‘I hope so,’ said Tona. ‘You haven’t told me anything that I can take to Gaunt.’ Elodie gasped.

‘I wouldn’t want you to do that,’ she said. ‘I just...’

‘I know,’ said Tona. ‘You’re worried. Why don’t you see if you can find anything out? Talk to one of the older women. One of the leaders, you know who they are. Come back to me in a few days.’

‘Are you sure?’ asked Elodie. ‘I don’t want to waste your time.’

‘There’s nothing to do here, anyway,’ said Tona. ‘I’m going so crazy that I’m doing pull-ups from the ceiling.’

‘Thank you,’ said Elodie.

IV

Harjeon held Elavia hard by the throat until her lips turned blue. He watched the skin of her neck around his fingers turn white as he increased the pressure. Her eyes bulged as she tried to plead with him.

There was barely space for two people to move around each other in the cramped space, let alone fight. He had to keep control. The bunks were divided by plasteel sheets. There were curtains instead of hatches, and only the compartments at the ends of rows, against bulkheads, offered any kind of privacy at all.

‘Understand this,’ he said in a hard whisper to avoid being overheard by the non-coms milling around the hab-deck. ‘If you ever mention my name to anyone, I will kill you. You know that I can do it.’

The woman finally went limp, and the weight of her body was too much for Harjeon to hold up. He let her fall awkwardly to the ground. He heard the hard crack of an elbow and then of her brow. The arm was broken. Her head would be badly bruised.

Harjeon sat down and waited for Elavia to come round. After a minute or two, just as he was becoming impatient, she coughed and gasped, and then moaned with the pain in her elbow. As she sat up, her left arm hung limp at her side. She

brought her right arm up to her head. It was bleeding.

‘You’re a mess,’ said Harjeon. ‘You’re not entitled to the stipend. I got it for you and I can take it away. If you go to the authorities, you’ll implicate yourself. Do you know what that means?’

Elavia hardly dared to look at him. She shook her head.

‘Stealing from the Guard is a capital offence. If you tell them about the stipend they’ll know you’re stealing. They’ll put a round through your stupid skull. Understand that.’

Elavia understood it very well. She understood that her man had died on Jago. He had belonged to her and that was enough for them. Other people had something they called marriage, but it wasn’t their way. Harjeon had explained it to her. She had paid him a percentage so she could keep her pension. All she wanted was to stay with the Guard, to go where her man would have gone, to try to live the life without him that she could have lived with him.

Harjeon pulled up the collar of his fatigues, pulled down the back of his jacket and walked away.

His captain could silence him, and he could even humiliate him, but there was only one of him to bully. There were dozens of women for Harjeon to torment, dozens he had been extorting. He’d had his own lucrative little sideline during the viduity scam, and it was ripe for exploitation.

V

‘Leaving so soon?’ asked Ban.

‘Do you mind?’ asked Elodie. ‘I promised someone...’ She tailed off. She didn’t want to lie to her husband, but she couldn’t involve him in what she was doing.

‘Are you on one of your missions, again?’ asked Ban, smiling at his wife. ‘You’re too sweet for your own good. Who are you trying to help now?’

‘It’s nothing, really,’ said Elodie, ‘just one of the widows. She lost her husband and you’re safe.’

‘I am,’ said Ban, squeezing his wife’s hand. ‘And Doctor Curth wants me back in that walking frame in five minutes, so go. Do your good deed. I’ll see you tomorrow.’

Elodie leaned in to kiss her husband. It was not enough, and he cupped the

back of her neck and pulled her closer. The kiss lingered for long moments.

‘No agitating the patient,’ said Ana Curth, walking up the ward towards them. ‘He’s got work to do.’

‘Sorry, doctor,’ said Elodie.

‘For the Emperor’s sake, Elodie, call me Ana,’ said Ana Curth. ‘And I’m teasing. Kiss your man while you can. It’s good for both of you.’

‘I’m going,’ said Elodie, rising from beside the cot with a broad smile on her face. ‘Ban... Ana.’

Half an hour later she was in the hab decks, drinking something that had been offered as caffeine, but which was, at best, its second cousin once removed.

‘Thank you for seeing me, Honne,’ she said, putting her mug down.

‘A captain’s wife asks to see me, what choice do I have?’ said Honne.

‘I’d never force you to talk,’ said Elodie. ‘You need to know that. But I hope you will.’

‘You don’t have to force, though, do you, mamzel? You only have to ask.’ The older woman folded her arms over her bosom and sat back in her chair.

‘You’re a good woman, Honne, and everybody knows it. The other women trust you. You help them birth their children. You give them solace when they grieve for their husbands. When they need you, you’re there.’

‘There’s nothing left for me to do. Two husbands, four sons, two daughters, all gone to the Emperor. So, I midwife and I dress scalds and I salve bruises and I dry tears, and I leave it to the Emperor to deal with the dead.’

‘How many bodies have you laid out, Honne?’ asked Elodie.

‘That’s bodies,’ said Honne, ‘and you know it. I’m talking about souls. Two husbands, four sons and two daughters all with souls, and even you can’t tell me otherwise.’

The woman was defiant. Elodie could work with that.

‘The living have souls, too,’ she said. ‘You deal with them every day. Women are suffering, Honne. I know they are, but I don’t know why. If I knew why I could help.’

‘You don’t know why. I don’t know why,’ said Honne.

‘You won’t say why,’ said Elodie.

‘I know that I have dressed burns and I have salved bruises and I have dried tears. I know that women are hurting more than is normal. I know that their mouths are shut,’ said Honne.

‘They must say something,’ said Elodie. ‘Someone must have said something.’

‘They say they are clumsy. They say they trip and fall. They say they walk into

doors. It means nothing,' said Honne. 'It means I am talking too much.' She picked up her mug of caffeine and cradled it to her bosom, her arms still half crossed, defensive.

'They are not hurting themselves,' said Elodie. 'Someone is hurting them. Who?'

'They are women,' said Honne. She held the mug to her mouth and took a long swig of caffeine.

The two women drank. Elodie talked. Honne said nothing more. She simply nursed her empty mug until Elodie's caffeine had gone cold. She would not leave until the captain's wife left. She would keep the rules of etiquette, but she would not speak further on the subject. She already felt that she had betrayed the silent women.

VI

Harjeon had her in an armlock, her face mashed against the rough plasteel of the bulkhead, grazing her skin raw. He pushed his knee into the small of her back and wrapped his free hand in her hair.

She was screaming.

He was filled with rage and panic, and he had to stop her screaming.

When she stopped screaming, when he finally let her go, he hardly knew what he had done. He only knew that he had done what he had needed to do to keep himself safe, safe from the Commissariat, safe from Meryn's threats, safe from this woman who could give him away.

'You're mine,' he said. 'You owe me. And there'll be plenty more where that came from if you ever mention my name to anyone.'

She tried to speak, but her nose and mouth were filled with blood and she was gasping for breath through the pain. She reached a hand up to her shoulder. That hurt, too.

Taria would never tell anyone where she got her money. It had been one bad man after another. They'd all wanted to do what they'd wanted to do to her. None of them had wanted her enough to marry her. And, anyway, they'd all died. She'd lived on her wits for a while, but that was worse. Men had still done what they'd wanted, but they'd paid for it. It was worse, much worse.

When Harjeon had come, after Jago, with the pension papers, she'd signed. It

was a lie, a lie that meant she was tied to one bad man forever. Except Harjeon had only wanted money. Until now.

If it cost her one broken nose in two years, she'd keep her mouth shut.

'If the Commissariat finds out, they'll put a round through your head,' he said. 'Scamming the pension is treason. You're a dead woman.'

He left her sitting against the bulkhead, blood dripping onto her dress. She could feel the bruising spreading around her eyes.

VII

Three days later, when Elodie knocked on the door of Tona's compartment again, it was Yoncy who answered.

'Auntie Elodie,' she said. 'Have you come for supper?'

Tona came to the hatch behind her daughter.

'Wash your hands, Yoncy,' she said.

'I'm sorry,' said Elodie, 'I forgot you eat at five bells.'

'You're welcome to join us,' said Tona. 'Someone always does, and there's plenty to go around. No real meat tonight, I'm afraid, but I'm a dab hand with slab.'

'I don't want to talk in front of the child,' said Elodie.

'Then we'll talk afterwards,' said Tona. 'It's good for her to have proper female company. She's got a thousand uncles.'

They ate and cleared the dishes, and then the two women sat down to talk. Gol's amasec was all gone, but Tona had some sacra, which she poured for them.

'She's a funny little thing, isn't she, your daughter? Lots of energy, and a great appetite. How old is she now, nine, ten?'

'She's thirteen,' said Tona. 'I'm expecting a growth spurt any minute.'

'Girls do that, don't they? Grow up suddenly,' said Elodie.

'You're evading the issue, Elodie,' said Tona. 'Why don't you tell me what you found out?'

'I went to talk to one of the women, as you suggested,' said Elodie. 'She was very defensive, but she confirmed my suspicions. The women aren't hurting themselves, they're being hurt.'

'Someone's hurting them?' asked Tona. 'Who?'

'That's the problem,' said Elodie. 'I don't know who, and I don't know why.'

‘What did she say, exactly?’ asked Tona.

‘She didn’t say anything, but she implied quite a lot. She’s seeing a lot of women with injuries, and she’s helping them. The injuries don’t match the claims the women are making about how they were caused. When I asked who was hurting the women, she said, “They are women.”’

‘That’s all she said?’ asked Tona. ‘Just, “They are women”?’

‘That’s all,’ said Elodie, ‘but the implication seemed clear to me.’

‘She was implying that it’s a man?’ asked Tona.

‘A man or men,’ said Elodie.

‘If it’s domestic and the women won’t speak out, we can’t take this to Gaunt,’ said Tona.

‘I didn’t think so,’ said Elodie. ‘I don’t want to lose my trust with the women, either. And I don’t want to jeopardise this woman’s standing in her community. She does a lot of good.’

‘We’ll go to Ana Curth,’ said Tona.

‘Is that a good idea?’ asked Elodie.

‘She’s the head of medicae,’ said Tona. ‘If any of the injuries are bad enough for the victims to end up in the medicae bay, Ana already knows about this... Even if she doesn’t actually *know* about it.’

‘What can she do?’ asked Elodie.

‘The next time a woman comes in with an injury, she might be able to persuade her to talk,’ said Tona. ‘She’s a pretty impressive woman when she’s got the bit between her teeth. If she tells you to do something, you do it.’

‘Would you talk to her for me?’ asked Elodie. ‘I’m not sure...’

‘Better coming from me,’ said Tona. ‘I’ll see her tomorrow. I wanted to drop in to see Lesp about some ink, I’ll do it then.’

VIII

Salandra needed the pension. She needed it for her children. Her children whom everyone believed to be another woman’s orphans. Guard orphans. It didn’t matter how or when or why it had all happened, they were her children and this was the only life her family had known for a dozen years. A percentage of the pension went straight back into Harjeon’s pocket, but that didn’t matter, either. She was frugal. She had learned to manage.

What made him think she would tell anyone? Why had he beaten her? She despised him, but there was nothing to be done.

She grabbed the bucket and drew it towards her again. How many times had she thrown up? Why was her neck so stiff? She must go see... She must go see... The old woman, what was her name?

IX

‘Do you need something, Tona?’ asked Ana Curth as the Guard strode through the medicae.

‘Five minutes of your time when you go off duty, if you can manage it,’ said Tona.

‘Wait in my office,’ said Ana. ‘A few stern words with Captain Daur and I’m done for this shift.’

‘Consider them spoken and understood,’ said Ban Daur, waving a greeting at Tona. ‘Lesp already covered this ground.’

‘Lesp isn’t your attending doctor,’ said Ana Curth. ‘Five minutes, Tona.’

Tona pulled a face at Ban, and strode to Ana’s office to wait for her.

Three minutes later, Ana Curth walked in, unbuttoned her smock and sat heavily in her chair, clearly exhausted.

‘Right, let’s have it,’ she said.

‘First things first,’ said Tona. ‘Are you coping all right?’

‘I appreciate the concern, Tona, but I’m busy, I’m understaffed, and I answer to Gaunt.’

‘Well, that put me in my place,’ said Tona.

Ana sighed.

‘It’s easier than answering the question, that’s all,’ she said. ‘For the purposes of moving on, of course I’m coping. That’s not the question.’

‘You’re miserable,’ said Tona.

‘Of course I’m miserable,’ said Ana.

‘I know it won’t help, but it gets less awful,’ said Tona.

‘That’s how I’m coping,’ said Ana. ‘The knowledge that it gets less awful... Until the next time.’

‘Yes,’ said Tona. ‘Until the next time.’

‘So,’ said Ana, ‘give me something else to think about. Tell me what I can do

for you.'

'Can you keep an eye on non-coms accident figures? See if they're going up? Look for injuries, particularly among the women,' said Tona.

'They're high,' said Ana.

Tona was surprised.

'It can happen,' said Ana. 'Sometimes, after an engagement... Sometimes the combatants don't know how to deal with the things they've gone through – the mental and emotional traumas.'

'They take it out on the women?' asked Tona.

'Sometimes,' said Ana. 'It's one of the tragedies of war. Everyone pays a price. The victims are strong and the culprits are remorseful. Often they love each other.'

'They tell you all this?' asked Tona.

'The women make excuses for the men, or they say it like it is. They're very accepting,' said Ana.

'Then it's not that,' said Tona. 'Have any women come in here with injuries that you've been suspicious about or that they've refused to explain?'

Ana got up from her chair and crossed to a cabinet of medicae records. She took out a thick file and leafed through it, pulling out several sheets.

'I've treated five women for unexplained injuries in the past week,' she said, 'including fractures to a nose, an elbow and a wrist, a dislocated shoulder, and two concussions. What's going on, Tona?'

'I don't know yet,' said Tona. 'The problem is, nobody's talking.'

'Well if I get another woman coming into my medicae in a state like this, she's damned well going to talk to me,' said Ana, slapping down the medical records of the five victims.

'That's what I hoped you'd say,' said Tona. She got up to leave. 'The other stuff, when it happens, you do something about it, right?'

'Always,' said Ana.

'Good,' said Tona.

X

Stremmy was worried about her mother. She was sick. She tried to stand up, but she kept falling over, and she was saying funny things that didn't make any

sense. It had all started the last time Private Harjeon had come to see them. Stremmy and her twin brother Flory had been sent away, and when they'd come back their mother had been lying down with a headache. They hadn't eaten that night.

It was two days later, and her mother was worse. Stremmy tried to ask her mother what she should do. When her mother didn't answer, she wasn't worried any more, she was frightened. Stremmy decided she'd have to do something by herself.

XI

'What's the matter, child?' asked Honne when Stremmy found her at the barter market, trying to trade some beautifully darned but very old petticoats for a nearly new wrap.

'Mum's sick, can you come?' asked Stremmy.

'Salandra's sick?' asked Honne, scooping up the petticoats that she'd arranged on the corner of a trestle table. 'How long has she been sick?'

'I don't know,' said the child. 'Ever since Private Harjeon came.'

The old woman and the child wove their way through the cramped passages of the hab decks to Salandra's tiny cabin. The stench of stale vomit hit her before she'd drawn back the oily old curtain that separated the space from the narrow companionway and the hundreds of other tiny, family rooms that led off it.

Flory was sitting on the floor next to his mother. She was still and silent.

Honne crossed the room in two or three strides, gestured the boy out of the way and bent to examine the woman.

Salandra opened her eyes when Honne spoke to her.

'They're mine. Don't let them take my children,' she said.

'No one's going to take the children away,' said Honne.

'They need the pension when I'm dead,' said Salandra. 'Make sure Harjeon keeps his word. I'm not a traitor. It's not treason to give the children a pension.'

'Be still,' said Honne. 'You're delirious. I need to look at you.'

There was a smudge of black blood around Salandra's right nostril, and her pupils were unequal. Honne gently felt the woman's head. The right, rear quadrant was warm to the touch.

'Flory, find two fit strong people,' said Honne. 'We're going to carry your

mother to the medicae bay. She needs a doctor.'

'Will Mum be all right?' asked Stremmy.

'I hope so,' said Honne. 'You're a good girl for coming to find me. Now stay here and look after each other until I come back.'

'Don't tell,' said Salandra as she was lifted from her bed. 'Don't say a word. I promised Harjeon I wouldn't ever speak of it. Shhh.'

XII

Salandra never regained consciousness after she was taken to the medicae.

Despite Ana Curth's best efforts, she died within the hour.

'What happened here?' asked Curth.

It was less than forty-eight hours after her conversation with Tona Criid, and this woman had clearly been beaten to death. The skull fracture had been fatal, but when she examined her, Ana found other injuries.

'I don't know,' said Honne. 'She said nothing.'

'Then I'm having her husband arrested,' said Ana.

'She has no husband,' said Honne.

'Don't split hairs with me, woman,' said Ana. 'I'm in no mood for wrangling words. Her man, whoever he is, will be arrested for this.'

'She has no man,' said Honne. 'There's never been a man. She cares for orphaned children who lost their mother at Hagia.'

'Someone did this,' said Ana Curth.

Honne shrugged. Salandra had been delirious. She had intended to take her secrets with her to the grave. Souls were not Honne's responsibility, not dead souls. The souls of the living, that was different. Stremmy and Flory were living souls. They'd lost two mothers.

XIII

At first bell, Ana Curth walked the companionway to Tona Criid's compartment. She'd stayed in the medicae long into the night, long after her shift was over, trying to piece it all together. There was no definitive answer. It didn't make sense.

The hatch opened to the smell of eggs. Ana knew they were powdered and stored and might be decades old, and she wondered how Tona managed to get them to smell as if they'd been newly laid.

'Ana,' said Tona, surprised. She couldn't remember the last time the doctor had visited her in her quarters.

'Tona, can I come in?'

'Eat with us,' said Tona. 'There's plenty.'

'Your eggs smell wonderful,' said Ana.

She stopped in her tracks as she saw Elodie sitting at the small table with Yoncy.

'On second thoughts, I'll come back,' she said.

'If it's about the women,' said Tona, 'it was Elodie who brought it to me in the first place.'

'Oh,' said Ana. 'What about the child?'

'Yoncy, would you like to eat breakfast tucked up in your bunk?' asked Tona.

'Yes please, mummy,' said Yoncy, getting down from the table.

Tona scooped some scrambled egg into a bowl, added a hunk of bread and handed it to her daughter. Yoncy ducked behind the partition, closing the hatch behind her, and climbed into her bunk where it was warm and dark.

'You'd think she'd find it claustrophobic in there,' said Ana. 'It's so cramped and airless.'

'It beats me, but it's her favourite place, lately,' said Tona.

'A woman died, yesterday,' said Ana Curth, when they were alone. 'She was brought into the medicae with a fractured skull. She'd been beaten, badly.'

'Did you find out who was responsible?' asked Tona.

'That's just it,' said Ana. 'The woman who brought her in said she didn't have a husband or lover. So, I checked her records, and there's nothing about her being connected to a man. She came into the regiment with a woman Guard at Vervunhive. The mother of her children. She was a casualty at Hagia.'

'So, it wasn't a domestic incident,' said Elodie.

'That got me thinking about the other women,' said Ana. 'I've spent most of the night sifting through records for the other five women who had unexplained injuries or who wouldn't talk about the causes of their injuries.'

'What did you find?' asked Tona.

'None of the women have current registered partners,' said Anna. 'Two had registered partners, not married, killed in action, and the other three had registered partners, married, killed in action. Salandra, the woman who died

yesterday, was raising Guard dependents.'

'They were all single women,' said Elodie, surprised.

'I also checked the records of the other women who had come in with injuries caused in domestic incidents or altercations,' said Ana. 'There were seven of them. Four were married. One had a registered partner, not married. Two were single with no registered partner.'

'So you think that the silence must be about something else?' asked Elodie.

'Yes,' said Ana. 'The pattern of injuries was different, too. I looked again at the injuries to the six women who were silent. Whoever hurt these women employs the same moves, over and over. The breaks and bruises are consistent with armlocks and with banging heads. He always attacks in the same ways. He's a sadist. One woman had clearly had her face smashed against a bulkhead, possibly repeatedly. Her nose was a mess. She'd also suffered a dislocated shoulder. The bruising to the wrist suggested he'd brutally forced an armlock. I think whoever it is enjoys inflicting pain on these women.'

'So we can take it to the Commissariat,' said Tona.

'How?' asked Elodie. 'We don't have a suspect, and I don't know why, but the women won't talk.'

XIV

There were eleven women.

Harjeon was already incapable when the first one had sat down at the small table. There must have been something in the caffeine the old woman had given to him. He didn't know her.

He'd come down to the deck habs for one of his visits. To talk to one of the women. She hadn't been there. Honne had been there in her place.

'She had to step out. She asked me to wait for you,' she'd said. 'I've got caffeine. You're very good to her. She's very grateful.'

One at a time, their faces had swum before his eyes. They'd said things as if from a great distance. They'd called him things. His body had taken the blows until he'd felt the warm froth in his mouth. He'd been relaxed, soft, numb. They'd punched like little girls.

He hadn't known they'd held blades in their fists.

XV

They carried the body into the medicae.

‘What in the name of the God Emperor happened here?’ asked Ana Curth.

‘You won’t save him,’ said Honne.

‘I’m going to try,’ said Ana. Lesp was at her side, cutting Harjeon’s blood-soaked fatigues off his body as she took his vitals.

‘Who did this?’ she asked as the stab wounds were exposed.

‘No one,’ said Honne.

Ana scowled at the old woman.

‘Was it you?’ she asked.

Honne allowed herself a low chuckle.

‘They won’t kill him,’ she said. ‘That will.’ She gestured to the medicae tray at the head of the gurney, and turned to walk away.

She stopped several paces further down the medicae bay, and turned to face Ana Curth. She looked right at the doctor, and without blinking, said, ‘He hurt the women. He’ll get what he deserves.’ Then she turned once more and walked away.

Ana watched her for a moment. Harjeon was naked on the gurney, and Lesp was checking and cleaning the wounds to his chest and abdomen. Some of them were quite superficial, others more serious.

Ana noticed that Harjeon’s skin was blooming in odd discoloured patterns, as if he had a rash forming. She looked at the medicae tray. She hesitated for a moment. She picked up a syringe. Filled it, and found the vein in the back of Harjeon’s left hand. She trembled slightly, stopped, and then in one swift move, she gave him the injection.

Thirty seconds later, Harjeon started convulsing. His neck went into rictus. His eyes bulged. Lesp called the code.

Ana Curth and Lesp worked on the private for a further twelve minutes, but he was dead.

XVI

‘Reporting on the death of Private Harjeon, E Company,’ said Ana Curth.

‘Take a seat, doctor. Tell me what happened,’ said Gaunt.

‘I’d rather stand, thank you, colonel-commissar. This won’t take long.’

‘As you like.’

‘Private Harjeon was brought into the medicae with stab wounds,’ said Ana Curth. She did not need to refer to her notes. ‘The autopsy shows that they were mostly superficial. The three serious stab wounds would have required surgery. He would have survived the attack.’

‘And yet, he’s dead,’ said Gaunt.

‘The toxicology report shows that Private Harjeon had ingested a recreational drug that reacted with a pharmaceutical that I administered during surgery prep,’ said Ana. ‘The patient suffered a seizure resulting in heart failure and brain death.’

‘Record death by misadventure,’ said Gaunt, holding out his hand for the paperwork to sign off on the latest casualty in his regiment.

‘I should have seen it,’ said Ana, still clutching the reports.

‘He shouldn’t have broken the rules,’ said Gaunt. ‘Drug abuse is not tolerated. He would have been executed for it. Hand me that, and let’s be done with it.’

XVII

‘I’m sorry to have troubled you with another meeting,’ said Elodie, ‘but I wanted to let you know that it’s over.’ She was sitting at a tiny table in the hab decks with her hands wrapped around another mug of terrible caffeine.

‘Thank you, mamzel,’ said Honne.

‘Private Harjeon died in medicae after reacting to a pharmaceutical. He got into a fight, but his injuries weren’t fatal. They’re not looking for anyone in connection with the stabbing.’

‘Thank you, mamzel,’ said Honne, again.

‘He won’t be hurting any more women, Honne,’ said Elodie.

‘I wouldn’t know anything about that,’ said Honne.

‘No,’ said Elodie. ‘Nonetheless.’

XVIII

‘Thank you, Tona,’ said Elodie, after her visit to Honne. They were sitting

drinking sacra in Tona's quarters.

'I didn't do anything,' said Tona. 'These things sort themselves out in the end.'

'Do you worry about the men?' asked Elodie.

'They're good men,' said Tona. 'For every hundred good men, for every thousand, there's one evil fether.'

'Like Harjeon?' asked Elodie.

'Like him,' said Tona. 'We look after each other, though, don't we? Don't think about Harjeon. For every one of him there are a hundred Bans. For every one of him there are even a few Caffs.'

Feth, I love this story.

David Annandale is a relative newcomer to the echoing halls of Black Library, but his work has already proved beyond doubt that he should be there. I very much urge you to seek out and read his Horus Heresy novel The Damnation of Pythos. Now he gets his Sabbath Worlds Writers' Club tie and fancy embossed card (there's probably some membership ritual involving rolling up one trouser leg and putting your shirt on backwards. Or did that just happen to me? You guys...).

I love David's story for a number of reasons. First, it's one of the others in this anthology that absolutely fits 'current' Ghosts continuity. The whole purpose of the Salvation's Reach mission (spoiler alert) was to sow the seeds of rivalry between the Blood Pact and the Sons of Sek.

Archon Gaur is the Archenemy leader, direct rival to Warmaster Macaroth. He's top dog, and he has the Blood Pact (notorious for being an actually organised, disciplined and thus effective Imperial Guard-style Chaos force – many are converts corrupted from the Guard itself by the dark whispers of Khorne... I refer you to John French's story, and my own 'You Never Know').

Anarch Sek is the Gaur's foremost lieutenant. Sek, whose voice drowns out all others, is probably a better strategic battlefield commander than the Archon, and he envies Urlock's mastery. Sek, inspired by the Blood Pact, has created his own 'disciplined' force, the Sons of Sek. Now two Archenemy monsters are fielding armies that go far beyond the feral hodge-podge of the Sanguinary Tribes. They are proper armies, equivalently skilled (and thus as effective) as the Astra Militarum. Gaunt's mission in Salvation's Reach was to exploit that rivalry, and make the Blood Pact think that the Anarch was trying to press for power, and make the Sons of Sek believe that the Blood Pact was turning on them. A propaganda war. Split the enemy and make them fight themselves.

This terrific story shows the results of that disinformation war. It also portrays the aspect and viewpoint of the Archenemy with great skill. Set firmly in current

Ghosts continuity, it is one of the other stories in this volume that provides, if rather more indirectly, vital links between the events of Salvation's Reach and those of The Warmaster.

If you never thought you'd find yourself rooting for the Pact, prepare to be confounded...

Dan Abnett



THE DEEPER WOUNDS

David Annandale

*Lycotham Gamma, 782.M41
(the 27th year of the Sabbat Worlds Crusade)*

Human skulls were a disappointment. They were too close to the surface.

Seddok Etogaur considered this as his Death Brigade moved through the disused mining tunnels. He felt an emotion like regret – regret woven in barbed wire – whenever his knife scraped bone. This wrathful frustration came whether he was carving an enemy's flesh or his own. The blade could not sink as far as was right. There were limits to the profundity of the pain and the conjuring of blood. He marked his worship of the Blood God in the whorls of sliced muscle and flaps of cheek. But how could he give full expression to his faith and rage with such hard limits in the material?

There was very little more he could do with the canvas of his own flesh. The scars overlapped. They built on each other, layering the violence of meaning. His skull showed in patches on his crown. He had even worked on the bone itself, scraping runes with the point of the blade. The extent of his mutilation demanded the respect of his subordinates. The depth of commitment to the Blood Pact was measured by the acts of war against the enemy, and in the acts given physical memory on the warrior's body. Seddok's loyalty was visible in every contortion of the slices. He hadn't even spared his tongue. He could still speak without difficulty, although he could taste nothing but thickened tissue and

blood.

It wasn't enough. The blade should go deeper. There should always be more pain, more blood, more flesh to tear away.

He was thinking about the limits to injury because the same ones applied to the present action. He and his troops were going to inflict pain. But not enough.

It would never be enough.

They reached a junction. Kstah took the left tunnel without hesitation. The mining operations had honeycombed this range of the Katchgar Mountains on Lycotham Gamma. The work went on, but many of the veins had been exhausted. By tasting the air and sensing vibrations beneath its clawed feet, the loxatl could gauge how close they were to any of the workers. The reptilian xenos had led the brigade through tunnels that hadn't been used in years. As they neared their target, Seddok could hear, faintly, the sounds of labour and industry. There wouldn't be any need for secrecy soon. A bit longer, and everything would be about injury and the teaching of a lesson. The lesson that would not be enough.

The Death Brigade had placed themselves on Lycotham Gamma four days earlier, landing in a desert, far from any population centre. Seddok and his warriors had made good time, and seen no one. They had not been detected by the Sons of Sek. The blow would come from the night. The message would be clear.

The quality of the air changed. It went from stale and close to choking, oily, gritty. Seddok felt a breeze. The tunnel came to an end at an opening about twenty metres up the cliff face. Seddok looked right, to the north, at the manufactorum. It squatted in a narrow valley, its walls abutting the mountainsides. It was a cathedral of black iron. Its clusters of chimneys were spires a hundred metres high, spewing clouds so thick they blocked all sight of the sky. Though it was midday, the valley was in deep twilight. A web of rails ran from tunnel entrances, feeding trainloads of ore to the receiving bays in the complex's east and west flanks. The south face was dominated by massive gates. From there, a road led from the valley.

'This won't hurt as much as it should,' said Mevvax Sirdar, echoing Seddok's displeasure. She was looking at the transports hauling the manufactorum's output through the gates. They were hull components for void ships. Taking out the manufactorum would be a blow to the Sons of Sek's strength, but hardly a crippling one. They controlled Lycotham Gamma. This was not the only centre of production.

‘Agreed,’ Seddok said. ‘But what does?’

She shrugged.

‘We have orders,’ he reminded her. ‘And we obey.’

She nodded once, the gesture tense with anger at the prospect of unjustified effort.

‘We are delivering a message,’ he said, reminding himself as much as his subordinate. They were teaching, not decapitating. The Blood Pact was not at war with the Sons of Sek. But Anakwanar Sek did not recognise the authority of Urlock Gaur as he should. The magister needed to be reminded that the forces of the Blood God in this region of the galaxy spoke with one voice, and obeyed one master. The Sons of Sek believed themselves to be supreme on Lychotham Gamma. Perhaps they were. That did not mean they were untouchable.

Paraak laughed. The sound was liquid. The grotesque that masked his features had short spikes that pierced his cheeks. He was always swallowing his own blood. ‘It would do them good to bleed,’ he said.

Seddok grinned, feeling the ragged edges of his lips split as they rubbed against his own grotesque. His mask, unlike those of Paraak and the other lower orders, was not iron. It was gold. *Even better for us to see them bleed*, he thought. There was a second lesson they were about to teach. The braggart Sons of Sek needed to be taught humility. They vaunted their military prowess. The stories of their precision and discipline were spreading through the Sabbath Worlds systems. There was some basis for their pride, yes. They were doing well, yes. But Seddok had come to show them what a Death Brigade of the Blood Pact could do.

Before the manufactorum gates, on either side of the road from the valley, was an encampment. Large enough, Seddok estimated, for two hundred troops. He counted twenty sentries stationed around its perimeter and near the gates.

‘Look at them,’ said Eshk. ‘Proud of their finery.’

He meant their gear. Even from this distance, the quality of the Sons’ equipment was apparent. They weren’t wearing full-body carapace armour as the Death Brigade were, but the vests and helmets had a uniformity, and thus probably a reliability, beyond what many Blood Pact troopers had at their disposal.

‘It won’t do them any good,’ Seddok answered. He eyed possible approaches. The urge to launch into the humiliation of the Sons was strong. He wasn’t concerned by the eight-to-one odds. His brigade had annihilated larger Imperial Guard forces. But he had to be mindful of the goal. If the manufactorum was

shuttered against him, its walls would be those of a fortress. He would be kept at bay until reinforcements arrived.

If he followed the dictates of cold anger instead of hot rage, the path was clear. Kstah had brought them to an entrance that gave onto one of the rails. From the state of its disrepair, it had fallen into disuse years ago, now too far from a viable source of ore, and was being allowed to decay. Its span was still intact. The receiving bay it led to was fed by two other lines. One of them came from an opening ten metres down and a hundred to the right of the brigade's position. The other started from a tunnel whose mouth was almost forty metres straight up.

Seddok looked at the upper line. Kstah gave a peremptory hiss and pointed at the lower one instead. Seddok watched, trusting the loxatl's vibratory perceptions. After a few minutes, an ore train rumbled down the track, its carts full. Its passage was loud, but added little to the metallic thunder echoing throughout the valley. Seddok raised his magnoculars and examined the sentries. They didn't so much as glance at the train. Their attention remained on the road, the sole ground approach to the manufactorum.

It was almost too easy.

'I think they want to be hurt,' he said.

At Kstah's signal, the brigade headed down the track. Twenty-five warriors in carapace armour stained dark with the blood of their victims. Twenty-five grotesques: metal faces of leering violence, noses and chins hooked into claws. Seddok knew their appearance would not terrify the Sons of Sek. His determination was that their actions, however, would.

From the moment they left the concealment of the tunnel, they were visible from the ground. Kstah, a quadruped, would be hard to spot, but the others would draw attention with their movement if an observer's eye fell on them. Seddok kept track of the sentries below as he crossed. They didn't move. No alarm was raised. In less than five minutes, the brigade was entering the manufactorum bay halfway up the complex.

The interior was vast. A few hundred metres ahead, slaves unloaded the contents of the ore train's wagons and hauled their carts down ramps to the levels below. The ceiling here was low. Further on, beyond the unloading, the space opened up.

Seddok took the lead now. The punishment was about to begin. They were no longer concerned with evading the enemy. Doing so for more than a few moments more was impossible. Slaves in the thousands were at work. There

would be guards. What mattered now was speed and violence. And he wanted to be seen. The full meaning of the lesson he was about to deliver would be in its witnessing. They would leave survivors. Not many, but enough for the message to be spread: *Respect the authority of the Gaur. His reach is long.*

The Death Brigade charged across the receiving bay. The sound of their boots on the rockcrete floor was just another note in the general din. The slaves did not look up until the last moment. Seddok saw their eyes widen. Their screams were the first taste of satisfaction, and the goad to more rage. These ragged humans had lived in the hope that obedience would grant them something that passed for mercy. It did not.

Laspistol in his right hand, chainsword in his left, Seddok cut through the slaves without slowing his charge. Blood washed over his armour. Limbs fell to the ground. The screams of terror became screams of pain, and the screams of pain ended under the growl of his sword. The rest of the brigade followed in wedge formation, bayonets gutting and stabbing. Kstah slashed with claws, and tore out the throat of one slave with his jaws. They left behind mounds of writhing meat. A few of the drones would live long enough to tell others of the terrible force that had come upon them. Seddok smelled the rancid milk and mint stink of the loxatl.

The slaughter was a trivial one. A minor thread. But it had its role to play in the tapestry of blood. Every drop an offering to the Blood God. Every drop a rebuke to the Sons of Sek.

The receiving bay ended at the vast space that occupied the entire central block of the manufactorum. Levels upon levels of assembly floors were fed by huge elevator platforms that rose slowly up a vertical track to the ceiling a hundred metres up, moved horizontally a few dozen metres, then descended another track, just as slowly. Slaves moved components and material on and off the platforms. They had to move fast, as the elevators never stopped. To Seddok's left and right, he saw more of the elevators. The work levels were staggered. The effect was a disordered tangle of metal and rockcrete. To the right, in the centre of the complex, was the colossal blast furnace. It radiated waves of heat and rumbled with the breathing of mountains. This was the heart of the manufactorum. This was the target. And it had to be attacked at its base.

An elevator platform rose past the level of the receiving bay. The Death Brigade tore across it and leapt to the level opposite. More slaves here, working on deck beams. Another slaughter in passing. A surge of blood across the floor. But no pause, because these kills were far beneath the skill of the brigade. The

slaves deserved no mercy, but they were not the point. They were not the subjects of the lesson.

At the other end of the level, a platform descended. Seddok's troops took it, and formed a circle as it dropped, clanking and juddering, towards the floor. Now they began to fire. They sent a stream of las in all directions, culling the slaves of every work floor within range, on every level as they went by. Workers died. More panicked. Fires broke out. Disorder spread, gathered force, turned into destruction. Seddok shot a cluster of pipes. The las melted through metal. Live steam and electrical cables fell on the slaves.

More screams. More fire. Chaos spread, and this was the gift of the Blood Pact's discipline. Rigour in the service of Chaos. Unity for Khorne. All the better to drown the galaxy in blood. Unity that the Sons of Sek would do well to remember.

Two-thirds of the way down, there was a sudden change. There was no work taking place on the lower levels. There were makeshift barricades on the sides facing the platform. Seddok saw what was coming. The counter-attack began before he could call a warning.

Enfilading las-fire struck the platform, killing three of the Death Brigade. Seddok and the others dropped into crouches, reducing their size as targets. But there was no shelter. They were surrounded, outnumbered. The enemy numbered in the dozens on each side, and there were more waiting on the levels below. If the brigade remained on the elevator, it would be annihilated before reaching the floor of the manufactorum.

'In their teeth!' Seddok yelled. 'Forward!'

The platform was between levels. The Sons of Sek rained las down from above, but the soldiers below didn't have an angle on the Blood Pact yet. Seddok led the charge over the edge. He brought a cataract of rage down on the defenders. There were ten of them. They responded quickly, without panic. He was a fast-moving target, yet he felt the sear of las burn through the armour on his left side. The pain was an outrage. He saw red, his vision shimmering with the pulse of his god's wrath. He rolled as he hit the deck, and came up firing two metres behind the Sons of Sek.

His first clear look at them. Their armour was ochre, and was an expression of their fidelity to Anakwanar Sek. Hands covered their mouths, either stitched across their lips or rising from the armour's gorget. A mark of possession, of the silence of secrets, of their lord's absolute control.

The Sons struck with a cold certainty. Two more of Seddok's troops were

down, unmoving, but the others retaliated as he did. The armour of their opponents was strong, but it wasn't enough. These soldiers were good, but they were not worthy of the Death Brigade. Seddok's force nailed them against the barricade with fire, then closed the rest of the distance and hit with a wall of bayonets. Seddok drove his chainblade through the gorget's hand and into the throat of the man before him. The warrior's face was shadowed, scarred with the ritualised wounds of devotion, alive with hatred and the fever of blood. It was the mirror of his own, and it was a betrayal. The scars were related to his own. But they were not the same. There was allegiance to Khorne, but this was a disciple of a master other than the Gaur.

Every deviation could mean a loss to the serfs of the false god. For such weakness, there was no death painful enough.

The fight was over in seconds. The Sons of Sek lay sprawled, mutilated. No uniformity to them now. Only the variety of death, the wet gleam of viscera, the pooling scarlet of blood and the jagged white of bone. *Now*, Seddok thought, *are you learning? This is the cost of schism.* There was satisfaction in that thought.

But the enemy on the levels above and opposite continued to shoot. Crouching low, the Death Brigade backed away from the barricade, out of the angle of fire.

'They were expecting us,' Mevvax said.

'How?' Eshk protested.

'*How* is irrelevant,' Seddok told him. Mevvax was right. There was nothing improvised about this defence. It was too strong, too well prepared. The space of this work level had been cleared of debris, giving the Sons of Sek room to manoeuvre. The tools were stacked against the walls on either side. The conveyor belts and generators were idle.

Seddok remembered the sentries outside the manufactorum, and how they had looked so conveniently in the wrong directions.

Mevvax completed his thought. 'This was a trap.' She was glaring at him. She was close to challenging his leadership. A weak leader was a dead one. If he didn't reclaim the initiative from the Sons of Sek, she would try to replace him.

'And?' he said. 'What difference does that make?' he asked the rest of the brigade. 'We knew they would come. What point would there be if they didn't? How would they be taught respect if we didn't ram it down their throats?' He moved to the centre of the level. Ladder rungs were mounted on an iron column that ran between the floors. 'They're waiting for us? Good.'

He pulled a frag grenade from his belt and tossed it down the shaft to the level below. He sheathed his chainsword and started climbing down as the grenade

went off. He kept his pistol out and pointing down. He pulled the trigger, firing suppressive shots as soon as his feet passed through the ceiling. He was through and could see the Sons of Sek before they recovered sufficiently to coordinate fire.

He had a few seconds of high vulnerability. There was another squad's strength below. Two had been killed in the explosion. The others were on the move, but there was no cover in the cleared interior of the work space. Seddok dropped another handful of rungs. Another grenade came through the opening above him. It struck the deck and bounced. It blew up in mid-air, shrapnel slashing out at neck level. One of the Sons staggered, clutching his face. Then Mevvax was through the ceiling, adding her fire to Seddok's.

The etogaur jumped, falling the last few metres, still firing. The landing sent a violent jar up his spine, but he stayed on his feet. With his back to the column, he shot in a wide arc, keeping the initiative as he forced the Sons onto the defensive. They fired as they ran, encircling his position. He ignored the near misses and took his time, aiming well and firing for effect. Two more of the enemy lay dead when Mevvax reached the ground. By then, Eshk and Paraak were climbing down. The Blood Pact's fire became more concentrated. The vulnerability of its warriors lessened. Kstah leapt straight through the opening and landed on one of the Sons, the impact snapping the man's neck.

Before the full brigade was down, the Sons of Sek squad was reduced to five troopers. They knew they were dead. They stopped trying to evade the fire. Shouting the glory of Khorne, they grouped together. They could not survive, and so they worked to kill.

Though they were outnumbered, they dropped three more of Seddok's command before they were cut to pieces.

There were two more levels before the Death Brigade would be on the manufactorum floor. From above, Seddok could hear the pounding of boots and the shouts as the Sons of Sek converged from the other decks. One squad at a time, they didn't have the strength to be a threat. It enraged Seddok that the victories he had won so far came down to brute numbers rather than skill. That was not the lesson he had come to inflict. And now, having walked into a trap, a trap whose jaws were closing, he was faced with the possibility that it was the Blood Pact that was on the receiving end of the lesson.

The edges of his vision flared hot-white. Pride fuelled his rage to the point that he thought he might snap the planet in half with his hands. He rejected the lesson. He rejected the possibility of defeat. He rejected everything that did not

involve wading thigh-deep through the blood of the Sons of Sek.

Most of all, he refused to consider the larger implications of the trap. He would negate them by rendering the trap futile. He would fulfil his mission. He would slake his rage.

Dread, wrath and his sworn vow flashed across his thoughts in the seconds between hearing the approaching troops and grasping the rungs to resume the descent.

Mevvax said, 'This is a good way to erode our strength.'

'We need to reach the floor,' Seddok answered. He thought about shooting her before her challenge became direct. With an effort, he set the idea aside. The unity of the brigade was paramount. 'You have a better way?' He didn't give her a chance to answer. 'No. I didn't think so.' He threw another grenade down and started to climb. 'With me!' he barked.

The Sons on the next level were better prepared. Las-fire came for him the moment he appeared. He couldn't move fast enough. He took a hit in the chest-plate. The armour absorbed the worst, but the hit damaged it badly, and he felt fire across his chest. Another bolt struck the column next to his hand. He kicked away from the column as he fell.

The drop was over five metres. He snarled as he arced towards his foe. He kept firing. The fall was just long enough for Seddok to experience the wind-whistling speed of flight, and the anticipatory dread of defeat. He bent his knees as he hit. He rolled into an impact that pounded his skeleton like a blade in a forge. He couldn't breathe. Raging defiance kept him moving. He came out of the roll with the momentum of his fall and leapt into a Son of Sek. They both went down hard. The Son lost his rifle. He grabbed Seddok's throat and squeezed hard. Seddok rammed his pistol into the Son's face and fired. He pushed himself away from the smoking corpse as more grenades went off, and his troops joined the fight.

He still couldn't breathe. His vision was blurred. He saw a shape before him. He fired, it fell, and he staggered upright, drawing his chainsword. He stumbled to the right, and the bayonet aimed for his heart struck his shoulder instead, piercing the armour through a seam. The pain shocked air into his lungs, clarity into his vision. He hissed, dragging the chainsword up. He severed the arms of the Son before him.

He moved back, towards the barricade, and tugged the blade from his shoulder. Before him, the fight was ending, decided again by numbers. The Sons of Sek were dead. So were more of his warriors. The brigade was at two-thirds'

strength, and he could hear the Sons' reinforcements arriving on the deck above.

He was out of time. If he led the fight down to the final level, the struggle there would give the larger force the chance to catch up. Their only move was a desperate one.

An act of will. An object lesson for all.

'With me,' he said once more. He held Mevvax's gaze, and she must have realised what he was planning, because she grinned. She had lost her grotesque in the fight, and when she pulled her lips back, her angular scars moved into each other, as if dozens of small, jagged mouths were echoing the expression.

Seddok's limbs sent shooting pain through his frame. He had fractured some ribs. Rage at the prospect of defeat sustained him. Rage pushed him forward. It gave him strength and the necessary madness. He ran for the barricade and leapt over it, blind.

Rage would guide him to the blood of his enemies. Rage would give Khorne the great sacrifice.

There was no las-fire as he dropped. The Sons of Sek had all left their ambush positions and were pursuing in a single force. As Seddok fell to the floor of the manufactory, he was assailed by a spiritual vertigo. He had been falling since the beginning of the assault, from greater and greater heights. He had a premonition that the next fall would not end, that it would be the terminal plunge into failure.

Down. Hard strike against the rockcrete floor. Absorbing the shock as best he could, but hearing cracks inside his body. There was something wrong with his feet when he stood. Pain was a deep splintering. He wouldn't be able to run much further or much longer. That was all right. He didn't have far to go. Wrath would sustain him. It coursed through his blood as he started to move, vaulting over cables to run parallel to cart tracks, leading the brigade to the great blast furnace.

Not all his warriors had survived the fall. Seddok glanced back. He saw two bodies on the ground. One of them was crawling. They were failures left behind for the Sons of Sek. The enemy hadn't arrived yet. The Sons had not taken the leap. The snarl in Seddok's throat was contempt and eagerness. He had the time he wanted. The lesson would be taught after all.

Kstah raced ahead. The loxatl showed no ill effects of the leap. The twin flechette blasters of the mercenary's body vest fired a storm of monomolecular shards, slicing to ribbons any slaves who crossed their path. There was panic on all sides. Vehicles bearing massive loads of girders and hull plating were

abandoned. Humanity in all its futility sought to flee its destiny as a feast for the Blood God. The fear gave Seddok still more energy. He would justify that fear.

The blast furnace loomed ahead. It was a squat titan, its massive, lantern-shaped body rising almost as high as the upper work levels of the manufactory. Inside, heated to thousands of degrees, was a small lake's worth of molten ore.

Seddok focused on the target. The furnace was his weapon. It was what he was charging towards. All true. Yet at the back of his mind, there was an outraged, humiliated wail that saw the race as a retreat, as a flight from a superior enemy.

They were within reach of the base of the furnace when the Sons of Sek struck. A wall of las fell on the Death Brigade. The Sons had created an unbroken assault line. They marched shoulder to shoulder across the floor. They climbed any obstacles for clear shots on the Blood Pact.

One of the Sons did not shoot. He stood atop a stack of girders several metres high, challenging the Blood Pact to make him a target. A scourger, Seddok guessed. He had heard the rumours: officers who spoke as if with the voice of Sek himself, driving their warriors to impossible feats of war. The gestures with which he directed his troops were imperious, even disdainful.

Of course they are, Seddok thought. *These are not his elite soldiers. There are too many of them.*

A point was being made. The Sons of Sek could take on the best of the Blood Pact with their most common forces.

The brigade returned fire. It was an act of symbolic defiance, a futile gesture that was swept aside by a massacre. The rear ranks fell immediately. The rest ducked beneath the huge bustle pipe that surrounded the furnace. It was a partial cover. It would buy a few more seconds.

Seddok reached the base. The heat from the furnace's volcanic heart reached through his grotesque.

'No one is leaving this battlefield,' Paraak grunted as he and Mevvax joined him.

'No one,' Seddok agreed. '*No one.*' He spat the words, a vow etched in acid. He pulled the melta bomb from his kit. So did the other two. 'Not a single Son of Sek will walk out of this manufactory.'

'Nor will any sworn member of the Blood Pact.'

'And?'

'No one will know what we have done here.'

Seddok fixed the bomb to the base of the furnace. '*And?*' he snarled. He didn't care for messages or any other wider consideration now. His enemy was on the

point of triumphing, and the only thing that mattered was robbing the Sons of their victory.

Mevvax grinned again. Her eyes glittered with predatory ferocity above her bloody rictus. She was not challenging him. She would vent her rage along with him. 'And blood for the Blood God,' she said to Paraak. She moved down the flank of the furnace. Paraak went the other way.

One melta bomb would be enough to pierce through. Three would ensure the Sons had no chance to react.

Behind Seddok, the fight was ending. There were only a handful of Blood Pact still remaining. The Sons of Sek were closing fast. They must have realised the lengths the Death Brigade was willing to go. Their rush to stop him gave Seddok his own victory.

He turned from the furnace. He saw Kstah atop the bustle pipe, firing down at the Sons. There was a supporting framework a few paces to Seddok's left. He used it to climb to the top of the pipe. The Sons of Sek were a wave of wrath and perfect war heading his way.

'Be ready now!' he called down to Mevvax and Paraak.

'We are,' Mevvax answered, and Paraak gave his liquid laugh.

Seddok pulled the detonator from his belt. With his thumb on the trigger, he stood up, facing his opponent. Time to crack the world open, as he had known he could.

He pressed the button.

A savage light burst across the space of the manufactory as the melta bombs ate through the furnace walls. They released its blood, its incandescent blood. It burned and drowned the last of the Blood Pact. It met the wave of the Sons of Sek with a different wave, a terrible wave, a wave of red and orange metal that scoured them from existence. The heat was a new sort of pain, sharp as a blade, brutal as a claw. In moments, Seddok's grotesque heated to the point that it began to cook his flesh. Beside him, Kstah writhed, meat roasting on a spit.

Despite the pain, for a few seconds Seddok could still see. For a few seconds, the bustle pipe was above the flood.

And during those few seconds he roared. He howled his hatred of the Sons of Sek, at the traitors to the cause. He shrieked so hard and loud that he won another victory. He held the thoughts of greater failure at bay. If he thought of the larger questions of what would happen now, of how dangerous the Sons of Sek must be to see him coming and prepare the trap, he did not care. He had won.

But as the supports buckled, and the pipe tipped Seddok towards the greater pain, the blinding light of the sea of ore, he could no longer defend against the epiphany. On this day, there had been no messages, no lessons, and no victories. There was only a wound, deeper than any he had ever carved. A wound to the cause for which he had made of himself a burnt offering.

And back to me again.

This is my third and final 'current Ghosts continuity' story for this anthology. It is set three weeks after Salvation's Reach, relates directly to my two previous stories in this volume, and also to Nik's, and is a must-read if you're going into The Warmaster next. Basically, and forgive me if you disagree, I don't believe that anthologies should be optional extras. This story, like the others listed above, informs the ongoing storyline directly. You need to read it (and them) to fully appreciate The Warmaster. This isn't an optional side order, this is essential. I hope you appreciate and agree with that philosophy. If I'm going to ask you to buy a Ghosts story, it had better matter. It had better be crucial. It had better not be skippable or disposable.

This isn't. No matter what you think is going on by the end of the story, you're wrong. But this is going to come back and bite arses everywhere.

I've been building towards this for a long time. A long time. When was Necropolis published (2000? Well, tonight I'm gonna party like it's 1999)?

I like long-term plot plans.

I like Gol Kolea a lot.

I also like turning mistakes into story points.

When you're writing a long series of novels, you make mistakes. I'm sorry, but even the most thorough author slips up. When I make a mistake, I recognise my failing and seek to correct it (Space Wolves style). I turn the mistake into an asset. Merrt was shot in the mouth in Ghostmaker and 'died' (though I didn't say so), but I wrote about him afterwards, forgetting his death. Realising that, I gave him an augmetic jaw, had him lose his marksmanship skills, and turned him into a major character. A compelling character, I hope. Through a continuity mistake, I found a great character (I fething miss him).

Bonin fell to his 'death' in Necropolis. I put him into the books after that, realised that I'd fethed up, and thus developed him into 'Lucky Bonin' and made my mistake an asset. Another character brought to life by authorial

incompetence.

I made another mistake regarding Gol's kids in the books following Necropolis... You see? A pattern emerges. I am turning yet another clumsy mistake into a plot point.

And a big one.

Truth is, I really shouldn't be telling you all this. Revealing my mistakes and my frantic efforts to make them right, I mean. You should have a sense that an author is in complete control, that he knows everything, that he has been planning for a long time in intricate detail. I really, really shouldn't be showing you how the sausages are made.

In writing this introduction, I was torn between two approaches. Pretend I was an infallible genius who had been developing secret subplots for years, or show you the craft (ha ha! 'The craft'? Abnett, get over yourself!).

I opted for the latter. In writing comics, I have often deliberately seeded ideas and notions, without knowing where they would go, and come back to them when I've decided, making it appear as though I had a grand scheme all along. Organic narrative. It's a beautiful and adaptable thing.

In novels, it's much more about owning your mistakes and making the best of them. Merrt, Bonin... Lijah Cuu (who appeared without warning when I was desperately trying to rewrite a lost manuscript at short notice... and look what kind of plot he turned into! For that story, if you haven't heard it, look online. I tell it a lot).

I'm taking the risk of showing you how this actually works. I hope you're interested, and that you're not disappointed. I build plots, sub-plots and storylines very deliberately, but sometimes something takes you off guard (no pun intended). You see that you've made a mistake, and you rectify it in the most creative way you can imagine.

To be fair to Gol and his kids, this is a mistake I recognised years ago, and I have been deliberately building upon it ever since. It has become a main thrust of the fourth arc. The correction of a mistake turned into a long-term plan. Don't make me use the term 'craft' again.

I love Gol Kolea. I love all of my characters. You may not believe it, but when I do shitty or fatal things to them, I suffer. Even if it is vitally expedient to the story. Merrt? Dorden? Caffran? Bragg? Corbec?

'Why did you kill Bragg?' is still the single most often-asked question I get. Because it mattered to you.

Write about war, nameless war, who cares? Write about characters locked in

war, make the readers care... Then it matters.

My high horse is becoming uncomfortable, so I'll get off it.

To all of you out there, I hope you enjoy this dark little story, which, oddly, is more about friendship and laughs than darkness. Until it gets dark.

To Gol... I'm so sorry. What happens next, to you and yours and the Ghosts as a whole, is going to be truly awful.

Organic narrative. The 'craft' (ha ha).

Get ready. Nothing is ever going to be the same again. For, as Aaron Dembski-Bowden always says, really reals.

Sorry. Gol, I'm really sorry...

Dan Abnett



GHOSTS AND BAD SHADOWS

Dan Abnett

*Aigor 991, twenty-one days out from Salvation's Reach, 782.M41
(the 27th year of the Sabbat Worlds Crusade)*

I

For the second time that day, they were making a hole in the forests.

The first hole had been made just before dawn. The *Highness Ser Armaduke*, once a proud Tempest-class frigate, now an old workhorse saved from the breaker's yard for one last, suicidal run, had dropped out of the warp six hours earlier. The ship had limped into a low orbit above Aigor 991, and hung there for a while, nose down, while the Officer of Detection mapped the northern landmass, compared the geophysical profile to Battlefleet charts, and then plotted the target resolution. As the first rays of the rising sun began to hardlight the warship's battered starboard side, the *Armaduke* fired its principal batteries at the surface.

The strike – from the *Armaduke*'s perspective just a brief flash of light on the night side below – annihilated six acres of rainforest, and left a smoking patch of earth that was geologically stable and operationally close enough to the destination. Then the *Armaduke* launched six drop-ships: four long-pattern Arvus landers, and two Falco boats.

Aigor 991, a small, uninhabited world, was almost entirely swathed in dense rainforest across the northern continent. The forestation grew very rapidly, so any sections cleared or burned back did not stay clear for long. Aigor 991 had last been visited by a Battlefleet supply tender twenty-one months earlier. No sign of that mission's landing clearance remained.

In the pale, rising light, the six landers had thundered in over the forest canopy and made landfall on the steaming, scorched turf the *Armaduke* had opened for them.

II

Through the trees, Gol Kolea could hear the rasp of flamers and the whicker of industrial blades. He could smell hot smoke, which had an acid bite to it, and a reek of sap so sharp that it smelled like disinfectant.

He turned, eyeing the dense forest around him. Slivers of sunlight, slender as las-beams, speared down through the canopy. Everything else was a deep emerald gloom. He was standing in shadow.

The shadow of trees. Gol didn't know much about trees, as he had not been closely acquainted with them in the rockcrete halls of Vervunhive. Ironical that he, a Verghastite, and Baskevyl, a Belladon, had been chosen to head up the surface detail; any Tanith would have loved it. Maybe that's why Gaunt had made the selection. Probably didn't want some Tanith officer getting all misty-eyed and nostalgic about forests instead of keeping his mind on the job.

'We're in the right zone?' he asked Fapes, Baskevyl's adjutant.

'Yes, sir,' Fapes replied. 'And that's the third time you've asked.'

'We're here for a resupply,' Gol snapped back. 'Promethium and munitions. Seeing as we've precious little of either, it would be a feth-fool waste to use up tanks of prom clearing the wrong zone.'

'Definitely would, sir,' Fapes replied. He raised his auspex and squinted. 'I've got a hard bounce off stone in there, and the coordinates are matched and confirmed. It's the silo.'

Remote Depot Aigor 991. Secret. Hidden. An emergency cache that the Navy kept stocked and supplied to provide for out-haul missions beyond the range of secure Navy bases and planetary yards.

The mission profile was twofold. Burn off a landing strip from orbit, and then,

from there, move in to manually clear the silo location proper with flamers and servitor teams. It was too dicey to try to clear the silo location directly from orbit: a slight miscalculation could risk vaporising the cache, even given the surgical precision of Shipmaster Spika's gunnery officers. Once the silo was opened up, freight landers could come in and start loading.

'This is the zone, right?' asked Major Baskevyl, approaching them through the green shadows.

'He just asked that,' said Fapes.

'I just asked that,' said Kolea.

'Because it would be a feth-fool waste of prom if we were clearing in the wrong place,' said Baskevyl.

'A point already well noted,' said Fapes.

They had six platoons between them, essentially composed of three from Kolea's C Company, and three from Baskevyl's D. The rest of the surface team was made up of worker servitors from the ship's engineering and cargo divisions, plus a few Battlefleet officers as supervisors.

A squad of men from one of Baskevyl's platoons struggled past through the undergrowth, carrying fresh promethium tanks up from the landing strip. A Navy officer, impeccable in his dark blue uniform with its silver brocade, walked with them. He was carrying precisely nothing at all, probably because he had urgent dabbling-his-brow-with-a-silk-handkerchief and smoking-a-lho-stick duties to perform. Kolea didn't know the man's name.

'Guard gets to do all the hard work,' said Baskevyl.

'That, my friend, is the entire story of the galaxy,' replied Gol.

'At least we get to breathe some fresh air,' Baskevyl shrugged.

'This is fresh?' asked Kolea, wrinkling his nose.

'Well, not now we're torching the place, no,' said Baskevyl. 'Still, better than ship air. That's like living in an armpit.'

'Or a sock that someone's still wearing,' said Fapes. They gazed at him.

'I'll carry on with the... checking things, sirs,' Fapes said.

Bask's micro-bead beeped. He exchanged a few words, then looked back at Kolea.

'Maggs says he's found the silo,' he said.

'Let's go take a look,' said Kolea.

III

They walked through the trees together. The occasional spears of sunlight made the green shadow all the more oppressive. Insects hummed. There had been birdsong earlier, but the roar of the flamers and the chatter of blades had sent them bursting from the canopy in startled flocks.

‘It has two moons,’ said Baskevyl.

‘What does?’

‘Aigor 991. Two moons.’

‘How do you know that?’ asked Kolea.

‘Because I read the briefing packet.’

‘Why are you telling me this?’

‘Because you *didn’t* read the briefing packet?’

‘I read the bits that Hark highlighted,’ said Kolea. ‘It was forty galking pages long. I don’t need to know about annual rainfall, highest elevation and the lesser-spotted wood-gargler.’

‘The real reason is you can’t read long words, isn’t it, Gol?’

Kolea glared at him, then saw Baskevyl’s grin.

‘Funny man,’ said Gol.

‘So, anyway, it has two moons—’

‘Why? Why are you telling me this?’

‘Because you can’t read.’

‘Bask—’ Gol growled.

‘Because we’re getting a day out, that’s why,’ replied Baskevyl, ‘and I want you to enjoy the sights and natural wonders of the world, and I want to be able to explain them to you in painstaking detail.’

‘Couldn’t you just club me to death with a log?’

‘Two moons. I want you to appreciate the sights.’

Kolea halted and stared up at the sky. Baskevyl did the same. All they could see were soaring tree trunks, coils of creepers, and a sea of green leaves, all locked in shadow.

‘Sights?’ Kolea said. ‘It’s not going to really fething matter if there are two moons, is it?’

IV

The stink of smoke and promethium grew stronger. Kolea felt the wet of sap

vapour in the air.

The work teams had cleared a decent stretch. Kolea saw Lyse and Zered moving into the dense undergrowth, hosing curls of yellow flame from their burner units. The noise of other flamers roared from nearby. Servitors hacked into foliage with whirring cutting blades or raked away cut or burned greenery.

Kolea's adjutant Rerval was waiting for them at the edge of the clearance area, with Luffrey, the sergeant in charge of Baskevyl's second platoon, and Caober, Kolea's chief scout.

Rerval flipped out a data-slate, slapped it to stabilise the flickering screen, and then scrolled open a schematic. In the shadow, the screen underlit his face.

'Definitely the right zone, sirs,' he said.

'Fapes will be delighted,' said Kolea.

'Beg pardon, major?' asked Rerval.

'Go on,' said Kolea with a 'never mind' gesture.

'The silo is here,' said Luffrey, leaning in to point to the slate. 'Large structure. Out front is a broad rockcrete apron, the landing platform. That's what we're clearing now.'

'Estimates?' asked Baskevyl.

'Providing we don't hit any snags,' said Caober, 'and the tanks don't run out, I think we'll have it open by nightfall.'

'You'll get to see the moons after all,' Baskevyl said to Kolea.

'Moons?' asked Luffrey.

'There are two—' began Baskevyl.

'Don't get him started again,' warned Kolea. He looked at Caober. 'Let's get a look at this silo.'

'Maggs is waiting for you,' said Caober.

'Luff,' said Baskevyl, 'lead us over. Caober, go find the senior Navy man and bring him to join us at the silo. He's got the access codes.'

'Which one is the senior Navy man?' asked Caober.

'Tall,' said Kolea. 'Dark blue tunic, silver brocade, walks like he's got an RPG lodged in his rectum.'

'Pretty much describes them all,' said Caober.

'Well, he probably isn't doing very much except standing around,' said Kolea.

'Still much of a muchness,' said Caober.

'Then use your improbably acute Tanith scouting skills and locate him,' said Kolea.

'On it,' said Caober.

V

Led by Luffrey and Rerval, Kolea and Baskevyl headed into the clearance area. They passed Lyse, kneeling to connect up a fresh promethium tank, her goggles pushed up onto her sweaty forehead.

‘How are you doing?’ asked Kolea.

‘It’s fething hot,’ said Lyse. ‘Hot and wet and nasty.’

‘Good to see morale at a high,’ said Kolea.

‘And the shadows—’ began Lyse.

‘The what?’

‘The shadows, sir,’ she said, snap-fitting the last hose and rising to her feet.

‘The shadows here are really dense.’

‘Dense?’

‘I don’t know. It’s creepy here, isn’t it?’

‘It’s verdant,’ said Baskevyl.

‘What does that mean?’ asked Lyse.

‘It’s lush and green and beautiful,’ said Baskevyl, ‘and the shadows are just part of its dark, primordial grace. Also, it has two moons.’

‘The feth?’ asked Lyse, blankly.

‘You got that from the briefing packet, didn’t you?’ Kolea said to Baskevyl.

‘No indeed,’ said Baskevyl. ‘As a man unafraid of long words, I composed it myself, in order to reassure Trooper Lyse here that this *isn’t* the kind of death hole we usually end up with as a working environment.’

‘To be truthful, it didn’t really work,’ said Lyse. ‘And now I think you’re creepy as well.’

‘Don’t worry,’ Kolea told her. ‘Major Baskevyl will be dead by nightfall. By my hand. With a log. Carry on with your work.’

‘Yes, sir.’

The quartet moved on as Lyse started burning again. They passed two hacking servitors, then reached the lip of the stone apron Luffrey had mentioned. It rose about two metres above the forest floor, and the ancient rockcrete was scabbed with lichen, as well as scorch marks from flammers.

Kolea wondered how long the place had stood, and which long-dead Navy architect had commissioned it. The Navy had been building remote depots and supply drops for thousands of years. They were like ancient reliquaries. Like tombs.

Now I’m creeping myself out, Kolea thought.

They hauled themselves up onto the apron. Baskevyl, first up, reached out a hand to haul his friend Kolea. More flamer teams were working up there, led by Neskon, Dremmond and Lubba, brought in from other companies because of their fire expertise. Kolea raised a hand to Neskon, and the flame-trooper nodded back as he hosed liquid flame into the undergrowth. They had cleared part of the apron, and Kolea could already see some of the chevron markings on the platform emerging.

Caober's estimate had been generous, though. There was a lot to clear. They would be working into the night, until morning perhaps, as the vegetation was so thick.

Now they were standing in a cleared patch, with hard sunlight falling on them, it made the shadows of the forests and undergrowth seem darker. Creepy, just like Lyse had suggested. Bad shadows. Where had he heard that phrase? Bad shadows. Too dark. Too dense. The air was bright, the sun was strong, and the sky was pale blue, but where the forests stood, the shadows were as thick as Old Night.

'Hey, Gol,' said Baskevyl. He pointed up at the soft, blue sky. 'I told you.'

Two moons, vague as smudges of white chalk dust, one larger than the other, were just visible in the daylight sky, faint as ghosts.

'I imagine you're feeling terribly pleased with yourself right now,' said Kolea.

'It's a moment I'm going to cherish,' said Baskevyl grinning. 'Me and my old pal, under the ghost moons, contemplating the natural glories of the universe.'

Kolea sighed.

'Do they have names?' he asked.

'What?' asked Baskevyl.

'The two moons? Do they have names?'

'I don't know,' said Baskevyl. 'Does it matter?'

'A sight so beautiful, one should know the names.'

Bask paused.

'You're taking the piss, aren't you?' he asked.

'He really is,' said Rerval, sniggering.

'I really fething am,' growled Kolea. 'Now let's get on with the job.'

VI

They moved across the cleared part of the apron and back into the overgrowth. It was like stepping behind a curtain, from a lit room into a lightless one. Bad shadows surrounded them again. They seemed darker than before, deep green and black like the abyssal depths of an ocean, but Kolea reminded himself their eyes had become accustomed to light out in the cleared space.

‘This way,’ said Rerval, and immediately tripped over a creeper root. He picked himself up, and had to slap the data-slate a few times to get it to relight.

‘Classy,’ said Luffrey.

‘This thing,’ said Rerval, brandishing the data-slate, ‘works even better when it’s been pushed up someone’s arse sideways.’

‘Classier,’ laughed Luffrey.

Kolea ignored the banter. Luff and Rerval were good friends. They often sparred like this.

‘Give yourself a moment,’ said Baskevyl quietly. ‘Let your eyes get used to the darkness again. Just a moment, and then no more falling down like an idiot.’

They paused.

‘See? Better, right?’ asked Baskevyl.

‘Sure,’ said Kolea, but he didn’t think it was. The shadows seemed just as dark as before.

Bad shadows. Who had said that?

Kolea pulled out a lamp pack and switched it on. The lance of white light illuminated tree boles and snaking creepers as he played it around.

‘Come on,’ he said.

They crunched and clambered through the undergrowth. After a few minutes, they came upon the rusted skeleton of a Valkyrie gunship, entombed in a tangle of branches and leafy suckers.

‘How long’s that been here?’ Luffrey wondered.

‘Can’t be since the last supply drop,’ said Rerval. ‘It looks ancient.’

‘We’ll need to clear it, too,’ said Kolea. He looked at Baskevyl. ‘You think the servitors can move it?’

Bask shook his head.

‘I’ll vox up and have some heavies transported down,’ offered Rerval.

‘Yeah, do that,’ said Kolea.

Rerval pulled the vox-caster pack off his back, set it down, and began to nurse it to life.

‘*Armaduke, Armaduke*, this is the surface team, copy?’

Static buzzed.

Rerval repeated his call.

‘Nothing,’ he said, looking up at Kolea.

Kolea moved his lamp beam so as not to blind his adjutant.

‘This happens,’ said Baskevyl.

‘Yeah, all the time,’ said Kolea.

‘No, *here*,’ said Bask. ‘It was in the briefing packet. Vox-links can be disrupted from time to time by atmospheric magnetics.’

‘Let me guess,’ said Kolea. ‘The two moons?’

‘Uhm, yes, actually,’ said Baskevyl.

‘Yet they were *so* beautiful,’ Kolea snapped caustically. He looked at Rerval.

‘Try again in a few minutes,’ he told the adjutant.

‘Sir.’

Rerval rose and reslung the ‘caster.

VII

‘You took your time,’ said Wes Maggs.

‘It was dark, and some of us fell over,’ said Kolea.

‘By some of us, he means Rerval,’ said Baskevyl. ‘Hey, Wes.’

Wes Maggs was the lead scout of D Company. He was also a rare example of a non-Tanith making the scout grade. He was crouched, gun flat across his thighs, his back against an ancient rockcrete wall. He rose, threw the majors a casual salute, and looked at Rerval.

‘You fell down?’

‘There was a creeper-related incident,’ said Rerval.

‘Try the vox again,’ Kolea told Rerval.

‘This is the silo?’ Baskevyl asked Maggs.

Maggs looked up into the dense darkness.

‘Pretty much. Right place, right ref. Big place, though you can’t see much of it.’

Kolea approached the rockcrete wall and placed a hand on it. It was wet with moss and lichen.

‘It slopes,’ he said.

‘Schematics say the depot is underground,’ said Maggs. ‘The cap, this part, is a pyramid.’

Like an ancient tomb, Kolea thought.

‘What’s up?’ Baskevyl asked him.

‘Nothing.’

‘Your face just then.’

Kolea drew Baskevyl to one side.

‘I’ll be honest, Braden,’ Kolea whispered. ‘I don’t like this, not one bit. There’s something about this place. Like Lyse said. It’s creepy.’

‘It’s just a depot, Gol.’

‘I know, I know, but the whole thing... the shadows... the trees... It’s just hitting all my alarm buttons.’

‘I thought you were a bit jumpy,’ said Baskevyl.

‘Sorry. I can’t explain it. Something...’

Baskevyl placed a reassuring hand on his friend’s massive shoulder.

‘I’ll tell you what it is, shall I?’ said Baskevyl.

‘Yeah, please do.’

‘Salvation’s Reach.’

‘What?’ asked Kolea.

‘We just went through fething hell.’

‘We’ve been through worse. I’ve been through worse,’ whispered Kolea.

‘The last time is always the worst,’ Baskevyl replied. ‘It’s the freshest. At the fething Reach, we lost friends. We lost good men. You’re still all wound up. You’re still on... what is it that Hark calls it?’

‘Fight time,’ said Kolea.

‘Yeah, right, fight time. You’re expecting the worst, and this isn’t it. You’re wound up tight.’

‘Maybe. And you’re not?’ asked Kolea.

‘Of course. I just don’t let it show like you do.’

‘Because you’re a professional soldier and I’m some scratch company lout?’ asked Kolea.

Baskevyl paused. He withdrew his hand.

‘No,’ he replied. ‘Because I’m Braden Baskevyl and you’re Gol Kolea and we do things differently, according to our characters.’

Kolea nodded.

‘Yeah, sorry. That was terrible of me. Sorry, Braden. I... Sorry.’

‘It’s fine,’ said Baskevyl.

‘It’s not,’ said Kolea. ‘That was out of line. I’m sorry. I just want you to know... There’s something about this place that has been freaking me out since

we arrived. And it's not just the fact we're only three weeks out of combat.'

Baskevyl shrugged.

'I know,' said Baskevyl. 'I felt it too, the moment I got here. I was trying to ignore it. It's the shadows. Under the trees. The shadows are just... bad shadows. Like—'

'What did you say?' asked Kolea.

'When?' asked Baskevyl.

'Just then. You said "bad shadows".'

'So?'

'Where did you hear that, Bask?'

'I didn't hear it anywhere. I just said it. With words.'

Kolea looked away.

'What's the matter?' Baskevyl asked him.

Kolea unslung his rifle.

'Bad shadows. I don't know why, but that phrase means something. I wish I could remember why.'

VIII

'Vox?' Baskevyl asked.

Rerval shook his head. He'd been trying for five minutes.

'Keep the cans on, Rerval,' Baskevyl advised. 'You might hear something.'

Rerval nodded, and hooked the headphones back over his ears. He gathered up the vox set.

'Let's get working,' said Kolea. 'Let's find the access point.'

'What?' asked Rerval, too loudly, headphones on.

Maggs dumb-signed him, Verghast style.

'All right. The entrance,' Rerval said, consulting the data-slate. He slapped it a few times. 'Eighteen metres that way.'

He pointed.

'Let's move,' said Kolea.

'What?' asked Rerval. 'No, you're all right,' he added. 'I see what you're doing.'

IX

Maggs had brought a machete. It was probably a meat cleaver from the *Armaduke's* cook rooms, but it served as a machete. He hacked back the vines and creepers that blocked their route along the wall. It was ridiculously dark. The shadows were upon them like a weight.

In the distance, Kolea could hear the rush of flamers. He kept his weapon tight and ready.

'What was that you said?' asked Rerval from behind him. Kolea turned. His adjutant was pulling off his headphones.

'You get a contact?' Kolea asked.

'No, no. You said something.'

'No one said anything,' said Luffrey.

'You said "eagle stones". One of you did,' Rerval said.

'What the gak are "eagle stones"?' asked Maggs.

'No one said anything,' said Kolea.

'But I heard it, sir,' said Rerval.

'Just keep moving,' Baskevyl advised.

They continued. There was no sound except the squelch of their boots in the muck, the hack and chop of Maggs's blade, and their panting. It was hot. They were all sweating hard.

'All right, stop fething me about,' said Rerval suddenly.

They looked back at him.

'What?' asked Luffrey.

'Someone said it again. Just then,' said Rerval. "'Eagle stones. I want the eagle stones. Bring them to me.'"

'You heard that?' asked Kolea.

'Like a whisper, sir,' nodded Rerval.

'Honestly?'

'Swear by the Throne.'

Kolea looked back at the others.

'A joke's a joke, but that's enough,' he said. 'Tell me, right now, which one of you is pissing this boy about?'

In the green-black gloom, they all shook their heads.

'Then I'm going to abort this mission immediately,' said Kolea.

'Shit!' said Baskevyl. 'Gol, we can't do that! After the Reach, we're down to twenty per cent munitions and fifteen per cent promethium! We need this

resupply.'

'Yeah,' said Gol, 'but more than that, we need to stay alive. Something's here. Bad shadows, Bask. Bad fething shadows.'

'Come on, Gol,' said Baskevyl. 'Another few metres and we'll be at the door. By nightfall, we'll have the apron cleared. We need this.'

'No. I'm calling it,' Kolea said firmly.

'Gol,' said Baskevyl, 'if we don't make this resupply, we'll be down to the dregs the next fight that comes along. Las-packs. Bolter shells. Promethium. Feth, we need them.'

Kolea looked at his friend's shadowed face.

'All right,' he said. 'Keep going. I want to know where Caober is with that fething Navy man. Rerval? Cans on. Keep hailing the ship.'

'Sir.'

'If I find out any of you is playing tricks,' Kolea warned the rest of them, 'know this. I have a log. With Baskevyl's name on it. But names can easily be changed.'

X

'And behold,' announced Maggs, wiping sap off his blade. 'The front door.'

It was a huge cargo hatch, double-overlocked and festooned with creepers and vines. It lay at an angle, recessed into the pyramid's slope, as if attempting to bathe in a sun it would never see for long.

There was a crunch. Kolea turned hard, gun at his hip, ready to fire. Maggs was a microsecond behind him.

'Easy, easy!' Caober called. 'Feth, you're jumpy.'

'Shit,' murmured Kolea, lowering his rifle.

Caober approached. There was a Navy officer with him. The man was clearly not used to doing anything except standing on a steel bridge shouting orders and sipping amasec. Each step he took was a gingerly attempt to avoid getting filth on his shiny boots. He had an augmetic monocle implant. His hair was silver, and oiled back. He wore a dark blue uniform with silver brocade. He walked stiffly, upright. *Like he had a concealed warhead up his back passage*, Gol thought.

'This is—' Caober began.

‘I am Senior Fedrush Arskil, Master of Materiel for the *Highness Ser Armaduke*,’ the man said.

‘Arskil?’ whispered Luffrey. ‘That’s a joke just waiting to happen, isn’t it?’

‘Stow that, Luff,’ Baskevyl hissed.

‘Who is in charge here, I wonder?’ Arskil enquired, leaning forward, his monocle whirring to focus.

‘I am,’ said Kolea and Baskevyl at the same time.

‘He is,’ Baskevyl added, looking at Gol. ‘He is.’

‘Your ruffian here,’ said Arskil, indicating Caober with a dismissive gesture, ‘led me through these vile woods in the belief there was something to inspect.’

‘Sorry about the vile woods and the ruffian, sir,’ said Kolea. ‘We have located the access hatch. Do you have the codes?’

‘Naturally,’ said Arskil, producing a sleek data-slate.

‘I’m not a ruffian,’ Caober observed quietly.

‘We will revisit that issue when we haven’t got *people* around,’ Kolea told him. ‘You hear anything coming in?’

‘Like what?’ Caober asked.

‘Dunno. Voices?’

‘I did not, sir,’ Caober replied.

‘Hatch codes as requested,’ Arskil said, handing the data-slate to Kolea.

‘Thank you, sir. One thing. That eye of yours...’

‘I lost my eye in the last Battle of Khulan,’ Arskil declared, as though everyone was interested. ‘Shrapnel from the desk of the Master of Artifice as it exploded. He died, poor soul. I mourn him still. Warp torpedo through three decks, just beneath the bridge of my ship. Took out the entire deck plating of the bridge and—’

‘Terrible, sir, terrible,’ said Kolea. ‘But that eye? The augmetic? It can see in the dark?’

‘Why of course, young man. I have worn it since Khulan and it has never failed me.’

‘Tell me then,’ Kolea asked, gently turning the Navy officer to look out into the undergrowth. ‘Do you see anything?’

‘Such as what, good fellow?’ asked Arskil.

‘I don’t know. Anything?’

‘Trees. A great deal of them’ said Arskil. ‘Creepers, vine. The heat-swell of your flamer units, in the distance. Woods from here to the rim of the apron, eighty-nine metres away. Fifty-one metres that way, I see the ruined chassis of a

Valkyrie gunship.'

'Well spotted. Nothing else?'

'No, my good man,' Arskil replied.

'Nothing at all?' Kolea pressed.

'No, nothing. Why do you ask me so repeatedly? It's just shadows out there. Bad shadows, mark you, but still.'

'Bad shadows?' Baskevyl asked, seizing on the phrase. 'Why would you call them that?'

Arskil looked surprised. 'Serious and unusual levels of light depletion. It quite foxes my augmetic. Sometimes the old eye can get a little stiff.'

Bask looked at Kolea.

'Open the hatch, sir,' Kolea said to the Navy man.

'Ah, can't you do it, my good man?' Arskil replied. 'I gave you the slate. I don't want to get my gloves dirty.'

XI

Gol raised the slate and studied the access codes. He slunked back the heavy metal weather-cover of the hatch controls, exposing the keypad.

'Weapons set,' he told his team. They all stood ready.

'Why are you Astra Militarum devils so wary?' Arskil asked.

'Because we've danced this dance before, more than once,' Caober replied. 'Besides, we're ruffians.'

Kolea began to punch the code into the old, worn keypad. A yellow light glowed, and then turned green. The massive hatch opened, ripping root tendrils and creepers aside.

A sigh breathed. Ancient air. Stale air.

Kolea turned suddenly.

'I heard it that time,' he stated. "'Bring them to me.'" Someone distinctly said "Bring them to me." Which one of you was it?'

Rerval, Caober, Maggs, Luffrey and Baskevyl looked at one other.

'Nobody said anything, Gol,' Bask replied.

'You really are quite agitated, sir,' remarked Arskil. 'I wonder why you—'
His head came off.

One moment it was attached to his body, the next it was spinning away into the

shadows, slack-mouthed, trailing a corkscrew spray of blood.

Arskil's severed neck vented arterial spray. His headless body sank to one knee, as if he were about to be decorated or promoted, and then fell over. Copious amounts of blood darkened his dark blue tunic and stained his brocade.

'Wait,' said Rerval, almost baffled. 'His head just came clean off. How the feth did *that* happen?'

Kolea and Maggs were already firing, loosing wild shots into the trees. Baskevyl, Luffrey and Caober swiftly followed suit. Rerval found his weapon and started shooting too.

'There's something in the trees!' Maggs yelled.

'There's something in the fething *shadows*!' Kolea yelled back.

'Keep shooting!' Bask cried.

'At *what*?' Kolea shouted.

The air was full of sap and shot-torn leaves. Vines burst and snapped. Creepers spurted juice.

'What's happening?' Rerval yelled, firing on full auto.

Bad shadows, Kolea thought, *bad shadows*.

Something uncurled from the darkness to his left. A squiggle of malicious blackness.

It looked like—

Gol Kolea remembered. He *remembered*. The memory stabbed into his head like a warknife.

Tona's cabin. Dinner. Just a precious few nights before.

Yoncy. His baby girl Yoncy.

A drawing. He still had it in his pocket. It had shown an anguished, heartfelt black squiggle of chalk made by his child's hand. The squiggle had been ground into the paper. The chalk stick Yoncy had used had broken several times during the furious effort. There had been something desperate about the marks, as if the child had been trying to destroy the paper and erase an image so terrible that she hadn't wanted it to take form.

'I was going to draw more trees,' Yoncy had explained, 'but I picked up black instead of green by accident, and it made a bad shadow shape, and I didn't like it so I scribbled it out.'

He could hear her saying it.

Bad shadow.

Bad shadow.

Kolea pump-ejected a spent clip and slammed home a fresh one. He kept firing

at the bad shadow.

The picture had been done in coloured chalk. There had been spiky things, several figures, and two sickle shapes in what Gol had presumed was the sky. The sickle shapes had made no sense at the time. Now they did. Two moons. Two crescent ghost moons, just as he had seen them with Baskevyl. There had been something else, too, a triangle. A pyramid. The depot pyramid.

‘Are these trees?’ Gol had asked, pointing.

‘Yeah,’ Yoncy had agreed, eating her stew with relish.

There were trees every fething where around him.

‘Who’s this?’ Gol had asked, pointing to the figures.

‘That’s you, silly. You and Uncle Rerval and Uncle Bask and Uncle Luffrey.’ They were all present. All of them.

‘How can a shadow be bad?’ Kolea’s son Dalin had asked, at the table.

Yoncy had wiggled her hands and picked up her dolly.

‘A bit like a monster.’

She had leaned over on her seat and pointed at the drawing in Gol’s hands.

‘See? Look? You’re killing it. Those jaggy lines? Per-chew chew chew chew chew! You’re shooting it with your gun. Per-chew chew! I used yellow chalk.’

That might as well be all I have, Gol thought, and switched to full auto.

Beside him, Luffrey shuddered and dropped, eviscerated by a blade of shadow. Coils of pink, wet intestines squirted out of his belly onto the black mulch like paste from a tube.

‘Holy Feth!’ Gol cried.

His voice made no sound. He couldn’t hear himself.

The world had fallen silent. It had been muted.

It had frozen, hushed, in shadow.

In the sudden silence, Gol Kolea felt cold breath against his cheek.

‘Who are you?’ he whispered. ‘What are you?’

‘I am *here*,’ a voice replied. Each word sounded like a slow scrape of chalk on paper.

A black shadow prowled around him in the darkness, angular, impossible, anti-geometric.

‘What are you?’ Gol repeated, frantically.

‘I,’ the black shadow whispered, ‘am the Voice of Sek.’ Again, the awful dry scrape of broken chalk. The thing’s voice was impossibly loud, but Gol was sure only he could hear it.

‘Bring me the eagle stones,’ scraped the shadow, at his side and yet far away at

the same time, ‘or your child will perish.’

‘You bastard!’ Gol snarled. ‘Leave her alone!’

Something scratched in the darkness. A chuckle. A scribbled shadow circled him.

‘You think you can have your damaged mind healed by the touch of a weakling Imperial saint,’ the shadow scratched, ‘and not become, by the same process, a conduit for daemons?’

‘Get out of my head!’

‘Bring them to me!’ the voice dry-scraped.

‘I don’t know what you want from me!’ Gol declared. He could smell chalk dust.

‘You will, Gol Kolea. You will come to understand. Do it, or the bad shadow will fall upon you once more. I will fall upon you and your offspring.’

In the darkness, a black mouth open and smiled.

‘You bastard!’ Kolea yelled, and resumed firing.

XII

They had blown the undergrowth to pieces with their gunfire. Sap dripped from broken and torn shoots.

‘Cease fire,’ Kolea said.

They were all spent anyway.

‘What just happened?’ Baskevyl asked, looking at the two corpses tangled on the ground. One was gutted, the other had no head.

‘Luff!’ Rerval cried, falling to his knees beside his friend’s body. ‘Oh no! Oh fething feth! No!’

‘Abort this mission,’ said Kolea. ‘Abort it right *now*.’

XIII

The old lamps set into the walls of the *Highness Ser Armaduke*’s stark debrief room hummed and fizzled, their shades yellowed with age.

Ibram Gaunt scrolled through the data-slate again, and then set it down.

‘So, you aborted the mission, major?’ he asked.

‘I did, sir,’ Kolea replied, standing to attention in front of the metal table.

‘Do you consider that a prudent command choice, major?’ asked Commissar Hark, sitting at Gaunt’s left.

‘I do, sir,’ Gol replied. ‘It should have been routine, but two deaths. A thing—’

‘You describe it as a daemon, sir,’ said Shipmaster Spika, sitting at Gaunt’s right.

‘I know no other word for what I saw and sensed and felt, shipmaster,’ Gol replied. ‘It spoke. It killed. It had no form except shadow. We shot at it, with multiple barrages. It did not die.’

Silence. Gol felt he should add more.

‘Sirs,’ he said, ‘I appreciate with full concern our lack of munitions. I really do. We stand in a bit of a fix without resupply. Do not suppose for a moment that I would have aborted lightly. But in all good conscience, I could not continue. Lives were taken, and I supposed that more lives would have been taken if I had tried to continue.’

‘That is reasonable,’ said Hark.

‘One of yours, one of mine,’ Gaunt said to Spika. The shipmaster nodded.

‘Sir,’ Gol said to Spika. ‘If I could have in any way protected your man, I would have. It was so sudden. It came upon us so suddenly. Also, if I may say, I aborted because I did not dare risk bringing it back aboard with us.’

‘This thing,’ said Gaunt, ‘it said it was the Voice of Sek?’

‘Yes, sir.’

‘And it wanted something from you?’

‘Yes, sir.’

‘It wanted... what was it? Eagle stones?’ Gaunt asked.

‘Yes.’

‘What are they?’ asked Hark.

‘I have no idea, Commissar Hark, sir,’ said Gol Kolea.

‘Do we have any data on that?’ Gaunt asked Hark. ‘*Eagle stones?*’

‘Nothing, Ibram.’

‘Major Kolea,’ said Gaunt, ‘is there anything you’ve left out or omitted from your report?’

Gol paused. *Of course there is, he thought. The fact that it knew my name, and that I had children. The fact that everything matched Yoncy’s drawing. The fact that it called me a conduit for daemons. How can I tell you that? How can I tell you those things and not have you execute me where I stand? I cannot speak of them, because if I am dead, executed for heresy, who will protect my children?*

Or will you just execute them, too, or hand them to the Black Ships? Who will know enough to protect the Ghosts? I will deny this darkness, this shadow. I am strong. I am Gol Kolea. The Saint herself has touched me and blessed me. I will protect my family and the regiment from this. It will be my personal, private duty, and I will not fail.

‘No, sirs,’ Gol said.

Gaunt glanced at Hark. Hark nodded. Then Gaunt looked at Spika, who shook his head.

Gaunt looked up at Kolea.

‘Despite the parlous state of our operational supply levels,’ he said, ‘we support your decision. Given the circumstances, it was right to abort. Major Baskevyl has vouched for you, and we take that seriously. We also respect your command choices on the ground. No charges will be pending.’

‘Thank you, sirs,’ Kolea said.

‘You made the best decision, Gol,’ said Hark, ‘under terrible circumstances. We’re backing you. There will be no mark on your service record.’

‘I am gratified by your support, sirs,’ said Kolea.

‘Shipmaster?’ said Gaunt, turning to Spika. ‘Supply depot Aigor 991 is no longer viable. Have your gunnery officers annihilate the site, and process that information through Battlefleet channels.’

‘I will,’ said Spika.

‘Full batteries,’ Gaunt advised. ‘Burn that site.’

‘I’ll raze the whole damned landmass, sir,’ Spika replied. ‘For my man Arskil, if nothing else.’

‘He was a good man, shipmaster,’ Kolea said.

Spika paused. ‘Really? I always thought he was a bit of a pompous fool.’

‘I was just being respectful,’ said Gol.

‘And I should too, major,’ Spika said, rising. ‘The man’s dead. He was crew. I shouldn’t bad-mouth him.’

‘He died well, in the service of the God-Emperor,’ said Gol.

‘Did he?’ asked Spika.

‘No,’ sighed Gol. ‘He didn’t.’

‘He was slain by darkness,’ sighed Spika. ‘Pompous fool or not, he didn’t deserve that.’

‘Nobody deserves that,’ said Kolea.

‘Dismissed, major,’ said Hark.

Gol Kolea made the sign of the aquila, turned smartly, and left the cabin.

XIV

He was halfway down the companionway outside when he heard Gaunt call his name. Gol stopped and turned. Gaunt approached him.

‘Gol?’

‘Sir?’

‘Are you all right?’

‘It was a bad situation, sir,’ Gol said.

Gaunt put a hand on Gol’s shoulder. It was reassuring, but oddly uncomfortable. Gaunt seldom showed connection like this.

‘Gol,’ said Gaunt quietly. ‘Gol, we’ve been together for an age now. Since Vervunhive. I think you’re... You’re the most foursquare and dependable officer I have in my command.’

‘Sir—’

‘I mean it, Gol,’ said Gaunt. ‘I am blessed with fine company officers. Bask. Daur. Kolosim. Obel. Sloman. Elam. Shoggy. Rags. Theiss. Arcuda... Rawne.’

‘Even him, sir?’

Gaunt smiled.

‘Of course, even him,’ he said.

‘Of course.’

‘But you,’ said Gaunt, ‘you are the rock. The core. The foundation. You have, in a way, filled the void Corbec left. You are rooted. You are true. I depend on you more than I depend on any other company commander.’

‘I am honoured that you say that, sir,’ said Kolea.

‘So if you need me,’ said Gaunt, ‘if you want to talk to me, off the record. If there’s anything, anything at all, I need you to know that you can come to me with it.’

‘I appreciate your words, sir, very much,’ said Kolea.

‘Good,’ said Gaunt. ‘Gol, is there anything else about the circumstances of Aigor 991 that you want to tell me about? Man to man, not subordinate to commander? Just two men talking? Two friends?’

Gol Kolea thought about the drawing in his pocket. He wanted to take it out, unfold it, and show it to Gaunt, whom he loved and admired above all other men.

But the consequences. The *consequences*. To those he loved most. The inevitable outcome. The inevitable *Imperial* outcome.

‘No, sir,’ he said. ‘Thank you for your frankness, but no, sir.’

Gaunt nodded.

‘Sir,’ said Kolea. ‘May I enquire... where are we headed next?’

‘Urdesh,’ replied Gaunt. ‘The forge world.’

‘Urdesh,’ Kolea echoed. ‘Well, I look forward to serving you there, sir.’

Gaunt patted him on the arm, and nodded.

‘All right,’ he said. ‘Carry on.’

Gaunt turned and walked away.

Gol began walking towards the troop billets, his head down, a weight upon him that he wasn’t sure would ever lift. He had a battle ahead of him, and the battle wasn’t Urdesh.

In the patchy ghost light of the companionway’s glow-globes, he cast a bad shadow behind him.

Aaron Dembski-Bowden needs no introduction, but here's one anyway. His work simply always rocks. We're friends. We think the same way (god help us both). We are like-minded in our vision of the ol' grimdark. His contribution to the last anthology was nothing less than the death of Warmaster Slaydo. I guess I trust him enough to play with the toys.

Here, he does Blood Pact, in his own, distinctive fashion, and nails it. And this story falls right in the continuity groove. 782.M41. Between Salvation's Reach and The Warmaster...

Dan Abnett



ARNOGAUR

Aaron Dembski-Bowden

*Urdesh, Southern Continent, the Serechan Expanse,
the Foundry City 'Xavec', 782.M41
(the 27th Year of the Sabbat Worlds Crusade)*

I

The crew of the *Strygora* came for Erec while he was taking a piss. Tomorrow would be too late, for tomorrow was the battle – they needed him dead before dawn. It had to be tonight and it had to be unseen.

Reaching him in the heart of the encampment wasn't easy. Murder between crews was an act punishable by crucifixion, and they could hardly cut his throat and hope his body would go unfound. If killing him in the field had been an option, he'd have been dead for a year. Similarly, it would have aroused suspicion if they'd simply followed him through the camp of barbed wire and flakboard, only for him to show up dead mere hours later. They had to walk away from the deed as innocently as they'd walked into it.

Guards were everywhere. Guards with scruffy lasguns clutched to their chests, their eyes keen and untrusting. Guards who were only your brothers on the battlefield, and who were all too eager to string you up and let you hang if you violated the laws of the Pact.

To get to Erec, the crew of the *Strygora* had to wade their slow and sloshing way through the latrine trenches at the encampment's western edge, their boots and trousers soaked in the knee-deep filth. They carried ritual knives in hands marked with sacred scars, and hid their faces beneath grotesques of twisted brass. Thus prepared, they went hunting through the sluggish, semi-liquid waste of several thousand men, women and monsters.

They melted out of the darkness when they were sure Erec was most distracted, garrotting him with a wet bootstrap to keep him from crying out. The leather cord slid taut against his throat beneath the snarling bronze visage of his own grotesque, denying him any last words. His eyes widened, piggish and panicked, as slaughter came from the shadows.

The first knife slid home into his back, immediately severing his spine with a sensation of sick, icy pressure rather than the sharp kiss of pain. The second knife stuck in his belly at an awkward angle, a killing blow missed, before it began sawing its crooked way across his stomach. The first blade crippled him, the second disembowelled him. His attackers were carving him open even as they strangled him.

He sagged back into the clutches of his killers as the slick ropes of his innards tumbled out in a wet spill onto the boots of the men that had come to murder him.

Neither of the knives killed him. The crew of the *Strygora* held him in that murderous embrace, hissing with bent-toothed laughter in the dark, cooing softly into his masked face, letting him die a strangling death in their arms.

Once their prey ceased his futile struggling, they made ready to ruin his flesh forever. Their urgency was such that they couldn't just wait for decay – the meat had to be spoiled at once. Dead men did indeed tell tales, and the poetic verse that claimed otherwise was one of the galaxy's great lies.

They used their knives on Erec's lifeless eyes before casting his defiled corpse into the waste trench.

Satisfied that at least one dead man would tell no tales, the *Strygora*'s crew waded into the filth and slunk back the way they had come.

II

Erec's last journey was a slow and sedate one. He drifted along the vile, shallow

river for almost half an hour, face down in the filth, until he was finally dragged from the waste trench by the fumbling hands and crunching industrial claws of two desecrated servitors. The cyborged slaves hauled the carcass onto dry ground and pulsed a summons as soon as their rudimentary visual acuity made note of the scars on the body's hands. Their dull and scarcely sentient brains had been triggered by one of the only sins they were capable of recognising: Blood Pact had killed Blood Pact.

Nautakah Arnogaur was summoned.

III

Nautakah Arnogaur had sworn the Blood Pact four years before setting foot on this blighted, lost world. Like all of Urlock Gaur's warrior elite, he'd made the Pact by dragging his palm across the Archon's jagged armour plating, splitting his skin and leaving a smear of blood as both a promise and an offering.

Unlike most, however, he'd looked Gaur in the eyes while doing it. More than that, he'd looked down at the Archon. Despite his many gifts and blessings, Urlock Gaur, Overlord of the Blood Pact, was still human. Nautakah was not.

When he closed his eyes now he could see the treacly smear of his own blood across the Archon's breastplate. He would never forget the way his blood had glittered against the beaten bronze symbol cast upon the Overlord's armoured chest. Nor would he forget the chanting of the nearby Red Priests in their surplices like gore-splattered aprons, moaning in divine tongues that held no meaning to mortal minds. Some of the words sounded like Nagrakali, the tongue of his former brethren, but he found sense in only one word among every ten. If the language was related to Nagrakali, it had rotted on the vine and fallen far from its roots.

He could even summon the smell of that night to memory – the vascular, syrupy sweetness of fresh death and sacrificed life. It was the smell of a god's smile.

Nautakah was to be Arnogaur. One who swore the Pact, yet stood apart from its disciplined human legions. This fate had pleased him then, and it pleased him still.

'Blood,' Nautakah had promised the Archon, 'for the Blood God.'

IV

The Arnogaur looked down at the carcass, ignoring the stink that rose from Erec's riven remains. Other Blood Pact – true human Pacted soldiers – gathered around the towering figure and the corpse he watched over. These Nautakah dismissed with a curt gesture of an armoured hand, the motion setting the joints of his armour growling in a rough, mechanical purr. Like the other Blood Pact, his armour was a dark and dull red, coloured by bloodshed and battle as much as by mundane paint, encrusted with brass runes depicting the Blood God's vigilant stare. Yet where their wargear was mere metal bolted onto cloth in mimicry of the Imperial Guard, his was an enclosing suit of powered ceramite, first forged when the Imperium itself was young.

A newer sigil adorned his shoulder guard, showing the sacred world of Hagia cast in consecrated bronze, caught in a maw of closing ivory jaws.

The body of the dead officer showed the pitiful borders of human superstition, even among the Blood Pact. Its saturation in the waste trenches had soured its blood beyond use, that was true, while its eyes had been completely removed. Both acts echoed back to the tribal beliefs of the Sanguinary Worlds, where the Pact was first born in the wake of great omens and bleak, bloody prophecies. A man's blood carried the truth of his life from cradle to grave, and his eyes were windows that bore his last visions before death. So the tribes – and the murder-handed shamans that led them – believed. Such beliefs filtered through the modern Blood Pact even decades later.

Nautakah was not about to disabuse them of this quaint fallacy. Rather than work here where countless prying eyes might bear witness, he lifted the body by its stringy hair and hauled it over his shoulder. Foulness ran in insipid trickles down his armour, but his mind was elsewhere, focused on the task at hand.

The blood and eyes would have been meaningless even had they been spared from careful, bladed desecration. In private, he would draw the gladius strapped to his shin plating and scalp this poor fool.

All Nautakah Arnogaur needed was the brain.

V

Mere hours later, Xavec burned. Smoke from the manufactorum-city's corpse

plumed high into the sky, turning day to night for kilometres around the city limits. Every breath of air tasted of molten metal and scorched dust. Grit lined every tongue and tooth of those who fought within its boundaries, while skin and steel darkened in the greasy, clinging smog from the burning promethium processors.

When night fell, indistinguishable from the choked day, Urdeshi armoured companies still duelled with Blood Pact tank battalions in the city's rubble-strewn streets. The rattle of small arms fire cracked against impervious hulls. Grenades clanged and burst uselessly against sloping armour plating. Packs of desperate, scavenging Blood Pact troopers swarmed over Urdeshi vehicles and dragged their crews out to be gutted in the open. In payment, tech-priests from the falling forge spires commanded ranks of lobotomised minions at avenue junctions, incinerating the Gaur's armoured lines with cannonades of the ancient and profane Martian weaponry.

Nautakah paid very little heed to any of this. To the Arnogaur, the fall of a critical Mechanicus foundry-city and one of the costliest battles on the surface of Urdesh was a distant secondary concern. He moved through the ruins alone, axe in one hand and bolter in the other, hunting for the *Strygora*.

Bio-details played out across his left eye lens while crude auspex readings scrolled across his right. Both displays were layered with aimless target reticules struggling to find purchase in the endless dust. An aerial map of Xavec formed a square of useless static at the very edge of his vision, its feed cut off by the storm of dust rising from the streets like the city's own ghost.

Silhouettes charged him – brave silhouettes indeed – with bayonets turning their empty lasrifles into crude spears. They ran and stabbed and shouted about how the Emperor would protect them. Nautakah proved the error of that claim. His axe fell seven times, and seven Imperial Guardsmen added their lifeblood's flow to the rivers of red that ran beneath the foundations of the Skull Throne.

The last of them was the bravest of all: this Throne-loyal soul crawled along the paving stones despite his body having been cleaved in two at the waist. With a prayer on his dusty lips, he reached for his fallen pistol.

Such heroic nonsense, Nautakah thought, grinding the soldier's skull into wet shards beneath his boot.

Where the streets were clogged by hammering, bucking tanks raining shells upon each other, the Arnogaur weaved between their revving bodies and clambered over their hulls, distractedly slaughtering the Imperial commanders who had raised their heads to get a better view of the battle. He exhausted his

supply of grenades by dropping them into open hatches or fusing them to Imperial hulls as he passed by.

Always moving, always moving, listening to the scramble of vox chatter as he hunted.

Blood Pact channels were bare of the fevered ranting Imperial propaganda promised to its own cowardly herds; the voices passing back and forth over the Pact's secure channels were almost mechanical in their cold efficiency. Orders were delivered and acknowledged. Positions were relayed and clarified. Casualty figures came in infrequent spurts, always followed by mournful prayers and chanted hymns. Nautakah listened to several feeds at once, using the chorus of voices to triangulate his location in relation to the rest of the Archon's forces and piece together a picture of the wider battle.

The picture he pieced together was a curious one, for it told of a city damned to the grave rather than conquered for territory and materiel. Entire infantry and armour divisions were being spent in storm-swift advances through the most heavily defended districts rather than being deployed in typical, disciplined grinds. The spaceport's landing platforms were being annihilated, their foundations and support columns blown out from under them. No containment teams were moving to secure and soothe the burning fuel refineries. The opposite seemed to be true: the bodies of the fallen on both sides were being dragged back to feed the flames. The habitation-barracks and spire armouries weren't being besieged and claimed, they were being razed to the ground with no thought of all the Mechanicus secrets and valuable slave flesh being lost.

So be it. If the Archon wished Xavec to burn, then it would burn. Urdesh was a forge world. It had a hundred such cities. Nautakah's place as an Arnogaur burdened him with more divine concerns.

VI

'Hal-ur-Rakash,' the three priests chanted at his approach. 'Hal-ur-Rakash.'

Hal-ur-Rakash. It translated poorly into Gothic and Nagrakali alike, but the sentiment was clear enough even in the language of the blood-mad when coupled with the reverence in their eyes. Walker in Misery they called him, in preaching voices cracked hoarse by the dust.

The three priests, clad in sewn-together scraps of pale human leather and

butchers' aprons, presided over a soothsaying of their own devising. Dozens of Blood Pact menials and thralls – mutilated human slaves wretched past the point of Nautakah's consideration – tumbled the stripped bodies of Guardsmen off the edges of a gantry bridge reaching over a steaming valley of dark metal and belching smoke. The bridge was impressive in scale, a thing of black iron running for three kilometres over the city's central heat exchange chasm. Piles of Guardsmen would go over, dropping into the rising greasy steam, down and down and down into the coolant turbines and flame vents of the subterranean factories below.

The Blood Pact's gore mages watched the flares in the roaring fires, reading the future in the flames.

Nautakah was struck by the image and its echoes to older, no less sacred shamanism, when clans of the Sanguinary Worlds would feed the bodies of their slain warriors to the daemons that supposedly lived in the dark places of their primitive worlds. He'd witnessed such rites many times, though always as an outsider. His home world was far, far from the Sanguinary cluster. Far, in truth, from the Sabbat Worlds themselves.

'Hal-ur-Rakash,' the kneeling, praying priests greeted him as he drew near. 'Hal-ur-Rakash. Remain, we beg. Your presence invites the flames to burn all the brighter.'

He turned his helmed face down upon them, these stick-thin holy men praying to the spirits of blood and fire. The twin crests that marked his helmet were daemoniac horns in the occluding cloud of grit that had swallowed the whole city.

'I bear a divine mandate,' he replied. His voice was as low and rough as tank treads slurring over broken rocks.

That set one of the priests into a wheeze of ugly laughter, pressing his grimy hands to his scar-branded face.

'Vanity and lies and self-exaltation! The God of War cares not from whence the blood flows!'

'That may be so,' Nautakah allowed, 'but the Archon cares a great deal.'

With those words he crossed the bridge, leaving the deaconry of the naked dead to their fire games.

VII

The *Strygora* thundered along the broken road, grinding the shattered rockcrete surface flat beneath its treads. There was something bestial in its advance, something implacable and alive about the way it bulled through the manned barricades lying in its path. Incidental shots from lasguns sang their useless, scorching song against its armour plating, ignored by the battle tank and those guiding its wrath.

Once she had been the Punisher-class Leman Russ battle tank *Daughter of Sabbath*, and before that she'd carried the forty-eight-digit serial code denoting her home forge and date of creation. Her weapons of old had degraded over time, with the Gatling cannon being pulled from the turret housing and replaced by brutal, booming autocannons once the crew could no longer scavenge enough ammunition to make her original loadout worthwhile. The three lascannons had suffered the same fate, eventually discharged by corrupt power generators that failed all attempts at retrofitting by Blood Pact technicians. She'd lost range but none of her lethality, with each of the three lascannons replaced by heavy flamers bound to great, stinking copper tanks sloshing promethium.

A single unlucky shot through her hull could ignite the whole crew in liquid flame, so they'd bolstered her already dense armour with layered plating stripped from half a dozen other Blood Pact vehicles over the last few years.

Her crew was cradled in the stifling womb-heat of her god-blessed hull. Sweat ran down their tattooed faces in diamond trails, looking more like tears as they trickled along the iron of their hook-nosed, snarling grotesques.

In the cramped confines of the tank's turret, Kereth and Maugr worked in unison – the former loading heavy shells with his Pact-marked hands, the latter with his face pressed to the gunnery sight for so long his back had adopted a permanent bend. Maugr licked the insides of his grotesque as he stared into the distorted blue tracking display, closing both of his hands around the jury-rigged handles on the gunner's periscope when he deemed the time was right.

'Brace,' he called down into the crew compartment. Next to him, Kereth slammed his gloved hands to the turret's sides, holding tight. *Strygora's* stabilisers were shot to absolute shit. Been that way for over a month now, since the fight at Forge Theria. Bloody technicians.

Strygora kicked all around them, bucking back and lifting half a metre off her front treads as both ill-fitted autocannons boomed.

'Reload,' Maugr called. 'Jashan, bring us down to half-speed once we clear the next junction. They're falling back in a feint.'

Kereth moved at once: hauling, lifting, sliding the next shells home. Below

them both, Jashan steered *Strygora* with his control columns, blinking sweat from his greasy, thinning hair out of his eyes. Manoeuvring in the dust was as much luck as judgement – the Blood Pact tanks advancing through the district slammed into one another with skull-rattling frequency in the narrower streets.

Somewhere above them, a horn shook the sky with its bland industrial whine. They felt it shivering through the hull plating and it brought a chill to their sticky flesh.

Titan.

Maugr dragged his grotesque off and strapped a rebreather over a mouth full of diseased teeth. Within three seconds of the horn's cry he was up and out of the hatch, straining to see through the dust.

Around him were the squat, stepped pyramids of Xavec's foundries, the hollow hulls of slain tanks, and...

...there.

The god-machine came out of the dust in an ungainly stride, straight-backed and ignoring the souls beneath its iron tread. The ground shook with its steps, but the loudest sign of its passing was the steel-stressed whine of protest, its huge metal joints crying out across the district. What little illumination managed to pierce the dust cloud finally died as the Titan eclipsed the anaemic moonlight.

Maugr ducked back inside and slammed the hatch closed.

'One of ours,' he called down. He didn't know if that was true – their scanners were dead and the dust was too thick to make out any details, but the fact the Warlord hadn't hammered them into oblivion with its immense cannons lent credence to the possibility.

The entire tank rattled as the Titan stepped over them, its foot driving into the rockcrete avenue with a crash of shattering stone. Each footstep made another crater for the Blood Pact's armour to drive over or around.

Orders came, crackled and delayed by flawed vox, for the column to hold position while the Titan passed. Maugr relayed it, shouting below.

All of *Strygora*'s boys had taken the Pact together last year, slicing open the knuckles of their right hands on Archon Gaur's ancient armour. All of them had come from the Guard, defecting with the other survivors of the Barakan 12th Armoured. On that day, *Daughter of Sabbath* became *Strygora*, and her hull was streaked red with bloody palm prints, marking her as one of the Gaur's loyal children.

Only Erec hadn't been Guard. No, Erec – their new sirdar appointed to keep them in line – had liked to remind them that he was 'pure' Blood Pact, born to

the tribes behind it all, spending his childhood skinning animals and worshipping blood, fire, the sun... and the War God alone knew what else. Erec, who'd never hesitated to break bones or lash bare throats with his leather flail when his 'mongrel crew' didn't follow orders fast enough. Erec, their noble sirdar, who'd crippled Ferlmann with a construction hammer and had him surgically attached to his flamer cradle down there in the crew compartment. The rest of them helped Ferlmann as best they could, but the poor legless bastard was starting to rot in his harness, his flesh lousy with sickness rashes and bedsores, getting infected worse and worse over time. His hands were practically fused to the handles of his flamer.

Poor dead Erec, floating face down in the muck where he belonged.

'It's gone,' Maugr called out as he stared down the static-ruined gunsight. 'The others are moving--'

His declaration was interrupted by a resonant clang of metal on metal, coming from the roof and sending shivers through the hull. For one cold-blooded moment, Maugr thought a smaller Titan – a Warhound, maybe – had given them a little love-tap as it passed by.

That's when a polite knocking sounded from the hatch above.

Maugr drew his pistol and checked his grotesque was back in place. His gloved hand had just brushed the release handle when the hatch cover tore free of its corroding hinges, letting the dust and darkness spill into the tank's interior.

A figure in immense ceramite armour marked with the brazen holy sigils of the God of War stared down with slanted emerald eye lenses, and reached in to curl its armoured fingers around Maugr's throat.

Kicking and thrashing, unable to breathe, the crewman looked into the barbarous, toothed faceplate of Nautakah Arnogaur's crested helm.

'Blood Pact,' the fallen Space Marine snarled in calm, vicious politeness, 'do not kill Blood Pact.'

VIII

The pain engine buried in the back of his brain thrummed now that he had his prey in his clutches. He could feel the nails biting deep, sending their tendrils of poison electricity into the meat of his mind. Revolting pleasure flooded him, pulling at the strings of his nervous system with practiced fingers.

The man in his grip fought and kicked, childlike in his helplessness. Nautakah had no time for such futility.

‘You heard me,’ he said, as politely urbane as before. By now he was well skilled at keeping the thrills of neurochemical rapture from affecting his speech. ‘Now answer the accusation.’

Generously, he loosened his grip on the human’s throat in order to facilitate this battlefield trial.

‘I am Blood Pact!’ the soldier gasped. ‘For the Archon! For Gaur!’

How disappointing, thought Nautakah. Hours of hunting, ending with such uninspired and patently false promises.

‘Words,’ Nautakah replied. ‘Words from behind a mask you do not deserve to wear.’ He ripped the grotesque from Maugr’s face, hearing the leathery snap-rip of tearing flesh with it. The strap hadn’t broken on one side, and it had torn one of the human’s ears from the side of his head.

Well. No matter. Nautakah hurled the screaming man from the top of the tank, sending him to the broken earth of the rockcrete avenue in a bone-cracking, lifeless tumble.

The Arnogaur aimed his pistol into the tank’s hatch, at the stinking dregs of humanity cowering in its sweaty confines. The salt-smell of soiled clothing and unwashed flesh rose almost thick enough to be a fog.

‘Reverse,’ Nautakah ordered. ‘Drive over your brother’s body.’

‘My lo—’

The bolt pistol kicked, driving a shell home into the driver’s spine and blowing the man apart with a boom loud enough to shatter the survivors’ eardrums.

Viscera and human meat painted every inch of the tank’s insides, dripping in a trickling rain from the roof. What remained of the driver, which was precious little of anything above the waist, slid from the control throne with the slumping thump of wet flesh.

For Nautakah, it was like looking down into the guts of some great beast.

‘Drive over your brother’s body,’ he ordered the others once more. He doubted they could hear his words – their ears were already beginning to bleed after the bolt shell detonated in such close confines – but he suspected his meaning was clear.

One loader clambered down the ladder, sinking with a cringe into the gore-wet driver’s throne. The tank gave several unhealthy chokes as its gears dragged on a stalled clutch.

‘You are boring me,’ Nautakah warned them. The tank moved, reversing in a

stuttering shunt, rolling over Maugr's corpse and turning it to red paste along the left track.

The four surviving soldiers – one of them was crippled and surgically bound to his gun-station, Nautakah noted with vague disinterest – looked up with wide, defiant eyes. They weren't without courage, and they were to be commended for that, and none were foolish enough to draw their side arms.

'Choose one of you,' he ordered them, holstering his bolt pistol and revving his chainaxe.

Perhaps the loader was the only one capable of hearing the order, or perhaps he was the only one with the backbone to sacrifice himself for the good of his brethren. Whatever the truth, it was he who climbed the crew ladder to his execution.

Nautakah offered him a hand to help him up. He was considerate like that.

'I will take your skull back to Overlord Gaur. The others may go with the Blood God's graces to whatever afterlife awaits them in Khorne's realm. In a moment, I will leave their bodies burning in the stinking tank beneath our boots. It will make for an apt funeral pyre. But for your courage, you will be the memoriam of your traitorous crew.'

The World Eater delivered his judgement with a politeness that knew no limit, then added, 'This is an honour, albeit not a grand one or one you will have a chance to enjoy. But it is an honour nevertheless. Try to remember that when the axe falls.'

'But we—'

'I tasted the brain matter of your dead sirdar and saw the flickers of his life in the meat you tried to spoil. More importantly, I saw how his life ended. You were there, Kereth. So was Maugr, and so were the others. He looked into all of your eyes as you killed him, so spare me any denials. Let this be a lesson, little man. Blood Pact do not kill Blood Pact.'

'You... You're Blood Pact,' said Kereth. 'You. Me. We're both Blood Pact.'

'I am the exception that proves our Archon's laws,' Nautakah smiled, though his iron teeth were hidden behind his faceplate. His chainaxe whined, singing its jagged song. 'I am Arnogaur.'

There now follow three stories set in the past. The first is monumental. I adore Matt Farrer's writing, and believe that he is one of the unsung kings of Black Library fiction. And more than that, SF fiction as a whole. Matt's based down in Canberra, and I count him as a true friend.

Matt constructs deep, complex, intense narratives. Which is why we love him. This story (actually, novella) is almost overwhelming with its scale and size. In a good way. Matt wrote a great story for the first anthology. It came in right before the wire. I said, 'Matt, where's your story?' He replied, 'I started writing it but it turned into something else. A prequel to the story I intended to write. So I scrapped it, and now I haven't got time to write the one I wanted to.'

Believing it was possibly a case of 'the dog ate my homework', I told him to send the 'scrapped' story to me anyway. Five minutes later, it arrived. And it was brilliant.

This novella is the sequel to that, and it's the story he originally meant to tell. His chosen subject is the Adeptus Mechanicus, mopping up the battlefield wrecks behind the forward line of the Crusade, and encountering the monstrous 'woe machines' of the Archenemy warlord and genius Heritor Asphodel. Exactly how do you deal with artefacts so appalling?

Lose yourselves in the immensity of this. This is the only story in this collection that I strongly urge you to go back and read the prequel in Sabbath Worlds again, as an appetiser. It's that good. It's that epic. And it's a novella.

Matt will amaze you.

Dan Abnett



THE INHERITOR KING

Matthew Farrer

I

‘Are you looking forward to seeing the graveyard?’ the scrapwit Runer had asked, and it had taken Mhorock Tobin an effort to keep the string of expletives off his lips. He had simply sat and stared at the brightly-coloured threads of readout, unable to decide if the question even deserved to be dignified with an acknowledgement, and after a few moments the man had wandered off out of the bridge without further word. His ugly little porter hadn’t been in attendance. Maybe that was what had made him say even stupider things than usual.

This was where he had come to. This was his life now. These were the sorts of people he had to travel with. This was the sort of insult that littered his days.

‘Master of the *Ramosh Incalculat*,’ he had used to murmur to himself over loopback audio, back when things had just started to go wrong. He had been trying to remind himself that he was still a man of substance and rank, the anointed master of a great Adeptus Mechanicus craft. There wasn’t much consolation in that any more.

He knew what everyone called his ship now. He had banned the nickname on board but he was sure even his own crew had adopted it. It was why the question had been such a foul insult, a spit in his face. Deliberate humiliation or unbelievably crass stupidity? Tobin couldn’t work out which was the least offensive explanation.

The Headstone. That was what they called his ship. Headstone. An inert thing, a crude thing, whose only function was to show the ending-place of something that had once been alive.

The worst part about the nickname was that, even to Shipmaster Mhorock Tobin, it made perfect sense.

Battered, gutted and old, the *Ramosh Incalculat*e was no longer a proud ship of war, carrying Titan Legions to the field in their giant armament silos. It had been deconsecrated by a coven of Legion magi, removed from the rolls of main-line fighting craft, refitted with an arkosect bay to collect and break down the remains of salvaged engines of war. Tobin had tried to console himself with that. It was no trivial office, caring for the Machine-God's fallen idols in the last of their existence, but it only diluted the bitterness, it did not dispel it.

He had been so proud to command the *Ramosh Incalculat*e to war. And now he sat at the bridge of a giant, mobile corpse marker.

He looked down through his scopes, filled his vision with the feed from the lower optics to see the view beneath him on the surface of Ashek II.

His orders had been to park his Headstone over a graveyard.

Tobin supposed that someone, somewhere, thought that was funny.

II

The Headstone was hanging over her, and it was getting on her nerves. The thing was too high up to be visible from the ground, to the naked eye or to Ajji's not terribly specialised optics, but it was oppressively obvious to her finer, higher senses.

Ajji, tech-priest and transmechanic and up to now one of the two most senior Mechanicus personnel at the Chillbreak Delta graveyard, sat motionless in the dark. She was cradled in support webbing, tucked into an anchor-shrine so tiny that her broad shoulders almost touched its walls. Her organic eye was closed, her two mechanical eyes shuttered, her arms – slender, slightly atrophied organic arms fitted with engraved titanium augmetic sleeves – half-extended and her hands linked in one of the intricate devotional forms of her cult.

There was silence around her in her physical cocoon, but that was the least important of the environments she was watching. Around her in her machine-senses the graveyard's manifold was as full of quiet, rustling activity as a forest

glade. The great transception antenna atop the shrine ziggurat rumbled like a bonfire and shone like a lighthouse; against it the repeater nodes arranged through the graveyard glowed like lanterns and the alarm stations around the perimeter were hot little candles.

She watched the hubs of movement around the guard stations and the overseer huts as the shifts changed, and the processions out through the workers' gates as the cutting crews shuffled out of the graveyard and back towards the Missionaria Galaxia prisoner compound over the ridgeline. One by one the confirmations came in: the right numbers of prisoners had been counted out, all casualties of the day's accidents accounted for. The handful of skitarii roaming the alleys between the piles of war-scrap signalled their shift to shoot-on-sight order paradigms, and the sentries at the main gate signalled an escalated alert level at the approach of the ground crawlers that were bringing in the Adeptus delegation.

That set Ajji's teeth on edge all over again. Finicky, prying little walking interferences, all of them, the Missionaria meddlers, the Sisterhood, the scrapwitted Administratum assessors. She had heard that they had been besieging the alpha-shrine that the Mechanicus had begun to build in the ruins of High Hive with petitions and requests and demands, as though they had some right to a say in the business, as though the reclamation of Ashek II were being done for them. She had felt wryly sorry for her peers up north having to deal with it all, but her amusement had evaporated as she had watched the Adeptus compound grow up around the internment camp where the graveyard's labour-force of Asheki conscripts went to sleep. That rubbish wasn't supposed to have spread down here.

And here they came through the gates, a formal reception, spirits of Mars preserve us, here to see the machine priest.

That was what the idiots called him, no matter how many times the Mechanicus had used his title of *Magos Parallact* in their communiqués. Somehow that Low Gothic title had got stuck in their heads and couldn't be winkled out.

Let them have each other, Ajji thought sourly. Maybe they'll keep each other busy and out of the way of those of us with actual jobs to do. Months more work, maybe years, just to strip down those battle-line machines, before we start in on the Hammerstone Kings. Let them jabber away about whatever they want to talk about, them and that walking mass of fancy airs who rode in on that flying headstone.

To her own irritation, she spared a moment's distracted attention to look up through the auspexes at the Headstone, the giant block of machinery hanging in its own distant haze of data manifold high in the sky. And then looked inward to yet another transmechanical link, one so tightly encrypted and smoothly engineered she could not have cracked it open to listen even if she had wanted to risk doing so. It was the link that bound their guest, Tey, the Magos Parallact, to the plodding little servitor that followed him nearly everywhere, a tiny two-station manifold that reflected every engagement by her own systems back on themselves.

The magos was sitting in the tiny seclusion-cell they had arranged for him, just below the ziggurat's peak. The miniature manifold he shared with his retainer creature was still and quiet, uncommunicative as he'd been ever since he had shuttled down from the Headstone. God of Mars alone knew what he was doing. Ajji hoped he was preparing himself for the audience with the Adeptus delegation when they arrived. The last thing she and Enginseer Daprokk needed was for this outsider to embarrass them and make their work harder than it was.

She caught her line of thought and tried to steer it a little. She did not like to think of herself as so vulnerable to irritation, so disrespectful of what was, after all, a higher office than her own. She just wanted the work to go on, she told herself. Orderly and controlled. Was that too much to ask?

With one more virtual glance at the little manifold loop in the magos's cell, she sighed and went on with her duties.

III

By day, the burning had been ugly, but by night it was exquisite, horrifying art. The clusters of sky-skewering metal spires, wrapped in a fuzz of black against the white sky, became towers of soft, sombre red light when the sunlight went away, waxing and waning as the winds of the burning thickened or thinned the smoke clouds. The fat domes packed around the spire bases, wearing their own coronets of towers, sweated smoke from their crumpled sides until nightfall, and then lit the cracked tundra with orange-white fire for kilometres around.

Every dome and bulge of the hive city burned its own way. Some, whose outer skins had been breached and split by the bombardments, showed veins of throbbing light winding across the black, cracks in their shells with the furnace

still blasting inside. Some places bore great incandescent wounds: glowing volcano-mouths in the tops of the domes where the lances of the orbiting warships had gouged through the hive's void shields; breaches in the sides, glaring like open kiln doors, where the Legios had closed in to demolish a hardpoint, or to tear open an entry for the waves of Guard.

The size of it. The breath-stealing size of it. The mind-blanking, thought-emptying size of it. The fires made ripples and shivers across the shells of the hive, made shimmying flame spouts climbing upwards, made avalanches of red-hot metal where the furnace finally broke the structure's cohesion and sent pieces of it sliding and crashing down in more shouts and billows of flame. And the fire spouts were monstrous, broader than a Titan's shoulders, and the avalanches were like wrath beyond any mortal wrath, each one tearing away layers of metal that had held thousands of human lives up here in the sky and scattering them down, down into the red-orange-white roil where every shift and swirl of fire was broad enough to sweep a city into nothing.

Sands of Mars, who could shape words when confronted with this? Was there anywhere in this galaxy a disciple of the Machine who'd attained clear enough thought to remain unmoved by this? Humans were not made to behold this. This was what the war had done. It had taken these cities of billions and turned them into hell.

Burning ladders to hell.

Tey had seen that phrase flagged as a context referent when he was first mind-mapping the Ashek II inload and had made peripheral note of it, routing it off to a third-order data-harmonic routine that Barrel had been looking after for him. It had come back to him after they'd broken warp at the system's edge. Once back in real space he had resumed his habit of inloading lower-order information and letting it sit in his system while his organics ran several hours of REM sleep. He had awoken early, while his machine cortex was still engaged on the personal-maintenance cycle. He had popped into perfectly clear consciousness, into the clicks and whirrs of his hands stripping and checking his leg augmetics, and surprised himself by saying the words aloud.

Burning ladders to hell. He'd come across the term several times as he had made his way into the Sabbat Worlds, in the more poetic of the despatches and propaganda pieces that had come back from the front, but he hadn't realised it had been coined here. A Guard officer, apparently, watching the pyre that had been Ashek II's High Hive.

A hive tower shuddered and slumped, and part of its buttress collar cracked

away and came down through the roasting air like a fat, slow comet. Where it impacted the tapering dome beside it, it released a fresh, roaring combustion that flowered up, up, fading down into dirty red as the superheated winds ripped it apart. That fire-flower would have been tall and broad enough to swallow twice over the hab-spike Tey had lived in on Pirye. Insanity.

But hypnotic insanity. The air-crew that had flown around the pyre to capture these images had all been volunteers, combat-seasoned, not native to Ashek. But Tey had internalised the crew records with the rest of the data and knew the effect it had had on them. They had come back mute, slow in their movements, too full of the experience and with no way to release it. The commander had been flogged for insolence when he had been called in for a report and had stood in front of his superiors, unable to speak. One pilot had drunk himself to death, and one of the pict-operators had tried to. And one of the navigators, barely speaking above a whisper, had asked for a relief posting to the Grinds, slipped away from camp on her third night there, and walked away across the hotstone flats in nothing but her camp fatigues, to let the radiation finish her. That wasn't a death that Galhoulin Tey would have wished on anyone, for all that she had apparently wished it on herself.

A blip in the recording: the colour in the pict flow blanched a little, and the edges of the flames became grainy for a moment. That gave Tey the little push he needed to break the reverie. 'The wheel, turning, carries,' he murmured, to try and bring himself some composure, and withdrew. The fire of High Hive acquired a black border, became a miniature of itself, and took its place in the great mosaic unfurled across Tey's inner vision. Data-tiles hung in their thousands, arrayed in multiple dimensions through the purple-black of Tey's personal memory cathedral, awaiting his command.

The tile showing the burning hive found its proper place in the array, put out silver-white spines and silently connected itself to its neighbours. The first things it touched were the orbital scans of the hive ruins as they were now, a blackened scrawl in three dimensions, an ashy whisper of what had been. Behind and above on a leftward oblique, it connected to combat vid from the final assault after the order to burn the hives. Tey had watched that too, twice. The blazing false day of the lance strikes, the wave of static as the High Hive void shields blew out. The curt streaks of light from the Titans' missile sheaths, so quick, so anticlimactic as they punctured the hive at precise points. And the terrible light starting to build up inside, as the hyperincendiary warheads detonated and the burning began.

Activated by his scrutiny, the cluster of tiles started to rotate and rearrange

itself, extruding more information. One offered up the text of the communiqués to the Legio Tempesta from Marshal Blackwood, conveying Warmaster Slaydo's assent to the immolation that had returned Ashek II to the Imperium at such diabolical cost. Another provided a window into the datastack with the initial calculations of that cost, Administratum figures measuring the damage to the system's tithing status and the logistical might the Imperium would have to expend to rebuild from the rubble. Another anchored a chronological thread of despatches, tactical breakdowns and schema-flows showing the path the Heritor had taken to escape Ashek II and flee the system.

Tey let his attention rest on that name for a moment. Responding, the tiles and threads rearranged themselves again.

Asphodel. The name sat at the centre of a whirl of links, data-lodes and referential concordances. Stacked yellow runes led to the Heritor's Munitorum dossier, or at least as much of it as they had made available to the order of the Machine. The Guard command had been more generous with its data than was customary, and Tey had supplemented what had been officially provided through some private techniques of his own. He supposed there was more the Munitorum hadn't revealed about the man, though. There usually was.

That musing triggered more responses from his deeper mind, and a softly glowing pink tag took position in his upper peripheral vision. Branching away behind it were data-paths he might care to pursue from his current train of thought: the current diplomatic agreements on information sharing between the Munitorum and the Mechanicus, background inloads on the memoranda of understanding that laid those agreements out, biographical details on the representatives of both sides who'd signed those memoranda, a sub-seam that promised details of other formal understandings reached between the two organisations, histories of clashes, of words or arms or both, where those understandings had broken down, comparative diplomatic histories with other arms of the Adeptus Terra in turn, theoretical treatises on the legal underpinnings of the Mechanicus's membership of the Adeptus, any and all of these branching out and branching out again in turn in whichever direction he cared to turn his attention.

He focused back on the Heritor's escape, and the pink tag faded down to grey and retreated from him. Now in front of him was a pict of the *Crow-Hand*, the monstrous spread-eagled creation the Heritor had ridden in from system to system. This was the triumphal image the battlefleet had selected as the header to its own Ashek dossier, Asphodel's flagship reeling and listing under Imperial

barrage, one of the last great victories in the reconquest. Its wounds bled plasma from its reactors, frozen air from its compartments, trails of debris from its disintegrating hull.

Ghosted in over the image was a tag leading to a spinning magenta rune denoting a classified data element. The intelligence had been firming by the week, and Tey thought it would not be long before it was verified. Asphodel had not gone down with his fortress. He hadn't been aboard the *Crow-Hand* when it had finally shuddered apart under atmospheric entry and turned into hot metal meteor-rain over Ashek II's south pole. He had slipped away from them somehow, left his grotesque orbital fortress and his great graveyard of woe machines behind.

(‘Are you looking forward to seeing the graveyard?’ Tey had asked Shipmaster Tobin, and the man's reaction had been so strange that Tey had filed it away and kept it to analyse later, to see if he had made some sort of misstep. It would be inconvenient if discussion of the graveyard were a matter of some sort of sensitivity. After all, the graveyard was the reason they were here.)

His data began moving again, a cluster of amber tags swimming up to prominence, orbited by sparkling priority runes and Mechanicus classification seals. The core inloads for his mission here, the associative threads pre-formed, tightly braided into one another. It was meant to push his deliberations in certain directions, keep his thoughts pruned to what Archmagos Gurzell thought were the most productive tracks. Tey hated that, although after so many assignments the sentiment had abraded away to a tired, gnawing irritation. He'd worked with worse.

(‘Are you looking forward to seeing the graveyard?’ he had asked. The little scrap of recording from his own internal logs flitted through the flow and weave of information like the lone orphan at a dance, like a silkfly skittering from blossom to blossom looking for just the right bloom to attach to. Its passage left connection tags gleaming like silver dust on the other files it brushed against: Shipmaster Tobin's personal dossiers, sealed and warded data-vaults on the woe machines, and other, more esoteric cross-references that chanced to mention graveyards or record strange conversational tics, directed by matching and testing algorithms operating so deep in Tey's mind that he was not conscious of them running at all.)

The leading tiles whirled and settled into an undulating ridge like a sine-wave series, arranging themselves into a history of the Ashek engine war and then mobbing about as cross-references and tangents laced files together and then

released them again. Now the burning of the High Hive anchored one end of the wave, the post-reclamation records making a gauzy flicker beyond it. The latter curve of the wave was made of a string of bronze and ruby icons showing the arrival of the Legio Tempesta and their engagements with Asphodel's forces. Back along the crest was the string of Imperial defeats as the Asheki fifth columnists had declared open war, burned the southern hives and come north over the hotstone plains. Those markers glowed bilious green for Imperial defeat, but in the middle of them hung a bright white rune so hung about with cross-referent paths that it seemed to explode when Tey turned his attention to it. It was the marker for the Battle of Chillbreak Delta, where the Heritor's machines had made their first serious breach in the Imperial fortification line, and where the Legio counter-attack a year later had finally turned the Archenemy's retreat into rout.

Chillbreak Delta. The graveyard of the Hammerstone Kings.

IV

The command bridge was torn and blasted open to the evening air, but the codecaster console was intact. She gritted her teeth together against the pain from the las-scorch across her calf and kept working, hands moving back and forth over her code-key and power unit, checking the connections by touch. Checking, and checking again. The margin for error was zero. In minutes she might be dead; within the hour it was a certainty. There was no guessing how much of that time she might have to spend fighting the aquila-kissing scoundrels just to make sure her little machine stayed running. The connections had to be—

Her breathing hitched as the code-key lit up green. Kovind had been right, the Blighting King's brain was still operational. It was reading the code, breeding it, unpacking and speaking to it. The green glow of the code-key began to mix with blue, and the double-coloured light gleamed in her eyes and teeth as she grinned. It was going to work. The Kings were talking.

V

The Hammerstone Kings.

When Tey spent a moment dwelling on the term, his data dissolved again and re-crystallised around the history of the name, making a shape like a long spiral seashell with shivers of data coming out of its folds like smoke.

Hammerstones was the Asheki word for the great mesa-islands that rose up out of the shifting silt deserts. Stable rock, fixed like an anvil you could bring a hammer down on. The mightiest of the Asheki forge-hives had all been built on hammerstone foundations, making a chain across the treacherous expanses of soft dry silt and radioactive hotstone dust. They were the capital hives for the great Imperial families, the homes of prestigious Mechanicus temples, hubs for Ashek's mighty forges. The hammerstones were the heart of Ashek II's intricate castes of machine-smiths and lay tech-adepts, and the fortified backbone of its defences against the Archenemy when the Sabbat Worlds had sunk into war.

Then the war came home to Ashek, and the Heritor Asphodel had built his four great Kings to break the hammerstone fortresses and make them his own.

A tile merged with another tile and the double-thick icon spun, rushed forward and suddenly Tey was jolting through the shallow gullies around Pitroost. He knew, because the ancillary data layer had instantly fed the context into his mind, that the Pitroost mesa and its blocky hive would be behind him if he turned to look, but he could not. He could see what the pict recorder on the transport had seen, nothing else.

It was after sunset, and twilight washed up from the western horizon. It mirrored the swarming points of light that crawled across the dim desert floor, and silhouetted the grotesquerie that loomed over them, glowering down upon its children. The Poison King, the first of the mega-engines to move north from Asphodel's warworks. The wide round base was lost in the evening gloom, but the rest of the tower defaced the sunset with its sharp black outline, speckled with red and purple running lanterns and slender stablight beams waving to and fro. It tapered slightly towards the bulbous top where its cannon batteries and storm-gantries were housed – the proportions put Tey in mind of a forearm and hand, the fist gripping a grenade.

(That musing brought a whisper of cross-filed data, anatomical illustrations, armoury specifications, artworks and religious icons composed around a fist held aloft, but Tey did not shift his attention to them and after a moment where his subcognitive processes found no stronger correlations the crossfiles slid back down out of Tey's active mind.)

A ripple of yellow-orange light flared across the front of the Poison King's upper face, as if the wind had gusted across a dying ember for a moment and

brought brief life to it. Each of those tiny glow-specks had been the firing-flash of one of the monstrous cannons Asphodel had designed especially to crown his first Hammerstone King. The pict-cam on the Guard transport hadn't been good enough to see the shells as they arced through the air towards Pitroost's walls, but his analytics knew the King's capabilities and sketched in likely trajectories that curved elegantly across and vanished off the left side of the recording. A moment later the picture fuzzed and jumped, as Pitroost's void shields discharged the impacts and the energy shunt leaked into the electromagnetic spectrum.

A moment after it cleared the field of vision swerved as the transport turned to try and intercept an oncoming line of vehicles, the fast little fortification-busters that had become known as Nadzybar's Fists. The turn carried the Poison King out of view, and Tey let the image go, shooing away a data-map of the fall of Pitroost before it could unfold. The footage had been recovered from the scattered wreck of the transport. The crew had never been found.

Tey was adrift in whirling data-tags again. He lingered for a split second on another image of the Poison King, a still pict from late in the siege of Ironhome where the King had come close enough to extend its gantries, gripping the side of the hive and cutting and drilling it open for the storm-crews to rush in. Ironhome had got off lightly. In its later battles the Poison King had simply belched toxic dust from its own internal forges into hive-breaches, killing the defenders and rendering tens of thousands of homes and street-halls tainted and sterile. Tey wondered if that had been at Asphodel's orders, or whether it was the thought of the King's own commander, whoever that had been.

But the Poison King's improvised toxic arsenal had been primitive compared to its brother-machine. Tey pulled the name of the Blighting King forward and centre and watched the chains of data loop and reform.

Here was the Blighting King at the Ruinous Sixty-Twelve, a simple map reference for a point in the silt flats that had become infamous when the King had arrived to take its first harvest of Imperial lives. Its collar of rocket-tubes had been loaded with a foul mix of warheads: shrapnel bursts to shred the Guardsmen's chem-hoods, blister agents to peel their skin, asphyxiants to wreck their breathing. The gas had settled into the valleys between the silt dunes... and when the Guard had begun to fall back and scramble away from the lethal fogs the Blighting King had ploughed up the desert with hyperbaric explosions that churned the poisons back into the air, now mixed with choking clouds of fine dust.

The Ruinous Sixty-Twelve fit Asphodel's profile to the last detail. The Heritor did not just build war machines to fight. He built them for theatre. Built them for – Tey hated to use the word – grandeur.

Tey pondered that, his thoughts full of sour distaste as the life of the Blighting King paraded past. Its horrific advance up to Ashek Secunda's north-west coasts was well documented. The Guard command had assembled as much visual data as they could as they grew more and more desperate to stop it, and the images flickered and layered around him now. The King turning the oases at Sainthaven to mud and steam with barrages of incendiaries. The King lowering its heavy armoured head like a bull about to charge, the rail-catapult that ran up the long slope of its back flashing as it launched Blight-Ball hardpoints and Helltalon fighter craft. The King facing off against Princeps Oskhai at the Eighth Conurbation after the Titan Legions had finally come to Ashek's deliverance. Its bulk heaving as it manoeuvred through towers of black smoke, its back fractured, the Fidelian Squadron Reavers prowling around it looking to close, like skitarii stalking a wounded tank.

Under scrutiny, the outlines of the Titans sprouted haloes of annotations and referent leads. Tey latched onto one of the hard white spider-trails and followed it through the mosaic to the record cluster from the engine battles in the final months of the campaign. While the Poison King had held its own against the Legio Tempesta, the Blighting King had struggled against the experience and determination of the Titan Princeps who set out to hunt it. But Asphodel must have anticipated the start of a full engine war on Ashek, because every intelligence analysis Tey had at his disposal, including his own, suggested that by the time the Tempesta battlegroup had broken warp at Ashek the Treading King was already under construction.

VI

The Treading King's head was high and angular, the inner walls of its command bridge sloped around over the beak-like void-shield relay that had thrust forward under the bridge windows before the monstrous rending-claw of the Warlord Titan Tyranova Primal had torn it away. That had ripped cabling conduits loose at the roots all the way up into the bridge and the codecaster access plugs were mutilated beyond repair. Kovind Shek had been ready for that.

He had had to look up at the ugly crater in the King's noble head every day he had slaved in the woe machine graveyard. The main caster array was almost intact and that was better than he had hoped for.

He could hear the gunfire beneath him as he wormed his way into the ruined cavity beneath the bridge and began his repairs, yanking pieces loose from surrounding dead machinery to switch in and wiring around the worst of the damage. Directing fine energy flows through control systems was one of the lesser mysteries, and Shek knew it well enough to do most of his work by touch. Working his way back up to the bridge feet-first along the crumpled conduit gave him more trouble than recabling the caster had.

His equipment was ready. He thought of pausing to mutter a benediction from the Four Intellects, or a prayer that the Heritor might hear, but the gunfire was getting closer. Instead he made the connections with the block of machinery he had brought up through the Treading King and watched as the marker flashed a brilliant blue. The circuit was complete. The chattercode was filling the synaptic paths of the three dead Kings. Soon it would spill into its final vessel and make a living one.

VII

A particular quirk of the Treading King's design had caught Magos Tey's attention. Something about the pivot of its thorax, the way the great outer armour plates distributed their weight around the turning joint that sat atop the thing's powerful hindquarters. He watched it now in a sequence amalgamated from a dozen skitarii optical logs from the fighting around the Third Terraduct. The great glittering device turned this way and that in Ashek's savage noonlight, reared up on its four hind legs like a centaur, now back onto one pair, head and shoulders over the blue and grey form of the Titan *Sagitta Caeli*. Waves of earth churned forward from the Reaver Titan's feet as it tried to arrest forward momentum and abort the charge that had sent it lunging for the Treading King's head. Its arms were already forward, cannon muzzles smoking, but before it could fire, the claws in the Treading King's two middle limbs folded back and the giant melta cannons in its forearms obliterated the Reaver's forward voids. The picture went white...

VIII

The graveyard guards were fighting hard, but they had been taken too much by surprise and the codecasters were all running now. The chattercodes interlocked, twined around each other and began to grow. To ramify. To evolve.

IX

...and reformed from another point of view, a wounded skitarii sprawled in the shadow of its ruined Chimera, doing what it could for the battle: feeding tactical footage and ranging data into the Legio's battlefield manifold. The Treading King's two enormous lead limbs were descending on *Sagitta Caeli*'s now-unshielded back, power fields shining blue-hot around one claw and vibration-drills extending from the other like talons, driving towards the missile pod on one grey-armoured shoulder.

It halted in midair. Tey had had his fill of Imperial deaths; he didn't need to see the Treading King claim *Sagitta Caeli* for its tally. He magnified the view of that turning joint again, skated back through the record and watched again as it tilted back to meet the Reaver's charge. Wireframes popped into view next to it: a similar joint that the Phaeze forge world had used for the Titans of the Legio Myrmidor before their forges were razed during the Age of Apostasy. That opened referent leads to more templates that began crowding the dataspace around the frozen Treading King: a spinal configuration from the short-lived Warlord variants of the Orreline Sector forges, a distributed-structure blueprint from the holy Cambyri Illuminata from the Phobos Cloisters, even a glowing red template superimage from some of the oldest, most secret designs of the First Legio, laid down before the Great Heresy.

Tey's vision swarmed now, the Treading King almost lost beneath the layers of information as those layers wove their own web of relationships and generated new analyses. Tey let the image go, moving in among the lattices of connections and conclusions, occasionally reaching out with a thought to link records together or guide one to a place in another analytical pattern. By now the original battle footage was blotted out by the references he had conjured, a thicket of off-white and yellow webs that—

No. Those code elements... were not his. They were as unwelcome as an ugly

twist to a favourite memory, as jarring as hearing a beloved song sung off-key. They were interference patterns. Something from outside.

The visuals froze, became coarse-grained and drained of their colour, and fled from his vision along a dozen different trajectories, still sorting and arranging themselves as they vanished. There was the sensation of rising, and of lessening pressure, as though he were surfacing from deep water. Completely illusory, of course. He had not physically moved at all. Tey had encoded the sensations into his cerebral augmetics as a useful sensory cue to help him shift cognitive states.

Now he felt a rush, as though something large had just accelerated away from him. That was his reverie on the Hammerstone Kings, snap-frozen with its entire component thoughts ready for his conscious mind to pick them up again, pushed across the noetic link to Barrel as a single, self-contained matrix. It would sit in his companion's data-coils until he called upon it. But now it was gone from his mind, his thoughts clear.

Tey sat a moment or two longer, riding on the mild euphoria that always came just after a process shunt, but he could not keep his mood from souring. He had brought one element of the reverie back into full consciousness with him: the ugly layered hash-grid pattern of the interference code that had batted across his mind while he meditated. Something was going on. As a matter of principle, he needed to know what it was.

Tey dismissed his visual overlays and looked at his cabin-mate with clear eyes. Barrel sat stolidly on the other sleeping slab, splayed pad-feet planted on the deck, head slightly canted forward. His hood was down and his eyes closed; had they been open he would have been looking distantly right through Tey's solar plexus. The powerful data-churn for which Tey had nicknamed him bulged up from his back, making a dome behind his head. Its smooth dark-grey metal gleamed with bronze inlays and winking clusters of semi-precious stones.

That dome held the suspended data-trance Tey had been running on the Hammerstone Kings. It was also considering the profile dossiers of the Adeptus staff involved in the collection of the vast woe machine graveyard in which Tey had taken up residence. It was also continuing the train of thought he had been toying with on escape routes the Heritor might have taken deeper into the Sabbat Worlds. It was also bringing up memories of the abortive engine war on Chellory two hundred years before Tey was born, looking for parallels to the hammerstone sieges. And a thousand other trains of thought besides, all waiting for Tey to fetch them back across the noetic link and load them into his primary consciousness again. They would be interlacing themselves, too, making cross-

connections and finding patterns, ready for intuition and insight to crystallise around them.

Tey was cataloguing them, seeing if any of his other thoughts had led to anything useful, when there was another blast of ugly chattercode and the off-white laceworks swam across his vision again. But no, not a repetition, an amplification. Backtracking through his sensory logs Tey realised that the code had not dropped off, just faded and then strengthened again.

This was no code he recognised. Something was definitely wrong. A moment later Tey was standing at the cell door, Barrel rocking forward off the other bench and shuffling into position behind him.

‘What do you suppose?’ Tey asked. Barrel didn’t reply. He never did. The two of them stepped out of the seclusion-cell and into the bright clean light of the cloisters.

X

‘Graveyard Shrine!’ The voice was tinny, oddly timbred. Without conscious direction Tey’s second- and third-line systems began combing the memory stacks in Barrel for sample recordings of similar distortions. The search readouts flickered at the left-hand edge of his vision. ‘This is Sarell, Adepta Sororitas Order of the Quill, to any Mechanicus personnel listening! We have reason to believe this insurgent raid is directed at the... Hammerstone Kings. R-Respond!’

After a moment, the voice came again, an identical message. Tey sent a curt snap of machine-cant into the shrine manifold, and received Enginseer Daprokk’s response a moment later. The man was up at the top step of the little ziggurat, at the foot of the transmast mount.

‘Graveyard Shrine! This is Sarell, Adepta Sororitas Order of the Quill...’ The cross-check routines had taken a moment to check the transmission against itself, and it came up now to show Tey that the transmission patterns repeated. This Sister Sarell wasn’t repeating herself; the shrine’s vox-arrays were repeating it on a loop.

‘I have a timeline ready for you, magos,’ Daprokk said as Tey took a dozen delicate steps up the stair to the ziggurat’s peak. Barrel stayed below. Tey could almost have stepped off the top stair onto his shoulder. He looked down at his companion for a moment more, then out across the graveyard. At this hour it

existed as a constellation of metal glints from the moonlight, smudged with orange-white wherever the crews had hung up a lamp. The hulks of the four Hammerstone Kings were dead black shapes against the starry, living darkness of the night air. The great slope of the Blighting King ramped up into the sky behind Daprokk, tilted and slumped in its middle from the superstructural damage that had killed it. The Poison King leaned drunken-dead in a dim tangle of scaffolding behind Tey. Off to their right the Treading King brooded, its gigantic arms stowed by its sides but still full of palpable weight and menace. The traces of light outlining its torn-apart face seemed to make it more sinister in the dark, not less.

To their left, close enough to make Daprokk half-consciously tense his shoulder against its looming shape, the great back-raked prow of the Inheritor King made a tapering mountain against the stars.

‘That alert you’re looping. It’s not a translation of this, is it?’ Tey asked.

‘No, magos. It’s from the convoy that was bringing the Adeptus delegation in to meet you. Sister Sarell is one of their number. The carrier has kept its channel open. Ajji is using our manifold transceivers to track it satisfactorily, despite the chattercode interference.’

‘And have we responded?’

‘I understand from Marshal Orfyon that we will be ordering them to turn back to the graveyard perimeter until this... disturbance is dealt with.’

Tey looked out over the graveyard again. He had inloaded and assimilated Daprokk’s timeline in less than a second. Now its markers and briefing points sprang into his vision as he turned his head again, as though the metal wreckage of the graveyard were sprouting a miracle orchard of glowing blue and orange trees.

Exchange of fire... Last reported location of three escort guards/conjectured direction of intruders’ flight... Two intruders killed, convoy elements now holding... Pursuit waypoint alpha... theta... Adeptus representative [tentative tag ADALBRECT Jers] injured/immobilised, multiple intruder casualties... Breach to security in Treading King hull...

In where the marker-trees were thickest Tey saw the little flashing rune that showed where the transmission had originated.

‘Is that wise?’ Tey kept his vocal cues calm, but the chattercode was scraping against his electronic senses, making him edgy. ‘According to your own information these people are armed and have given something of an account of themselves already against... Well, I know you’ve had trouble with Asheki

partisans here already, so we can suppose they're behind this too. They are the enemy of our enemy, quite apart from the fact that they were supposed to be our friends to begin with.'

'A point of principle, magos,' Daprokk declared, a little primly. 'Everything that goes on here is the concern of the Machine. These others were here on sufferance to begin with. They have no right to insist—'

'The integrity of our order and its mysteries is paramount,' Tey agreed. He was rather impressed. Most of the time the engineeer seemed in awe of his august guest, if not actually frightened by him. This was the most forthright he had seen Daprokk since they had met.

The night breeze brought a distant string of popping sounds, the unmistakable sound of autogun fire. Tey paused a moment to allow the noise and its implications to sink in.

'That said,' he went on, 'I invite you to consider the threat to that integrity posed by the first set of intruders – the ones these Adeptus folk seem to be fighting against alongside our own guard,' he returned the timeline inload to Daprokk, with his own layer of annotations showing his point, 'might be our primary concern? The Adeptus are directing their efforts at these other intruders. The other intruders are directing their efforts at the most important machines we have in our custody.'

He didn't need to be more specific. He had extrapolated paths from each of the chains of skirmishes and pursuits, and added a crimson priority rune over where each of those paths seemed to point: three of the derelict Hammerstone Kings.

'The Kings...' Daprokk began.

'The Kings are the raiders' goals. Goals they seem to have reached.' Tey had been assimilating vox-traffic into his timeline map. 'And the Hammerstone Kings are the source of a chattercode we cannot yet decipher, which is blanketing our entire shrine and facility. Which, just between you and me and the Divine Intellect itself,' he gestured to the four-metre *Machina Opus* insignia that hung from the transmast above them, 'was sophisticated enough to leak into my thought-streams while I was in reverie. Take a moment to consider the facts if you wish, engineeer, but preferably no more than one.' There was a sudden edge of ice in Tey's tone. Daprokk was nervous again. Good.

Before he could answer, the woman's voice was on the broadcast vox again.

'This is Sarell, Adepta Sororitas Order of the Quill, to any Mechanicus personnel listening! We have reason to believe this insurgent raid is directed at the... Hammerstone Kings. R-Respond!'

‘Be courteous and see if you can raise the good Sister, Daprokk,’ Tey said. ‘Indulge me, if you would be so kind. And consider yourself under direct orders if you would not.’ He pushed his hood back a little, allowed his two emerald optics to stare into Daprokk’s four violet ones. He knew that seeing the full configuration would trigger an overlay in Daprokk’s vision that included Tey’s seal of office as a Magos Parallact. A blunt instrument, but Tey felt he had let this go on long enough. He thought he could hear gunfire again, from somewhere around the Poison King’s feet.

‘The graveyard is being *invaded*, Daprokk. When I find myself on the receiving end of an invasion, I consider it past the point of taking a stand on decorum. *Go.*’

XI

The chattercode had stopped its wax-and-waning and had settled into a constant muttering hiss at the extremity of Tey’s senses. The association strings spun away through his thoughts, even without the quasi-visual support of his data mosaics. It set him to thinking of the soft, deadly sounds of the corrodant snowfalls on Corenvast, as the metal canyons connecting the hives sizzled and tarnished. And of the gentle music that the solar wind had made in his electromagnetic hearing when he had walked out onto the airless rock of the Kheim III asteroid shrines to meditate. And the whispering prayer-wheels in the Mechanicus cloisters on Pirye-Semmaru, constantly broadcasting hosannas to the Machine-God across the airwaves, using secret and holy syntax principles that—

Tey shouldn’t have been surprised that that train of thought triggered a physical twitch in his limbs and a crimson warning rune in his vision. Whatever this was, it was similar enough to Mechanicus works in his memory coils to trip the warnings that Archmagos Gurzell had built into his briefing inload.

It was a fine thing when a man needed explicit permission to follow his own trains of thought, but Tey decided it was for the best a moment later, when the Adeptus delegation had arrived.

There was a flash of bright blue-white floodlights that swept this way and that as the fat-wheeled carrier wove through the last of the graveyard’s debris piles and into the clearing around the ziggurat. It lit up the red of Daprokk’s robe as he

walked towards the motley little group that was spilling out of the open hatch, kicked-up dust haloing their legs as they hurried forward. Tey, lingering on the lowest step of the ziggurat as Daprokk went forward to meet them, counted two Administratum clerks' gowns, at least three Imperial Guard fatigues, the tunic of one of the bonded planetary reclamation guilds. And behind them—

‘Daprokk! Which one of you is Enginseer Daprokk?’

The shout came from the taller of the two figures bringing up the rear. A woman in the livery of the Adepta Sororitas Order of the Quill – Sarell, Tey presumed – supported a lanky, lantern-jawed youngster with a clumsy tonsure and the long tunic of an ordained Missionaria Galaxia evangelist. Tey's memory dossiers flipped the name *Jers Adalbrecht* out for his foremind to catch, and followed it with a string of paramedical analysis: Adalbrecht was carrying one shoulder and arm stiff and awkward, the body language of a fresh combat wound.

Then Tey's attention was snatched by the noise spilling out of the carrier's open hatch. He spread his long metal arms, using aural pickups in his head, shoulders and hands to triangulate and focus on it. The sound was unmistakable: the carrier vox was tainted by the same wash of chattercode interference that had wormed its way into his own senses. He felt a crawling sensation through his limbs and back as the machinery of his body cycled up to amber-level readiness and heard the snicking sounds as a number of concealed defence systems reflexively armed themselves.

‘Our transmechanic is evaluating the signal according to the mysteries of her order,’ Daprokk was saying rather defensively, ‘which I shall not discuss. The signal is not considered to pose a threat to our installation, and certainly not to yourselves. Its relation to the insurgent action here tonight shall be evaluated. That action is being brought under control. There is no cause for impatience, Sister.’ Tey would have rolled his eyes, if his crystalline optic arrays had been built to allow the movement. ‘We may proceed to treat your wounded as a token of hospitality, our Order to yours.’

There was shouting from below him, and then came something that made Tey sharpen his focus on the wounded, staring-eyed missionary.

‘The Kings are finding their voice,’ Adalbrecht croaked. ‘It's not just some... harmless thing. They're doing something with the Kings.’

Tey turned his senses up and out, tracking the ugly buzz through the manifold, and once he knew what to look for he could see it clearly. The chattercode was washing back and forth between the three wrecked Kings: Poison, Blighted,

Treading. With every call and response it was growing denser, more complex. The corpses of the Hammerstone Kings were talking.

‘Can you guarantee that this transmission is so harmless that we can just let them make it?’ the Sister was half-shouting at Daprokk at the bottom of the stairs. ‘We don’t have the power or the skill to do this from the carrier, but you have these gantry antennae and a transmechanic. Enginseer, please. Will you consider what I have told you?’

‘Daprokk?’ Tey canted to him on a spectrum segment inaudible to the Adeptus voxes and the manifold overhead. ‘Utility directives over purity tenets, please. Pay attention to what they’re saying. Have Ajji shut down the interpretation work and jam the signal. I want it unintelligible. I want it scrambled to randomness and beyond. Swallow your damned pride and *do it*.’

Daprokk didn’t move, didn’t take his gaze from the Sister and her reeling, half-fainting companion. But Tey heard/felt the flash of code from the enginseer’s spinal antenna out through the manifold, and a split-second later came Transmechanic Ajji’s response.

Finally, he thought, and found himself turning to study the great dark spire of the Inheritor King, brooding over him and his little lighted graveyard from Ashek’s darkening sky.

XII

It was four days later, and the graveyard sat sullenly in deep daytime gloom.

The *Ramosh Incalculat*e was no longer a barely-perceptible dot high in the heavens, but a paralysing mass of metal and stone hanging motionless overhead. Mhorock Tobin had answered Tey’s summons and, fitting its action to its nickname, the Headstone had descended over the machine graveyard and made itself the sky.

The cloud-rippled grey of the desert sky was gone. The giant lifter was all of it now, blotted it all out and cut off the pale glow of Ashek’s sun for all but the first and last hours of the day. Now that the ventral shutters had folded back and the great cavern of the arkosect bay was open over their heads it looked like a temple ceiling, high-arched and cross-vaulted, the interior arc lights winking like devotional lanterns. And then a moment of reflection, or a peripheral glimpse of something closer to hand, gave the sight perspective and let the Headstone hit

the mind like a hammer. That spacious, vaulted temple was hanging one and a half kilometres overhead. Those elegant trceries just visible in its shadowed roof were gantries and lifters that could drag a Titan up from the ground by main force, and utility arrays that could shear it limb from limb. The high ceiling that looked like it arched over an incense-filled nave was really a space that could descend to touch the ground and barely notice that it had engulfed the entire cathedral, and could engulf half a dozen more.

The ocular skull climbed up through the air towards that enormous space on a buzzing suspensor cushion, shuddering a little in the light atmospheric chop, the bright silver of its inlays and augmetics dulled by the *Ramosh Incalculat*e's shadow and the pervasive Ashek dust. When it was so high that it would have been less than a speck from the ground (and still less than a third of the way to the Headstone) it stopped, hung, and turned its polished and lacquered face back down to the graveyard.

Somewhere down below in all that wreckage, Magos Tey's body was walking on semi-automatic with Enginseer Daprokk trailing along behind. A not insignificant part of Magos Tey's senses and consciousness had been directed through a secure tunnel in the manifold laid down by the Headstone, up into the skull, to try and take the place in.

Galhoulin Tey had pursued his rather strange vocation for the Adeptus Mechanicus for over a century, and he had never before seen a sight like the one he was seeing through the skull's eyes. He might, Omnissiah willing, pursue it for another century or more, and even so he would be surprised if he saw anything like it again.

The skull pivoted in mid-air, its optics ticking softly.

The graveyard had none of the sober order that the word implied. It might pass for an insect swarm, or a carpet of ugly, runnelled, rust-coloured fungus, or a high view of one of the vast trash hills that accumulated around Imperial cities and at the bases of hives, but it beggared the comparisons Tey had tried to bring to mind for it. It was its own thing.

It was fragments, and shells, and hulks, and wrecks, and scraps. There were kilometres-long tracts where woe machines had been laid out in orderly rows, their broken pieces stacked alongside them, and there were far more where they had just been dragged, dumped and left, crazy leaning mounds of metal shapes, stacks of steel piston-limbs, blown-off turrets piled in cairns like skulls outside an Arbites punitive, fragments and lengths of tank-track making lumpy hillocks among the lurching parade of wrecks. Little paths wriggled their way between

the piles of dead metal, broad at the outside where new machine-corpses were still being brought in across the plains, but further in shrinking to tiny threads of bare dust with hardly room to squeeze between teetering piles of smashed war machines heaped three times as high as a person could reach.

The graveyard was the segmented bodies of piston-driven Coffin-Worms lolling half-dislocated with their shattered cockpit canopies gaping. It was Flensing-Wheels leaning drunkenly against one another, pocked by las-fire and distorted by macro-shells or Titan kicks but the spikes on their sides still butcher-sharp. It was the obscene burred bodies of Gallowspiders slumped and lying amid stacks of their own shot-off legs. It was whole squadrons of batrachian Rackmouths crushed up shoulder to shoulder in death with the vicious squat shapes of the Murdernauts. It was ungainly piles of Blight-Balls, grotesque as rotting fruit, or Skybreaker carriages lying in broken lines like a snake crushed by a truck-wheel. The graveyard was the looming, leaning shapes of the four Hammerstone Kings. The monstrous shapes they cast against the sky could still chill the heart even now they were dead, gutted and in the shadow of the Headstone itself.

The graveyard was all these things and more, murder-spikes leaning this way and that, scissor-limbs lying at drunken dead angles, filament-whips ready to shiver back into life and cut one last piece of Imperial flesh off an unwary labourer. The graveyard was a monument to Asphodel's death-dealing engines, and to the death the Legio Tempesta had dealt out to them in turn. To the Imperial Guard the graveyard was a way to pen up and be rid of the ghosts that rumbled through their nightmares. To the magi who'd come to Ashek II in the wake of the Imperial victory the graveyard was a challenge thrown in the face of the Mechanicus. To Galhoulin Tey, the graveyard was a riddle.

The graveyard was...

The skull dropped a dozen metres, suspensors sizzling as they braked and turned it.

The graveyard was gunfire, and shouts, and screams, and running...

XIII

‘Magos?’

‘This is certainly one of the chattercode's repeater points,’ Tey said. He was

looking up at a trio of Stalk-Tanks piled roughly against each other, their legs at half extension, the free space under their feet home to a tangle of pitted and broken debris from who knew where.

(Somewhere in Tey's systems a subprocess was cataloguing each fragment and mapping it to known machine patterns and other wrecks from his continual and subconscious scans of the graveyard around him. Tey liked to be the 'who' in 'who knew where'.)

'Magos?'

'Observe where the top of the topmost tank canopy has been torn open,' Tey said, pointing, and extending his pointing arm a metre or so to add emphasis. 'For want of a better word, a nest has been made in the hollow. Someone set up a transceiver vane in that position. It corresponds exactly to your triangulations, Ajji. Confirmation? Opinion?'

'Magos!' Daprokk called again, in a threefold voice: vocalisation, binary cant and a jarring electromagnetic squeal on the alert frequency.

'I doubt they'll reach us, engineeer,' Tey said without taking his gaze off the little camouflaged transmitter post. 'And the odds of them being able to reach us *and* actually manage to harm any of us in any meaningful way are low enough that I judge wasting any more time on the matter to be, well, a waste. Look at the nest, please. Do you require the visual input from any of my bonded skulls?' Two more of them were flitting about the top of the pile, raking it with scanner beams and feeding Tey a mosaic of the cleverly-hidden little codecaster post the dead Asheki had used.

At this moment Daprokk's interest wasn't so much in the dead partisans as in the live ones. By now the sounds of the hunt were close enough to be audible even if he set his hearing to normal human sensitivity. The walls of wreckage all around them were baffling the sound, and the engineeer couldn't be sure how fast it was moving towards them. Were they the objective? That humiliating commando raid into the graveyard had come so soon after Magos Tey had come to Ashek II; surely that was no coincidence? He cast a brief glance up to where the Headstone made a cave-ceiling of the sky, but even the hoped-for sensation of being in the protective embrace of the Machine-God failed to appear.

Magos Tey hadn't looked around. His odd little bonded servitor hadn't twitched a muscle, just stood there bowlegged with the weight of its data-churn. How could Tey just ignore the fighting like this?

Daprokk's cortical boosts were not configured for military-level sense analysis or tactical breakdown. He had been sent here to supervise the ritual dismantling

and rendering-down of the horde of wrecked woe machines littering the deserts and piled around the hammerstones. He had thought the war was over when he had come here. He wasn't cut out for this. He felt a bitter stab of envy for Transmechanic Ajji, sitting at the heart of her manifold connection back in the ziggurat shrine, excused from having to tag along with Tey in person.

'Confirmation, Magos Tey,' she replied now through the manifold's high bands. Both she and Tey were using encryptor routines that gave their transmissions an unpleasant burr in Daprokk's senses, but there had been no question of communicating without such security until the mystery of four nights ago had been solved. The partisans' raid had been planned with care, prepared with cunning and executed with skill and audacity, but it had still been a suicide mission that had cost them three capable leaders and two dozen fighters. All this, just to send out a meaningless chattercode between three wrecked war machines? Even ones as monumental as the Hammerstone Kings?

There was more shooting from nearby, and Daprokk's spinal gyros whirled – his equivalent of a flinch – as a solid-slug ricochet struck a high metallic note off some piece of debris far too close for comfort.

'This is not made by enemy forces,' Tey was saying. 'None of the elements are consistent with what Asphodel designed for his own machines. It's stolen Imperial equipment. Not even battlefield salvage. This is not a military pattern. Look at this.' A share-point flicked out to Daprokk and Ajji through the manifold; grasping it, they saw a top-down view of a bulky shoulder-slung codecaster box wedged into one of the tank cockpits. It was bigger and cruder than Ajji's elegant shrine-machines, but Tey was right. Definitely Imperial. They could all see, to their common disgust, the ugly scarring down the front of the casing where a bayonet had gouged out the etched-in Mechanicus scripture. The heavy moulding along the top of the box had been bashed and partly melted to break something off.

A moment after Daprokk noticed this, a modification to the image came through: Tey had boxed the broken moulding into a red frame for emphasis, and imposed a quick sketch of what had been built onto the unit before the partisans had stolen it.

'A golden aquila,' the magos said, with a satisfaction that Daprokk entirely failed to share. 'That tells us something.'

Just then a ripple came through the manifold, a datacast with no exact organic parallel. An angry scream, an exultant shout, a red tinge across the vision, a roil of jittery, adrenaline-laced excitement through the belly and up the spine. The

code-cry of a skitarius on its way to make war.

XIV

The servo-skull tilted its face towards the ground and dropped like a stone. Its aural sensors were crude, and couldn't pick out the gunshots at this distance and over the noise of the wind. But its eyes were magnificent, made to the most demanding templates its home forge had possessed, and they had no trouble picking out the puffs of dust from running feet, the muzzle flashes, the flickers and smudges of infrared as las-rounds heated the air.

The skull remanifested its suspensor field, slowing and skewing its fall to home in on the meeting of three winding trails through the piled war-scrap. A flicker of red and turquoise came pelting down one: the back-banner on a bounding skitarius. A stir and clatter in a nook between two shattered tank hulls, between the other two: its quarry, a man and woman who had wedged themselves into the gap and were sighting along their weapons at the incoming enemy. More were dotted back down the trail, corpses shrouded in grey rags and grey dust.

The skull braked to a halt, face still pointed downward, and hung a dozen metres above the path. The skitarius, its organic torso and head a barrel of muscle wrapped in flak-weave, bounded up the path on backward-curving sprung-steel augmetic legs, a short but lethally heavy gladius-blade in each hand. Behind it a second Mechanicus warrior raised a short-barrelled grenade launcher on a scorpion-tail dorsal dendrite-arm and chugged a flash round over its companion's head. The shot sent an automatic warning code into the local manifold and the skull flicked its optical sensitivity down for a moment as the blue-white nova went off beneath it.

(And even so the flare was bright enough that one pile-and-pathway over, ten metres away, Galhoulin Tey murmured 'my, those *are* powerful' as he watched the flash through his servo-skull's eyes, as his data-flows analysed the spectrum of the light and sent data-strings reeling past him of the grenade's composition, its origin, the specifications of its launcher, links to tactical treatises on sensory weapons, profiles of skitarii famous for close-quarter actions and more.)

The lead skitarius had not broken stride: its eyes had flicked shut at the noetic warning and it had timed its lunge purely on the mental map it had made of its

targets in the instant before the photon flare had gone off. It was good at its job. By the time the skull's optical feed to Magos Tey had re-established itself it was showing the bodies of the two partisans jerking and bleeding out as their killer held them in the air, each with a combat blade driven through the sternum.

The gesture was part barbaric theatre, part tactical move. The bodies soaked up most of the autogun burst from the third partisan, a slight little dark-haired man fetched up against the wall of scrap four metres away, and the flak-weave stopped the rest. The roaring skitarii flung its arms wide, flourishing its kills, filling the alleyway, the sight rooting the last gunman to the spot. He was cowering, sweating hands gripping the autogun he had not moved to reload, when a second grenade, a rocket-driven explosive round, hit home to finish the work.

By the time the echoes of the explosion had died away the skull had embedded itself in the graveyard's manifold and the features of both skitarii – one a bare human face, flushed and snarling, and the other a hide mask daubed with cog-and-hammer designs – turned up to look at it as it appeared in their machine-senses. They stared at it for a long hard moment before their recognition of a friend overrode their combat glanding, and each warrior gave it a curt salute before they both turned and bounded away.

Tey's servo-skull excised itself from the manifold again and began the climb back up to a high vantage, leaving its master and his ill humour still on the ground.

XV

'I should have been quicker,' Tey vocalised aloud to Barrel, not particularly caring whether Daprokk overheard. 'No cataclysm, for sure, but still. To be caught out by events like that. Graceless.'

'Magos, I think that—'

'Enginseer, I cannot conceive that you did not hear the end of the engagement. The particular set of trespassers at whose hands you thought you would meet such a terrible fate is all gone. I saw it happen. My word should be enough for you.'

'Magos Tey—' The words came simultaneously from Daprokk's mouth-grille and from Transmechanic Ajji over the graveyard manifold.

‘One at a time, please.’ Tey abruptly turned and walked away along the trail between wreckage stacks. ‘Transmechanic, you first.’

‘The manifold accepted a servo-skull slaved to your own noetic presence, magos, additional to the two you informed me you were bringing with you. It has now deregistered itself again.’ A log extract of his drone’s brief official existence flared accusingly across Tey’s vision as Ajji passed it to him. ‘Magos, I am the shrine’s transmechanic and overseer of its manifold. I must, with all due deference to your own station, request that any first- to third-order device in your retinue which is to move through the manifold be made known to—’

‘Thank you, transmechanic, I understand your concerns and will not forget them. Enginseer Daprokk?’

‘We are going the wrong way, magos.’

‘Are we?’

‘That is to say, sir, that our direction of travel contradicts what I understood to be our purpose out here. If we are still here to examine conflict sites pertinent to the main partisan incursion targeting the Hammerstone Kings, the most important sites are now behind us. If our objectives have changed, I respectfully request the relevant data so that I may revise my own activity plans and continue to provide you with the best assistance of which I am capable.’ Daprokk finished this last almost on the run, hurrying to keep up with the plodding of Tey’s data-servitor. Tey’s own tall, slender form was just visible beyond, his muted russet robe and hood blending into the gloom of the Headstone’s shadow.

‘Commendably diplomatic of you, enginseer. My change of direction doesn’t make sense to you and you want to know what I think I’m doing.’ Tey framed this reply around a pict-burst: Daprokk’s reply laid out as though it were a coding exercise in a Mechanicus training hub, adorned with corrections and rephrasing by an instructor.

Daprokk thought the magos found it funny. He himself didn’t see the humour, but duty and utility required that he go along.

‘As you wish to phrase it, magos. May I be informed about your immediate plans?’

‘Consider your map again, Daprokk.’

Obediently the enginseer brought up the gridded and tagged map of the graveyard that he and Tey had been sharing. He noticed that a new red and blue data-pin had already appeared in it to mark where the two skitarii had killed the partisans just moments before. Daprokk wondered if there were any way at all to ask Tey how he could be so maddeningly unconcerned by it without breaching

protocol.

A series of points on the map flared green-white, Tey's personal icon on each to show who was emphasising them. Looking around, Daprokk could see those icons hanging around him in the air as his mapping system imposed them on his regular vision.

'Consider each of the sites we've visited this morning,' Tey told him. The nest in the Stalk-Tank pile had been their fifth stop; each inspection had been of a clandestine transmission post that had assisted in the code linkup between the three Hammerstone Kings on the night of the raid.

'Done, magos.'

'No processing power at any of them,' Tey said. 'Relays, not code engines themselves. Their placement shows planning. Those nests weren't just thrown together wherever they could find a spare spot. They were set up in advance by people who knew just where their transmissions were going to be directed. This will have been apparent to Transmechanic Ajji, whose order is steeped in the mysteries of code-speaking and far-ranged interface.'

Ajji must surely have been listening, but she did not take the cue to reply. Daprokk suspected she was boycotting the conversation in retaliation to Tey's own rudeness.

'Consider the relay nest they hid in that enormous pile of tank-treads. That would have taken great labour to have set up for people using the basic equipment these traitor work crews were using. And that is not even considering that the whole exercise had to be done in secret, or disguised as part of their regular work, and carried out under scrutiny.'

Under *his* scrutiny. Had any organic skin remained on Daprokk's face it would have flushed. The work camp was run by Guard auxiliaries and the Missionaria, but the responsibility for the graveyard and its machines was his.

'The same goes for the one that used the Skybreaker control cab. The nest itself was easy to conceal, but recall that they had to run in a power source and steal and then install several of the components for the transmitter. And we just saw another nest, positioned with equal care, but using a caster they stole from one of their Missionaria Galaxia overseers. Of the areas of incomplete data we now have on the establishment of these auxiliary relays, which is the largest?'

The data snapshot that Tey shared across the manifold then was enough to overpower Daprokk for a moment, leave him stumbling stiff-legged as his processors maxed out trying to grip it and his organic brain became too fascinated to pay attention to where he was walking. It could be nothing other

than a snippet of Tey's own thought-logs, an incredible fractal web of signifiers and data-trails, blizzards of meaning and cross-referred information stretching through dimensions and layers that Daprokk's brain, trained and re-engineered as it was, could not hope to follow. He wondered how many decades of work it had taken to rebuild the magos's mind until it could function in the midst of all that. And he wondered if Tey had meant to pay him a compliment by assuming he could handle even that tiny breath of data, or if the magos had been showing off. That was another question he lacked the information to resolve.

Daprokk realised he had walked into a Coffin-Worm's leg struts and nearly fallen.

'Keep up, please, engineeer,' Tey called back to him in basic vocals. 'If we want to know more about what the Asheki work crews were up to, we should be talking to the people who ran them. We're going to the worker compounds outside the boundary. No time like the present, is there?'

XVI

Most of the Adeptus had quartered themselves in the partly-rebuilt fortifications atop the Chillbreak hammerstone, but Jers Adalbrecht had taken to heart his role as spiritual guide to the Asheki prison crews and set up the Missionaria Galaxia post inside the internment camp itself.

Recent events had not been kind to it. Everything had been in order, Tey's records told him, for months after the end of the engine war. The labour force of liberated Asheki civilians had kept the Emperor's peace, attended their services, worked hard on ordering and stripping down the woe machines that were being dragged in from cold battlefields all over the continent to fill the ever-growing graveyard.

Then the *Ramosh Incalculat*e had arrived, and with it the rumour that some great tech-priest from out in the Imperium was going to dissect the Inheritor King, and it had turned out that the Heritor-corrupted machine-faith of the Asheki had not been as dead as the Missionaria curates had been boasting. There had been the secret nests and arms caches concealed deep in the maze of wrecks. There had been equipment breakages that with hindsight were looking more and more like camouflage for outright thefts, and a spike in lethal accidents on the crews that was looking similarly like the partisans had been carrying out blood

sacrifices to their Kings.

And so then there had been the suicide mission to awaken the Kings themselves, the riots and the punitive lockdowns, and the sabotage and desertions and violent, escalating disobedience. By the time the Headstone had descended to the ground the work of the graveyard had ground to a halt as the hands of the loyal Imperials were filled with simply trying to keep their former charges locked up and stamped down. The camp was a trashed shambles, the Adeptus fortifications had battened down their hatches and evacuated most of their personnel, and hunting escapees through the graveyard had become a full-time task for the handful of skitarii the shrine had been allocated. The kills Tey had witnessed that morning were nowhere near the first, and nobody expected them to be the last.

Tey fancied that even had he known none of this, he could have deduced much of it from Adalbrecht's face. The preacher had not been at his best when they first met, lurching out of the night with the shot-off Flensing-Wheel spike still in his shoulder, but he looked worse now.

Adalbrecht sat in his little chamber at the back of the Missionaria cloister, in a hot gloom behind closed shutters. The floor was a litter of his possessions: not one square metre of the camp had been untouched as order had disintegrated, and the jumble around them showed little sign of the quasi-military discipline that most Missionaria clerics displayed. The preacher's desk had been smashed in the last wave of rioting and he had been scribbling notes on a paper held down on the back of a broken large-format data-slate that he had balanced across his knees.

Adalbrecht's face was stretched and haggard from exhaustion and fasting, and puffy from poor sleep. He was not old, but he stooped over his makeshift writing-table like a long-faced gargoyle hunching out over the corner of a hive tower or off a spaceship prow. He made no effort to stand or salute when Tey entered. He closed his eyes for a moment, then laid down his stylus and stiffly placed the slate by his feet.

(A subprocess of Tey's normal vigilance routines snapped a pict of the notepaper in the half-second that it was exposed, reversed it to see the writing properly and began analysing his notes, cross-referencing it for context with the visual log the magos's brain had been keeping since they had arrived at the camp and looking for correspondences with whatever other documents had been visible when Tey had glanced about the room upon entry. Tey had not deliberately commanded this, nor was he consciously aware of it. He just knew

that all of it – picts, transcripts, analysis, context and conjecture – would be there for him the instant he needed it. And if he never needed it, it would live in Barrel’s data-coils forever.)

There was no second seat. That was fine. Below the base of his neck there was no longer any part of Galhoulin Tey that was organic. He locked his limbs in a stable position and waited to see if Adalbrecht would greet him.

‘You’re the one who was watching,’ the evangelist said at last. His voice was smooth and well-trained, but low and flat. ‘I saw you. The night that it...’ he waved a hand listlessly, ‘the night that we went into the graveyard. I got cut.’

‘Yes,’ Tey said, and stopped talking again. There was plenty he wished to know from the man, but questions could wait. He was interested to see what he could learn from just watching the way Adalbrecht started a conversation. Or didn’t.

‘We thought it was you they were after,’ the man said eventually. ‘I think. You were all we had talked about for a while. We had only had junior coppers...’ His voice trailed off and he stared at the floor between his feet. ‘Pardon, magos. That was disrespectful. There had... We had met the members of your priesthood responsible for the routines of your graveyard, but no one from a high rank approaching...’ He glanced up and Tey watched the priest glance at his sternum, shoulder, hood, wrists, robe-hem, all the places where a regular magos would have markers denoting rank and station. Finding no help, Adalbrecht glanced past him looking for followers. No retinue behind Tey apart from Barrel.

‘...uh, yours. I suppose you were on our minds. We were thinking that you would take command. Change things. You’re the, the machine priest? Is that right?’

‘That is an Imperial Gothic idiom, originating outside the Mechanicus,’ Tey said. The right side of his vision flared with associative threads on Imperial Gothic dialects, conceptual and linguistic analyses of spoken Gothic to formal to High to pure machine-cant in all its forms, theses on linguistic/cognitive/cultural shaping of the Mechanicus culture and religion and its classic Imperial counterparts, and more. They fizzed and jostled and tried to push their way into his primary thought-processes. As so often, it took conscious self-control to avoid leaving the conversation to a placeholder process and letting his alpha-mind go chasing off among the endless, wonderful data-streams.

‘“Magos Parallact” is a formal designation of mine that is appropriate for your use,’ he went on. ‘It is a position outside our priesthood’s formal hierarchy. You need not concern yourself with details of rank.’

Adalbrecht nodded and let his head drop again. Tey's brief distraction had not lasted long enough for an observer, especially an unmodified one, to notice any gap in the conversation. For this one, even focusing on speaking seemed to be an effort.

'But I don't think they were, were they? Don't think that now.' Adalbrecht's voice seemed to be floating slowly up from inside him, like bleached, dead driftwood rising through dark water. 'We keep finding new evidence. They were organised. They were planning these things...' That little wave of the hand again.

'They were planning these things well before any word of my arrival reached them,' said Tey, who had judged it time to prod the man along a little. That, and he wanted to round off the conversational thread. Leaving it open was irritating his sense of order. 'If anything, it seems to have been my arrival that forced their hand before their preparations were complete. There are all manner of operational flaws to suggest that this leader of theirs...'

'Kovind Shek was his name.'

'...this Kovind Shek, then,' said Tey, who had known that and had the man's picture and dossier unspooling in front of him as he spoke, 'was unable to carry out his final mission to the level that his other operations suggest he was capable of.'

That got a reaction. Adalbrecht's face twisted as though Tey had slid a blade into him.

'He was pretty capable, wasn't he?'

'You had some contact with Kovind Shek. He had been appointed to positions of trust within your congregation. What was your assessment of him when you worked together?'

It was a pitiless question. He was asking Adalbrecht to damn himself just a little bit further, to explain in his own words just how successfully Shek had fooled and defeated him.

He found himself admiring the way the preacher didn't miss a beat.

'My assessment at the time was that he was... earnest. Like all the Asheki I've known. Close, taciturn, slow to speak. Thinking all the time. You know...' Adalbrecht imitated the pursing and tightening of the lips that was a favourite local mannerism when they were keeping their own counsel on something. Tey, whose own face was incapable of expression, nodded anyway.

'He was very convincing,' Adalbrecht went on. 'However this sounds to you, I know I wasn't the only one taken in. Shek got warrants of trust from all of us. He

really seemed to be what he made himself out to be. An Asheki war displacee who had kept himself free of the Archenemy's tech-cults and who wanted to purge his world and rebuild it under the aquila.'

'Was he a senior member of your congregation? What were his religious practices?'

Adalbrecht shrugged, then winced again. Evidently the wound to his shoulder was not fully knitted.

'He didn't have any particular religious rank,' he said. 'He was observant. He was at every one of the services I preached to the labour crews. I suppose now that he was being careful to keep his cover shored up. He knew the call-and-response routines when the congregation was testifying or self-denouncing. He was... not noticeably pious, and not a conspicuous troublemaker. He blended in.'

'Just a man among many.'

'A man among many. He was a hard worker but that wasn't my remit. I attend to the spiritual rebuilding of Ashek, not the physical.' Adalbrecht's voice showed a quick flare of defiant pride when he said that. Tey was oddly glad to hear it.

'Shek's close associates? The ones using the names Jopell and Psinter?'

'Oh, were they false names? I don't have much to tell you. I know they were the ringleaders. That's all. You want to talk to the Administratum overseers for that.' He gave a bitter chuckle. 'The ones that have been left after the last riots burned the logistics hubs.'

'You are, however, attuned to the morale and general tenor of the labour camps,' Tey said. 'Your vocation centres on knowing your congregation. Are these riots calculated and directed, as the continued infiltrations into the graveyard are?'

Adalbrecht shook his head. For the second time that conversation, a trace of animation crept back into him.

'My assessment? They're spontaneous. The pattern while the active conspirators were organising disturbances to cover themselves was pretty apparent with hindsight and these riots don't match it. They're still angry, and they know that Shek is dead so they feel they're in free fall with nothing to lose, and they're scared that something is still going to happen to their Kings.'

'Their Kings,' echoed Tey.

'Their Kings.'

'Plural. Interesting.'

'Definitely plural. The two I met in the graveyard were very definitely using the plural. Are you thinking about one of them in the singular?'

‘I have been thinking about all of them. Remind me about your encounter in the graveyard. Work to be commended, by the way. You acquitted yourself valiantly. Any number of your colleagues would not have survived the encounter at all.’

‘They made me angry.’

‘Your after-action report didn’t allude to your emotional state, in fact. But I can understand it.’

“‘Eagle-licker” was what they called me.’

‘The wrong choice of insult, it turned out,’ Tey said.

Adalbrecht was still staring at the floor, remembering.

‘Told me that they listened to their Kings, not the aquila.’

‘That was the night the Kings found their voices. That was what they told you, correct?’

‘Correct,’ Adalbrecht said. ‘Definitely Kings. Plural. Are you wondering why the Inheritor King was the only one not to speak?’

Tey did not reply, but he tilted his head toward his left shoulder as he stared at Adalbrecht – a quirk of body language his brain remembered from his full-organic days.

‘It’s the Inheritor King you’re here to learn about. It must be. It’s the only one that’s in remotely working shape because it’s the only one that was never fully commissioned in the first place. They’d only just finished building it and started it rolling north when the Titans burned High Hive. It never saw battle. The others are all wrecks. That has to be what you’re here for, doesn’t it?’

Adalbrecht shook his head.

‘Don’t mind me. I’m not exactly a threat to anyone. Not even the other Adeptus are really listening to my sermons any more, I don’t think. We’re just going through the motions until one of those senseless riots finishes the rest of us off. Then they’ll all come knocking at your graveyard gates. They’ll be your problem then. You can tell those engineers in there that I tried to warn them.’

‘You have that little faith in the Administratum adepts still here? The Munitorum overseers?’

Adalbrecht gave a humourless death-head grin.

‘They’ve stopped begging for more armymen to keep this lot suppressed – the front’s moved on, the next stage of the war is sucking all the armed soldiery off this planet faster than they can fill out the requisitions to replace any of it. And the ones who haven’t been able to get out already have all started begging for transfers away from this...’ another nerveless wave of the hand ‘...this place.

They won't get moved. Nobody wants anyone associated with this benighted mess anywhere near them, and they won't throw good resources after bad trying to prop it back up and get it working again. They're going to let us all rot in the desert along with the machines we were trying to finish off for them.'

The grin faded. The bloodshot eyes looked up into Tey's face. Adalbrect picked up his little knee-desk again. The notes he had been writing were the opening of an Ecclesiarchy psalm of contrition, over and over again, copied out with joyless, methodical precision.

'We're going to die here. I'm just the one who's made his peace with it.'

XVII

'May I ask what you learned out at the labour camp, magos?'

Tey heard Ajji's question but he did not respond, at first. He was standing next to Barrel where one of the wider pathways debouched into the circle of clear space around the lower slopes of the Inheritor King. His view of it was what Asphodel had intended as an Imperial's last ever view of it, or so he imagined: the point of the giant ramming-prow almost overhead, the great bastions looming over him as though they were about to topple and crush him. Tey could barely imagine what having the thing actually bearing down on him would be like. Even inert, the sheer sense of mass and might it gave off seemed to bend everything else in his vision around it.

He had disembarked from the Munitorum carrier-six at the graveyard perimeter and taken a second to inload the previous day's activity logs from the skitarii that had met him and escorted him in. It had been a quiet day, and Tey had decided to come and see the Inheritor King on foot. He had even felt confident enough to entrust the business of walking to an automated process linked to his own eyes and Barrel's, while Tey himself tuned out from the physical and meditated in the waterfall of data that his archive banks were pouring over him.

Droplets of it were still in his vision now. An icon-stack of files about the Inheritor King sat beneath the crimson security rune that Archmagos Gurzell had locked into his data mosaic. Tey watched it rotate in his vision, and thought his thoughts.

Until Ajji hailed him again, and the subsystems that handled his local

environment pointed out that she was using a physical vocalisation that was coming from nearby. In fact, she was standing just behind him.

Transmechanic Ajji was broad and heavy of build, her green-bordered red gown cinched in to her body by metal-weave sashes holding data-arks and router phylacteries. Befitting her station at the shrine – she was higher in her order’s mysteries than Daprokk was in his – she had a retinue, albeit only a single servitor. It walked directly behind her carrying a graphene transceiver antenna aloft like a palm leaf, keeping Ajji’s personal noetics linked to the heart of the graveyard manifold.

Tey had far more senses than the human five, and he could see the electromagnetic shadows ghosting around Ajji’s body and read her link to the relay behind her. Her cortical augmetics were running at elevated rates and the metabolic governors for her organic body were drawing more physical and processing power than was usual for such systems. The signs pointed to excitement, fear, or angry displeasure. Probably the latter.

‘I restate my question, magos, for lack of a response from you.’

Definitely the latter. Tey made the sign of the cog and canted a complicated self-referencing salutation and blessing that was specific to the transmechanics’ cult, but it failed to appease.

‘Affairs are far from in order here, magos. We retain control in the graveyard by a slimmer margin than I think you realise. We had thought that someone of your reputation and credentials would increase that margin rather than give us another *unpredictable* element to work with.’

Certain rarefied circles of the Adeptus Mechanicus delighted in unpredictability. It meant that something was not yet fully understood, and that meant the challenge of uncovering or reclaiming more knowledge. Tey felt it best not to make that observation aloud. Ajji had very clearly not meant it as a compliment.

‘Free fall,’ he said instead, slightly surprising himself. The phrase had been Adalbrecht’s. *They’re in free fall with nothing to lose*. He hadn’t given it any great weight at the time, but the records of that whole interview had been marinating in his parallel processors and when he brought them into his conscious mind again, the memories suddenly as fresh as though he had just walked out of the preacher’s room, there it was at the centre of the data web.

Ajji, unimpressed, snapped a single piece of code at him: the most basic protocol marker for an ‘awaiting data status’.

‘A remark from the Missionaria Galaxia preacher there, that informs your own

about order and control,’ he said. ‘He describes the Asheki as being in free fall. They have abandoned any rational framework of thought or behaviour that might be used to influence them. The Administratum and Munitorum are keeping themselves from being overwhelmed by superior arms and main force, but Preacher Adalbrecht does not seem to expect matters to do anything but deteriorate. His impression is that this place has become an embarrassment. He implied to me that the reconstruction authorities will deal with the graveyard by simply failing to reinforce or resupply us. The graveyard and its work camp are not close to self-sufficient. A month with no resupply drops would do the job, I imagine.’

‘They lack discipline and any sense of higher purpose,’ Ajji said with what sounded almost like satisfaction. ‘The Adeptus Mechanicus had bid for a workforce composed entirely of our own servants. Had we been resolute on that this would have been different.’

‘Had we been resolute we would have united the other Adeptae against us, made no ground at all on the matter and the graveyard would have been in the sole hands of the Administratum. Who knows what the bureaucrats and the woe machines would have made of one another?’

‘Nothing that either party did not deserve!’ Ajji snapped, walking up to stand by Tey and stare up at the King. ‘A pack of machine-ignorant waterbags and a pile of righteously-scrapped heretech. Not an iota of the Omnissiah’s grace in any of it. Leave them to it, let them chew each other to crude rubbish and let the whole mess be an object lesson. Just as the war was, I’ll point out to you. This planet was lost to the Light until we chose to take a hand.’

One splay-fingered augmetic hand made a gesture at the word ‘Light’, a stylised cog/sun that was the mark of one of the galactic north-east’s thousands of transmechanic sub-cults. Tey copied the gesture and let his data-streams spirit the image away to index it against his archives of Segmentum Pacificus technotheology. His subprocesses cross-referred it into his internal dossier on Ajji; less than a second later the corona of annotations she wore in his vision danced and shifted, and he felt his knowledge and insights about her reshuffle themselves in his mind. It felt like suddenly remembering something he had learned long ago, except that he knew this knowledge was fresh.

He paused to relish the sensation – delight in new knowledge linking with old was one of the cornerstone shamanic ecstasies of his own order – and when he felt the sensation subside he realised Ajji was staring at him. She had extruded an ochre eyelight on the end of a slender silver tendril and was scanning him up

and down with it.

‘Do you find fault or satisfaction with your assignment to watch over the graveyard, transmechanic?’

Ajji’s reply was another terse, canted interrogative, until she remembered her manners and vocalised instead.

‘May I know the utility of communicating this to you, magos?’

‘Speculative utility,’ Tey answered after a moment. ‘My optimal mode of engagement with a mission is broad fact-gathering around all tangents, vectors and horizontal and vertical shades.’

He paused to reconsider his phrasing, although Ajji had said nothing. He was aware that his words would make little sense to anyone without access to the dizzying multi-dimensional ideograms that his data-flows formed and re-formed in his brain. He tried again.

‘My mission history furnishes repeated and convincing proof that broad-scaled data gathering considerably increases operational effectiveness. Effective insight and action can often be derived late in a mission from patterns that were not apparent at the time of acquisition.’

‘You don’t know why you’re asking.’

‘But it may well be useful that I do, in ways that will not make themselves apparent to me until far later. Any given data point may seem meaningless when I acquire it, but only because the information which will give it meaning by association is still unknown to me. Trying to impose *a priori* criteria for what is meaningful and useful harms this process and reduces the effectiveness of my work. I speak from experience.’

‘You don’t know why you’re asking, you’re just asking on general principles and you have faith that my answer will be useful some day, somewhere.’

‘Faith, curiosity, analysis. Three of the signal virtues of our priesthood, were I immodest enough to point the fact out.’

They were silent for a little time. The wind was up, and gust-blown grit kept up a desolate little tune upon the curved Coffin-Worm hulls sprawled on either side of the pathway behind them. Ajji retracted her eyelight and they both stared up at the Inheritor King’s prow-spire and the distant ceiling of the Headstone overarching it.

‘My methods don’t meet with your approval, then?’ Tey asked at length.

‘What *methods*?’ Ajji retorted. Her noetic band squealed with a dozen simultaneous pingback codes, a mannerism with the same meaning as throwing one’s arms up in frustration. ‘I barely understand your methods. You haven’t

briefed us, haven't explained anything to us. A despatch came ahead of you that we were to render any and all assistance to the magos travelling aboard the *Ramosh Incalculate* while it made ready to do its own work, but all you seem to want from us is answers to inexplicable questions. What are your methods? What is your thesis? What are you even *doing* here, Magos Tey? Why is the Headstone just hanging over the graveyard instead of picking up the Inheritor King and carrying it away like it was supposed to?

'I sit and study the manifold, I watch the skitarii hunt these heretical bastards who continue to manage to get in here I still don't know how, I sit and watch our attempts to continue the work of the graveyard gradually sliding into disorder, and I *hate* disorder, magos, it offends me personally and philosophically. And in the middle of it all, here you are, wandering about at random, gadding off to talk to those incompetent fools out in the work camp, and asking me if I like it here.'

She stopped, and composed herself. Some of the fire of her words had leaked into her body language and noosphere: the big, rangy form had hunched slightly and her hand had slipped into a fist, while the noetic link back to her servitor was thrumming with heightened-alert messages.

'I think I have given you my answer,' she vocalised. She sounded a little surprised at herself.

'I think you have. Thank you, transmechanic. For what it is worth, I regret the... aggravation my work is causing you. It brings me no pleasure. But my own mission parameters are ironclad, and my methods, I assure you, do work. Tolerating my activities must, for now, be considered part of the general *disorder* of running a facility such as this in a time of war.'

He couldn't resist that last little dig – Ashek was not a war zone, scuffles with partisans notwithstanding. And although Tey regretted it later, that was the note he left her on that afternoon, walking away towards the Inheritor King's enormous barbed prow and leaving her standing, silent and resentful, in the blowing dust.

XVIII

Tey was almost physically under the thing's armoured skirts before he realised he wasn't sure if there was a way into it. The other three Hammerstone Kings had all been prepared for the delicate attentions of Daprokk's cutter crews, who

had explored them at length and mapped the access points throughout their undercarriages, built access scaffolds up to their lower hatches and ramps. But the other three Kings were the ones that had seen battles and been stormed by force, and the cutting crews had been the most careful with them, treating them with the respectful wariness due a powerful, bestial enemy whose life might not have entirely deserted it. The Inheritor King had barely been made mobile. It was a truck, Tey told himself, a grandiose one, but no more than that. An over-engineered cargo-eight.

That thought amused him, and he looked about him. No, there were far more than eight track arrays around him. A twelve? More than that, even. Tey suppressed the surveyor routine that would have automatically fed him the number and blueprints and strolled down the length of the Inheritor King's undercarriage, looking up at the hull and around at the titanic treads, absently counting them up.

It wasn't like being in a temple, Tey decided. The space beneath the Inheritor King was an oppressive place, the track assemblies thick and deep on each side of him, blocking out most of what light there was. Unlike the soaring vaulted roof of the *Ramosh Incalculate* over the graveyard outside, in here (and Tey did find himself thinking of it as *in here*) the hull was close overhead, a shadowed mass bearing down low enough that it felt as if all the life and air were being crushed out. It was like the spaces traditionally dug beneath the temples, Tey decided. He was in a catacomb.

Mind wandering, Barrel shuffling through the dust behind him, Tey walked the length of the Inheritor King. He turned sideways and slipped down the aisle beneath the twinned treads, the links so massive that when Tey reached he could only barely hook his fingers over their lower edges and the upper run of the treads was lost in the darkness overhead. He stood beneath the ramming spike and stared up at the mountings for the giant power field generators that had still been half-built in the Heritor's forges when the battlefield had collapsed around them. Those fields would have armoured the King's prow against attack, and fed a disruptive pulse down the length of the ram to scramble void shields and split fortress walls. This was more like a cathedral space, the sides of the prow rising up around him, sloping inward to where they met in the superstructure overhead. The prow had been built so that swarms of infantry or whole tank formations could advance under its protection: once the King had driven through a fortified line or into a battle formation, the prow would raise and the Archenemy's soldiers would pour into the breach.

As Tey meandered this way and that beneath the Inheritor King's underbelly, he had first let his mind drift into its usual frayed cloud of semi-random associations. He had allowed it to run unmolested for a time, and he was aware that his hindbrain was finding this soup of data – the exploration of the King, the Ashek war dossiers, his conversations with the other magi, the disturbing chattercode the night of the raid – to be rich indeed. The layer of augmetic processors wrapped around the inside of his skull was working at such pace that Tey's sensors had noticed an actual temperature change, something he had not experienced in decades of duty and dozens of missions. The noetic bridge between those processors and Barrel's data-churn, with its unimaginable density of information, was a bright blaze of transmission in Tey's readouts.

He cast a light eye over the swarms of data-particles now, watching patterns form between his conscious thoughts, his memories, and the files he had absorbed straight from his inloads. There was a strange doubling feeling as he watched himself watch his own mind at work.

He tossed a carefully-sorted stream of referents into the storm, as though he were standing on a bridge tossing dye down into the swirling waters below to see their currents more clearly. The great eddies of information began to boil more angrily as his processors rethought every data-particle's relationship to every other one in light of these new directions. Tey started to notice backwaters into which low-correlation data was drifting, sudden tidal surges as a point of relevance was discovered and great volumes of knowledge rushed into new positions, upwellings and vortices as insight led to insight and fed back into the constant motion. His mission directives were like deep, implacable currents running beneath it all; his intellect, the Machine-God's benediction given manifest form, was the sun warming the sea.

And there was the sealed data-rune from the archmagos, the secret run of Tey's thoughts that he had locked away from even his own brain, and this was the moon, high and distant but its pull shaping every tide and flow.

Three of the vortices had stabilised, dancing around one another like whirlpools, like tornadoes, as their central concepts acquired enough referential weight to accrete information around themselves. Tey threw an associative mapping layer over the entire pattern and then drew it into his alpha-mind. For a moment it was as though he was remembering something he had once known perfectly; a moment later he could not remember what it was like to not know these things.

The Ordinatus. That was the first of the referents that had gathered a data-

swarm about itself. Tey had known that the war engines of the Centurio Ordinatus would loom large in his deliberations – even the most casual first assessment of his mission briefing had brought them to mind. But still, his thoughts darkened and he murmured a soothing canted blessing in a base-eight code he had learned on Mars to regain his calm.

His mental records of the Centurio began to orbit the hotter, messier mass of data his deep mind had synthesised from the war records of the Imperial Guard and the Titan Legions, sometimes chasing behind it or swinging around it and sometimes seeming to drag the denser, more cohesive data-mass along behind it in turn. Tey's mood failed to lighten. He drew a line of thought down the outer layers of each data-mass, prompting them to put out tendrils and threads towards one another, their facing surfaces rippling and mirroring each other. Data scattered back and forth between them in particles and waves which slowed each time they felt Tey's main attention on them, and unfurled menus and maps of themselves, summaries of what they contained, lists of current and previous associations.

Heritor Asphodel has built his own Ordinatus. That phrase ran through thread after thread of data connections. Each time it presented itself to Tey's vision it was strung with Munitorum and Mechanicus icons. It was the Munitorum who had made the claim, no less offensive for being carefully veiled between the lines of their communiqués. It was the Mechanicus analysts who had come to their high priests to pass the foul accusation on.

The structure of Tey's newest data-reverie shook as if a wind had passed through it. He had surprised himself by allowing a sudden burst of anger to interrupt the calm analysis of the reverie. He exerted his will over his passions and carried on.

The two data-masses were joined by a whole cat's cradle of connections now, with major associations zipping back and forth between them like transit cars on inter-hive cableways. Tey focused his attention on the centre of that connecting web. The sight of it bore down on his heart.

Data-sigils hung through the connection web like gems strung through a spire dam's netted veil, or like stages in one of the beautifully illuminated diagrams of evolutionary spread that Tey had seen on tapestries in the Biologis Shrine on Khulan. Each sigil was that of an Ordinatus engine, the strangest and most terrible faces of the Machine Cult's war-making. And from each great Ordinatus, strands of concordance ran to the blood-dark icons that signified the Hammerstone Kings.

In an almost-forgotten high corner of Tey's mind, the thought-process locked inside Archmagos Gurzell's thought-seal fizzed and burned, prickling at Tey's brain, wanting to be released. He ignored it and brushed his mind over the threads of his analytical web, letting data soak into his foremind each time his attention brushed one of the connecting threads.

A thread connected the Treading King to the noble blue-and-gold insignia of the Ordinatus Rakenheim. Tey's feather-light mental touch shook loose facts, histories, images that settled on his foremind like petals dislodged from a blossoming tree. Tey saw pics of the engine as it climbed up from the machine-pits beneath Rakenheim's capital hive, up the collar of cliffs and into the usurpers' siege lines. He soaked up its blueprints, understood in microseconds the principles of its architecture. Saw how the design of its arching back and armoured shoulders were so uncannily like the form of the Treading King.

He skipped across to a thread which strung through three Ordinatus data-tiles as it spiralled down towards the signifier for the Poison King. The gangling sprawl of the Ordinatus Karros; the sleek, flared outline of the Ordinatus Stygia; the rearing scorpion-tail of the Ordinatus Malamuria. Each flared in his vision and then shrank back to a wireframe, as though the attention he had paid was enough to incinerate it to its bones. But left glinting in the centre of each was what mattered: the beautifully complex and compact reactor systems, marvels of improvisation, purifying and burning fissile ores in processes that called on the deepest and most taxing mysteries of the Magi Physik.

It had been four millennia since the Ordinatus Karros had hunted orkish invaders through the asteroid belts around its forge world. Two and a half since the Ordinatus Stygia had stalked across the ocean beds, in the blackness and silence and mind-numbing pressure and cold, slipping under the apostate Hedoniarch's warfleets. And only eight hundred years, perhaps a handful more now, since the Ordinatus Malamuria had raised its tail and carried its monstrous gravitic projector to war over the splintergrass steppes.

Such different machines, divided by so much space and time and war. But the ideas at the core of them, the concepts behind those reactor furnaces each carried in its heart...

This was something Tey normally found beautiful, the union of such far-flung places around the objective and undeniable beauty of a principle of engineering or a work of forging. But not like this. Not when the final variation on that beautiful work was the blasphemous machine-pit deep in the guts of the Poison King, where the heavy elements from the hotstone flats had been purified and

ignited in the reactors or turned into lethally radioactive payloads for Asphodel's guns.

Tey had felt this sensation before. The creeping, clinical revulsion of having to watch something he held precious and sacred being covered in the excrement of the Archenemy. It was like having to wash and groom the corpse of a murdered loved one for burial.

But he did not turn away. He had function, he had duty. He moved his mind on.

The close-combat limbs on the Treading and Poison Kings used quantum-fluid bearings that recalled sacred archeprints from three forge worlds in the Segmentum Solar.

The accelerator rail that ran up the Blighting King's spine, launching aircraft into the sky and lobbing the Heritor's malevolent little Blight-Ball mobile strike-points into the enemy. To a first scan, even a careful one, it appeared to be its own thing, but when Tey turned the schematics and auspex-log compilations over in his mind the parallels sprang clear. The thing was far weaker, a barely-there shadow of the great gravimetric accelerators that the Mechanicus built for the Imperium's space fleets, but the design elements were hauntingly similar.

And the Inheritor King. The skeletal structure of its long, segmented body, the architecture of its drive distributors, even the fat, triangular armoured housings of its tread arrays, all recalled the form of the Ordinatus Mars. And oh, that hurt, the mirroring between this twisted Heritor's most fell creation and the oldest, greatest war-shrine of the Centurio Ordinatus, the one that bore the name of the Machine-Cult's home world.

Except...

Tey knew he was holding on to the hope that he was wrong. That none of this meant anything. He could feel that possibility vanishing from his thought processes like water running through his fingers, every new insight and observation rendering the hope weaker.

But it was still there. There was room for hope, and room for doubt.

Tey had not been sent to Ashek so that he could report back about hopes and doubts.

In the locked bolthole that the archmagos's inload had created in his mind, that thought-process continued to linger and buzz, like a bone-deep itch or the deep creak of a joint.

Tey had to *know*.

A moment later he came back to himself, standing in the dark among the

Inheritor King's treads.

He had to know.

Tey woke his noetics and sent a command sleeting away through the graveyard's manifold for his servo-skulls to come and join him. Somewhere along the great mass of the Inheritor King there was bound to be somewhere he could get inside.

He walked away through the dimness, with Barrel's splayed feet shuffling up the dust and leaving it hanging in their wake.

XIX

For most of his long walk through the chambers and passages of the Inheritor King, Galhoulin Tey moved in reverie. The most superficial layers of his consciousness stayed aware of his surroundings, navigating his feet and turning his head, adjusting the sensitivity of his eyes, marshalling the servo-skulls. And that awareness filtered through into his meditations, as he had fully intended it should. A stately orbit of construct-templates and blueprints wheeled and tumbled through his thoughts, the darker shades of memory and inload meshing into and then parting from the brighter forms that were the real-time observations of his skulls as they swooped and flitted around him.

He had entered the King in one of the rearmost carriage-segments, given over mostly to the machinery that supported the rear-facing gun-decks. Little of it was operational. The Inheritor King had still been no more than two-thirds built when Asphodel had had to roll it out of its forge-hive, burning through his workforce mercilessly to get the plasma furnace operational and the motor assemblies running. He was driving the beast northwards like a mountain riding an earthquake even as the Legio was cutting down through the atmosphere on the daring lifter strike that wrecked the hellish Chaos-hives that the Heritor had made his capital. His hereteks had been frantically cobbling its combat systems together even as they had rolled up the southern canyons, and when that thought crossed Tey's mind his vision obligingly sorted what he was seeing into layers: the surgically-precise lines of the original forge-worked hull, then the progressively cruder and hastier jury-rigs as the King had neared the battle lines and Asphodel's technicians had had to do ever more with ever less.

Tey walked along the companionways past craters where finished weapon

mounts had been blown right out of the hull when the Mershan and Pragar regiments had finally trapped and besieged the King. He could see crude weld-scarring in the lower galleries where the crew had bodged together pintle mounts for whatever weapons they had managed to salvage from their home hive or loot from the Imperial wrecks they had found or made along the way. Behind the gun-decks were the winch-lifts and cavernous ammunition magazines that had never been filled. The magazine chambers were still littered with bedding, empty ration packs and discarded clothing. Little of it matched anything that had been issued to the work crews here at the graveyard – Tey guessed that the chambers had been filled with crew, or troops, or opportunistic forge-labourers eager to claim a berth that would take them out from under the descending Imperial Titans.

The rear carriage was roofed over with rough, heavy slabs of metal and plascrete. Had the King been finished this would have been a nest of great artillery pieces, sending macro-shells arcing forward over the King's back and into its path to plough up any enemy resistance. As his skulls skimmed low over the deck Tey fed himself their auspex data and saw how the floors were sprung to take the battering of recoil, and honeycombed with shafts for the suspensors that would have steadied the cannon as they fired. The improvised roofing that had been fixed over the carriage in their place had apparently been recycled from the hive-slope fortifications as Asphodel's crews tore the forge down around them.

Again he saw his surroundings in layers: the shadowy ruin he stood in, lit dimly by the lights of the Headstone hanging in the sky and the red and blue eyelights of his skulls. Over that came the blueprint his systems were reverse-engineering from what they were seeing, a rippling layer of construction diagrams, metallurgical analyses, circuitry tracks. And over that came the grainy, jolting images from the optics of the skitarii commandos who had been the first to drop into through the breach after the *Unguis Argenta's* monstrous close-combat arm had peeled the corner of the carriage open. In amongst the gaudy battleplate and canted war cries Tey could make out the ash-grey uniforms of the Pragar infantry and human voices shouting for the Emperor's attention. They seemed to have met little resistance, at this breach at least. Tey turned in place, watching a brutal close-quarters battle that had ended a year before he had even seen the light from Ashek's star. Racing parallel processes deep beneath his conscious mind assembled the optical feeds into a real-time reconstruction, figures scrambling and tumbling around him, flickering out here and there where

there was no record of where someone had moved. Dampers in his hearing muted the blast of grenades down to soft clangs and thumps and muffled the screams and the bellows.

From the defenders there was almost no sound at all, or so they thought. His files recorded no oaths or battle-cries characteristic of the Heritor's foot soldiers. He tilted some of his audio settings a little to hear the enemy clearer, but there was not much to be had. Hoarse shouts in the southern Asheki dialects, orders, encouragement to hold fast, rapidly turning to crude biological obscenities and then simply wordless cries as the skitarii did their work.

But there was something else. Tey froze the battle footage into a tableau and walked through it, eyelights flickering in his platinum-steel face, bringing his auditory processes into conscious focus to strip out the sounds of battle.

The Inheritor King's defenders had tactical halters over their heads and around their chests, hung with las-clips, combat blades and blasphemous charms: images of Asphodel's rune-brand or machine-components that the Heritor had personally touched or blessed. And high on each left shoulder rode a heavy, blocky vox-caster.

Tey prowled among the frozen ghosts of his reconstruction, and stood in the spot each skitarius had occupied at that split second so he could experience the sound as they had. Then he dismissed the image overlay and stood amongst the wreckage that that battle had left. The woman who had been snarling into a skitarius's crosshairs flickered out and Tey could see the pitted stain on the bulkhead that that skitarius's cannon had made of her a moment later. The two lanky men with grey hair hanging in their eyes, caught in the middle of a dive to escape a Pragar flame trooper, vanished and Tey could see the charring across the metal deck where the flames had caught them.

He dismissed all the video, muted the analytical feeds, stripped out the audio until he had the strand of the recording he needed. The sound that had been buzzing out of the enemy troops' vox-casters. The sound he recognised from the night of the partisans' raid.

The chatter.

It would be hours yet before he realised that he wasn't just hearing it in his recording.

The passageways between the carriage-segments (sleeved in interlocking armour segments whose design and interplay were quiet little marvels) brought Tey into the next chamber of the King, even less finished than the gun-decks, a cavernous space sliced this way and that with grey support struts veined with cables. Tey's own eyes saw nothing but pitch blackness, shaded every now and again with a tiny, distant spark as one of his skulls darted across his field of vision, somewhere high and distant, but he felt the space take shape around him as his skulls mapped the struts and girders, the scaffolds where the assembly of the interior decks had begun, the litter of trash on the floor.

All old, all coated with grit, fragile with decomposition although the air was too dry for rot. No new litter, no disturbance to what was already here when the King had fallen. Tey knew that the cutting crews had been sent to the Hammerstone Kings. Had none of the crews to be sent in here made a start on their work? Not even to disable the mechanisms, cut the cables, sever the treads? Had the Asheki partisans infiltrated the graveyard's workforce so totally?

He stood in the darkness for a time, letting his deep mind continue to sort through the structure around him while he mulled over the interview with Adalbrect, and the camp overseer's logs, and the maps of cutting-crew fatalities. Eventually, with the seal-rune fizzing in his mind like limestone in acid, he moved on.

XXI

Tey passed through the central carriage without stopping. Barrel kept pace with him as always, but his skulls skipped above and below him, auspexes prodding at the machinery around them. Tey felt their senses niggling at the edges of his own as their input streamed in through his compilers. Flickering lines shaped themselves in his mind as they traced the routes of optical circuits. The superconductor stanchions felt heavy and slick in the auspex fields; the folded piezo-electric layers around the furnace core scratched on his senses like sacking and sand.

The reactor seemed unexceptional. Tey had inloaded the Ashek Illuminata from the Mechanicus war-temple they had passed in orbit, and so now he knew in detail which designs the Asheki used and how they applied them. The construction that his skulls' senses perceived in the nested decks above him

settled comfortably into that knowledge – here and there came little pushes against Tey’s mind as one feature or another showed a change, modifications Asphodel had made to the machine his conquered forges had already been working on. The oddnesses hung around him with the faint nagging sensation of a picture hanging crooked in the corner of vision, but nothing about them triggered any alarm and he let the knowledge sink into his deeper mind, for his beta- and gamma-processes to contemplate while he moved on.

The forepart of the prow-carriage was walled off at every level but for one access point, a great processional gate whose chamber climbed up through four decks. There was still a little light here – not all of the self-contained lamps in the walls around and above him had been destroyed in the final storming of the King, and Tey could see the four galleries where the decks behind him finished and faced off against the great carved wall in front.

Tey spent a moment trying to amuse himself by cataloguing all the horrific impracticalities of the design. A choke-point for evacuation of the prow. An unsealable channel for fire, contaminants, invaders. A gap in the reinforcing structure. He was sure he would find more as he peeled away the layers. But Asphodel did not just build war machines. He built horrors, artworks, avatars and shrines to his own twisted genius. And the Inheritor King, the engine that was to have been his personal fortress and chariot, he had built to be the grandest of all.

The doorway to the King’s prow and bridge stretched up nine metres in front of Tey, a giant ogive arch that seemed to be cast from a single bifurcating slab of adamantised steel. It was sheer, undecorated, and not because there had been no time: Asphodel’s artisans had had the chance to ornament the towering bulkhead wall it was set in, and had made the most of it. The archway slab was there to flaunt its mass and cow the thralls who had been brought into its shadow to serve in the Heritor’s sanctum.

The doors themselves were wedged back at an ugly angle. In their centre was a blistered crater-scar from where the skitarii’s ram had slammed into the portals, welded itself in place, seized control of the door’s systems through its own noetics and thrown the magnetic locks open. Once the doors had parted the ram had immolated itself rather than risk carrying any taint of enemy code on with it. Tey stopped in front of the doors and said a small, sombre prayer for the sacrifice of its machine-spirit while his skulls swept out to either side, mapping the friezes on the walls.

He had thought that the doors were covered in carvings, as the wall around

them was, but the realisation of what he was looking at arrived at the same time as the information from the logs he had inloaded days before. The skeletal forms that seemed to swim out of the metal in front of him were not carvings. They were human bones, from bodies that had been arranged up and down the length of the door until they covered it and melted into the metal.

Tey shot a query-line down into where his subprocesses were churning through his data files on the Inheritor King, but there was no firm record on whether the corpses were willing victims – it was a known tradition of Asphodel's to sacrifice a clutch of his own engineers once a major work was under way, to consecrate it – or enemies who had resisted his takeover of the southern forges. Tey wondered how he might go about finding out, his auxiliary mind festooning the edges of his thoughts with threads about verispex recovery procedures, Biologis lore texts, forensic tracts on human sacrifice practices along the segmentum's northern border lines, ethnographic data on skeletal patterns of southern Ashek that might hold a clue.

Data patterns began to jump and cohere in his foremind and he realised he had already started running the matching processes on the tangle of bones before him against his dossiers of ceremonial wound patterns. With an irritable flick of a thought he shoved the process down his priority list and brought his skulls in and down to join him.

Tey stepped between the breached doors and started up the staircase to the King's command decks, picking his slender metal feet around the divots the skitarii's meltas had left in the steps. The ceiling over the stairs was ribbed and vaulted, in a pattern that Tey could see the basic echoes of in the unfinished passages he had passed through. The designs that had covered the outer wall were repeated here, in finer detail, in gold and glass instead of perspex and pig-iron.

Something about those designs was nagging at Tey. He switched his attention for a moment to the analytics that were processing the input from his skulls' eyes, but all he saw was calm dataspace around the cool turquoise information flow describing shapes, composition, proportion, pattern repetition.

There was still something out of place. Something missing. When Tey weighed up the analytical feeds the feeling was akin to lifting a container and finding it lighter than it should have been. He shifted some processing power from his foremind to reinforce the filters, tightened their parameters and kept walking. He was dimly aware of the soft metallic sounds coming from within the folds of his sleeves as his slender steel fingers curled and clicked against one

another.

The stairs arrived not at the grand landing Tey had expected when he first inspected the plans, but in another solid wall, broken by slots barely wide enough for even Tey's narrow-shouldered frame to fit through. Each doubled back on itself once, twice, and when Tey cast an eye up and down the walls he saw they were scorched with las-shot and scraped with shrapnel and solid-slug marks. The baffles were to choke off the momentum of any charge up the stairs and force attackers to fight their way through the tiny, back-hooking passageways.

The passages opened out into a broad arena, a dozen metres wide, beneath a high, railed gallery. The battle-damage at this end of the baffle covered the doorways from floor to ceiling, the scarring so ferocious that it blurred and deformed the lines of the doors and the smooth faces of the walls. The gallery had been raised so that a platoon of defenders on each side could sluice down fire on attackers as they came single-file out of the baffles.

Tey walked forward, his skulls swooping up to survey the gallery. He cued the pict-feed reconstructions of the final battle for the bridge but did not bother to run them, working from his rough datagrams of the final skitarii incursion. The bridge itself had been almost abandoned and had yielded with minimal resistance; the peak of the assault's savagery had been—

Tey's foot hit something soft and yielding. A split second later the same sensation came to him from Barrel's senses as the servitor's leading foot kicked something away with a slick wet sound, and then crunched into something else.

Tey froze both of them in place and brought his skulls whipping back around, spinning around him so fast their eyelights began to streak in his vision, switching power to his limbs and readying a combat overlay to his thoughts. That alert kicked his sensory suite up to maximum, and an instant later his olfactory webs were drenched with the stink of rot. Locked in engagement mode, the skulls' weapons armed and hunting, his vision and foremind a firework display of analytics and queries, Tey looked down.

They were walking on hands.

Human hands, severed hands, some hacked off halfway up the forearm and some cut so low on the wrist that the thumbs were almost falling off. Some were still covered in sagging, withering flesh, but many more were bundles of bone held together with shrivelled, rotting scraps and the oldest of all were just loose collections of fragments half-scattered across the floor.

In places, the piles came up to knee height. Tey muted his olfactory screens

back down to diminish the sickly stink, and started picking his way forward through the charnel mess.

How long had this been going on? Tey's parallel cortices had instantly started analysing the piles, cross-referencing decomposition stages, distance from the entrance, placement of each relative to others. Webs of association started to build on each other and throw out speculative thought-strands to connect to archives elsewhere in his memory. The silent flashing and wheeling of thought and pattern was reassuring, keeping the reeking reality at bay, but Tey found that the essential foulness of it kept reaching through to tweak his thoughts with rotting fingers. How long? How many deaths?

No grand arrangement was suggesting itself from his analytics. The scatter patterns on the hands that had come apart suggested they had been thrown from the entrance, or close to it. No elaborate rituals here. The partisans had crept aboard the Inheritor King, come up the stairs, tossed their freshly-severed hands onto the floor and... what? Left it at that? A quick cross-reference with the work logs from the graveyard overseers suggested just that. The crews wouldn't have had time to do much more without an absence being noted.

But then the crews would have reported the deaths that had given them their supply of sacrificial hands as accidents, or not reported them at all, and so how trustworthy could those records be? Tey dismissed that line of thought as unprofitable for now and walked forward into the vaulted shadows of the Inheritor King's bridge.

XXII

He must have been expecting something, because after he had walked into the broad upper deck beneath the great slant of the forward windows, Tey realised he was waiting. For what, he had no idea. A flourish of trumpets? The cant and lights of a system start? An attack? He shrugged inwardly. Another magos might have fretted about that odd, unfocused expectation, and audited their thoughts to find where such an unproductively open-ended process bundle was running and why. Galhoulin Tey, who depended on the messiness of his thoughts to produce insights that pre-engineered logical forms could not, simply noted the sensation and moved on.

Through the bridge windows he could see constellations: not the star-spatter of Ashek's night sky (and its overlay of twinkling debris from the war) but tidy, symmetrical lines and clusters: the running lights of the *Ramosh Incalculat*'s all-encompassing arkosect bay. The lifter had been constructed to ferry an entire formation of Titans down to a planetary surface: to carry away the Inheritor King, the walls between the Titan silos had been stripped out, turning the ship's belly into a single enormous open-floored hangar. Tey, who had started to feel a little like an ant creeping through the carcass of some great predator, found the sight something of a relief. Here was a slightly more solid reminder that he was on an Imperial-held world. The war was over here. The graveyard of enemy machines was a tribute to that fact.

Tey laced his fingers together and stood in the centre of the bridge with his head bowed, his cowl falling forward and dropping a russet fringe around the edge of his vision. The ocular skulls circled him, painting the catwalks and the control banks around him with their eyelights, turning the darkened bridge into a surreal mosaic of glints and glimmers and textures. The great dark throne that would have been Asphodel's high seat loomed in the bridge's rear chamber. Tey turned his back on it.

What were you thinking, then? Tey thought half-aloud. *You were a creature of mind, so-called Heritor. Still are, wherever you are now. What did that mind of yours draw on? What fuelled you? I want to see it. I am standing in what you intended to be your greatest creation, I am in amongst your thoughts and ambitions made manifest in glass and steel and adamantite. But it's not enough.*

Your followers are poor scraps of what they were when they stood in the shade of your banner, Asphodel. Your woe machines are wreckage and your three fighting Hammerstone Kings are hulks. And your Inheritor King stands mute. I do not know what I need to. And I do not like not knowing what I need to. There will be a way to make your thoughts speak to me. I will know how your mind was when you were here, Asphodel. I am the servant of a greater god and a purer machine than you.

He walked forward, around the gracious swoop of the outermost control banks that curved beneath the bridge windows themselves. Most of the control configurations he recognised, some he had to wait a moment for his pattern routines to flicker through his memories and show him similar devices from Mechanicus machines. Some bays had nothing at all for a hand to operate, but were just mountings for interface cables tipped in brutal-looking cranial plugs for servitors. Or for human pilots so heavily remade as to make little difference.

His deep-memory systems had noticed the attention Tey was paying to his library of control layouts and the delays were getting shorter as his systems brought the technical archives closer to his foremind, like an iceberg being ponderously carried towards him on a new current. The dance of patterns and diagrams across his vision sped up and spread out. Tey watched comparative overlays of Leviathan control banks, the bridge pits of Imperial starships, Titan consoles. The flickering patterns gained urgency, reached deeper into his vast internal library. An overlay of the bridge of an Armageddon gigatanker tried to match itself to the scene in front of him, but could find no purchase and slid away. An overlay of the macrosystem control pulpits of Ectarion Hive on Braga Sanctis flickered for a moment as Tey's data-matching algorithms thought they found points of similarity, then that evaporated too.

Tey paced up and down the control banks, hands folded into his sleeves, metal fingers snicking softly as they moved against each other. He could see a pattern emerging, but it was the pattern of no-pattern. The architecture of the Inheritor King's bridge shied away from every STC and archeprint that Tey's monumental memory banks could bring up. Every time he thought he was identifying a perfect alignment of form, the details of the match missed one another by the barest of margins. It was as if the whole machine-edifice had been built by someone carefully kicking over the traces of their inspiration in the divine lore of the Mechanicus.

He resisted the temptation to force-match, and sparked with impatience at his own impatience – had he still owned an organic face capable of movement, he

would have been scowling. Force-matching was cheating. Tey knew there was a truth buried somewhere in this tangle of inert machinery, but it was a truth that had to unfurl itself for him. It had to emerge from the constellation of data and the parallax of his thoughts. It had been an axiom of Tey's almost since his induction: you could no more tear a truth out of the universe than you could tear a spiderweb loose in your fist and expect it to come away undamaged.

He made himself stand still. He dimmed his optics (an observer would have seen his eyelights fade, until the space under the russet cowl was nothing but shadow), and pushed his thought-mosaics back from his primary processes for a moment. In their place he arrayed a code-cant psalm, an ancient Martian tech-song, soothing and uplifting. The aural component keened softly in his ears and the code component spread out to fill his personal noosphere, its symmetries beautiful, traditional and comforting.

Tey sang to himself for forty-three seconds precisely, then lowered his head for a moment and reignited his eyelights. He felt composed, back on balance again. It would come to him. He would watch and listen...

Listen.

He allowed himself a little inner smile.

The Inheritor King was the only one not to speak. He remembered that from the conversation with Adalbrecht. Speaking. Voices. The night of the raid was the night the Kings would find their voices.

Such a silly mistake. Tey had been looking where he should have been listening.

Tey cycled up a new bank of senses to full sharpness, dimming down his sight, focusing his hearing. He listened in every audible spectrum: to the electromagnetic bands, to the thrum of the graveyard's manifold, to the buzz and chirrup of ambient energy. He woke senses more exotic still and turned them all to look past and through the banked controllers in front of him, and down into the dizzying microwebs of circuitry the Heritor had laid out beneath them.

Silly mistake. So obvious. The screams of chattercode the other Inheritor Kings had been woken to utter had all been pointed here. This was where they had sent the voices they had found. And deep in the Inheritor King there was enough life in the circuits to keep those voices echoing. The blank brain of what would have been the King's machine-spirit was cycling the ghosts of its siblings' chatterscreams around and around in its systems, like a newborn murmuring in its sleep, shaping words it was too young to understand.

Tey listened to the chatter, threaded it out through his systems and tried to

parse it for patterns, traces of familiar cyphers, even common elements to the lower forms of heretek scrapcodes, the ones he was able to carry in his mind with their malignance contained.

He listened to the chatter, even while his senses traced it as tiny energy pulses through the control webs, mapping the channels of the Inheritor King's brain.

He listened to the chatter, while Barrel stood motionless behind him and his servo-skulls circled in their holding patterns above him and the silence thickened around them like gathering dust.

Tey listened to the chatter.

XXIII

Transmechanic Ajji watched him pacing slowly in the bridge of the Inheritor King, Barrel motionless beside him, the skulls orbiting. She watched him with her thoughts darker than the perpetual twilight that his monstrous lifter-ship had cast over them all.

While Tey had been meandering outside the great beast she had observed him through the optical scintillae atop the slender surveillance masts spaced through the graveyard, and through the eyes of a handful of skitarii who had obeyed her orders to fall in and shadow the graveyard's guest. She had made sure no skitarius followed the quarry for more than fifty metres or so, short enough encounters to make it look like chance. She was unsure if Tey held her in as much suspicion as she held him, but she wasn't going to take risks.

Now she watched him directly through her higher senses, tracking him by identicast triangulation from the shrine's transceiver vanes. Tey was not communicating with the manifold, although he had left a single, basic IFF indicator running in contact with it – had he severed himself from it entirely, Ajji would have been prepared to consider that a hostile act and launch the skitarii and tech-militia on him without further thought.

The only thing Tey seemed to be communicating with was the servitor, the perpetually stooped little creature that was always lugging that data-churn around at his heels. Ajji had not attempted to actually tap the communications between the two – partly because the transmissions themselves were a wonder of subtle signal-craft and deep encryption that she suspected even her own considerable capabilities might not be a match for, but mostly because, even with

her respect for the Magos Parallact worn down to nothing, that was still a line she was not prepared to cross.

But even disregarding their content, the fact of the signals betrayed the magos. Ajji was good at what she did. She was skilled in her technics, well-versed in her mysteries, pious in her devotions. She tracked the faint gossamer of Tey's connection to his 'Barrel', re-gearred her primary senses into the passive auspex, watched him, and brooded.

Hours came and went, changes of shifts and watches. Magos Tey did not move from the King's bridge. He did not break his silence to make even the most basic routine check-ins or observances to the shrine, or to corticoflect to its shrine icons.

It was full night again by the time Ajji decided that Tey was dormant, or meditating, or at any rate not about to leave the Inheritor King. Quick on the heels of that observation, before her nerve could fail her, Ajji sent a summons to Enginseer Daprokk, and began to make plans.

XXIV

In the higher reaches of Galhoulin Tey's consciousness, realignments were under way. Instead of silos in three virtual dimensions, his analyses were now worked into great webbed globes of facts, speculative annotations and connections, like tight-woven balls of virtual string. Each of these hung in his mindspace in precise and meaningful relation to the others, the surface of each globe sparking and glittering where data concordances connected it to its fellows.

Stringing them together like a silk thread through a set of pearls was the stream of chattercode Tey had stolen from the Inheritor King's unformed and restless brain. The chatter as it had slithered into his senses the night of the partisans' suicide raid. The chatter as it had whispered to itself in the dark below Heritor Asphodel's empty throne. Chatter as it...

The data-globes' arrangement was altering with calm unstoppable, like a once-in-a-millennium concordance in a planetary system. Tey felt the balance of his thoughts tilted this way and that by the shift in their gravity. Strands of his mind raced through each individual array, chasing connections and patterns around and between them, flashing back and forth to each other, building up a picture to present to his primary consciousness. But his primary consciousness

stood back from the process, watched himself thinking, drew new ideas and data into the swirl and watched how his own thoughts dealt with them.

If the analytical groups he had been watching were planets moving in bright and orderly orbits, then these new ideas were rogues, dark gravitic anomalies from deep in his mental Oort cloud, moving into the light, bending the courses of the system around themselves.

(And in his secret mind, that hot, red, fizzing itch.)

He settled his mental focus on the first of the dark thought-spheres, feeling the rest of his processes gather and align on it also. After a moment, under the mental pressure, it flared off a bright swarm of data-tags that coruscated outward and began to integrate themselves more aggressively into the rest of Tey's matrix.

These thought-spheres were *scrapcode*, were *heretek*, were *De Umbra Xana* and more, and it had taken a conscious act of will and permission for Tey to detach them from the locked vaults of his own mind. He had brought them out into the run of his thoughts with sombre focus and care, wrapping them in holy cant-admonitions and abjurative calculi whose principles had been laid down in the days when Mars herself was still burning in the agony of the Heresy.

Initiates to the Mechanicus priesthood soon began to hear oblique hints about the warp-perverted mirroring of the Mechanicus's own beautiful logic forms into something only a rotted mind could use. By the time they had advanced any way up the complex ziggurat of holy offices they would know of its existence as a fact. By the time they had entered the higher mysteries of their particular order they would know how the Archenemy had made use of it, what atrocities they had committed with it. The most puissant and trusted magi might even begin training should they ever encounter it, in order to resist it.

Tey had sometimes been called on to help provide that training. He had insight and experience that he knew, for a simple and immodest fact, that few of his peers could match.

None of it was helping here.

Tey watched the sealed thought-processes that had evaluated the chatter logs throw their conclusions out into his mindspace where they were snatched up by the realigned thought arrays and sent into a tight, crazed blizzard of referents and matches. But the whirl did not last. After what had been only seconds of deliberation (though to Tey's foremind, diving from concrete reality into his own dream of thought, it seemed a matter of hours) the processes slowed and drifted apart, unable to find purchase. The match was poor, the parallels almost non-

existent. What correspondences he had been able to find were barely even the result of convergent design – they were nearly all anomalies, statistical noise.

Tey's lower thoughts tasted disappointment, and the feeling was quick to percolate up through his mind and sour the taste of his mood. With each foray out into the graveyard to survey the woe machines, and with every new datum about the Hammerstone Kings themselves, Tey had been getting less certain of the premises of his mission. Now his certainty was in tatters.

Heretek, the Munitorum communiqués had said. They had sounded so sure of themselves, telling each other that Asphodel was the spawn of some renegade warp-touched forge world, some secret set of defiled teachings hidden away from the eyes of Mars by generations of corrupted devotees.

Of course they had *sounded* sure of themselves, Tey thought, skidding around on a momentary tangent. Slaydo and Blackwood had known just what they were doing when they had dropped their oh-so-casual speculations into the communiqués they had allowed the Mechanicus to overhear. It had galled Gurzell and his peers to have to play at being taken in, but to allow the slightest shadow to be cast on their cult would have galled worse. And anyway, Tey would find it stimulatingly ironic if the Mechanicus itself ended up using the Dark Adeptus as a cover to drown the secret that...

...but the locked directive Gurzell had had him inload into the peak of his foremind nipped off that train of thought then, and jolted Tey back onto his original one.

There had to be a match. In his own brain and in the great mind-trove he carried with him on Barrel's back, Tey carried the work of hundreds of generations of magi in cataloguing the machinery of the Archenemy. And outside was a wealth of wrecks, a grand library of the Heritor's lore, as soon as Tey could unpick the language that it was written in. He was sure there would be a match. There *must be* a match. The alternatives? (And the red locking-rune at the apex of his consciousness pulsed and jittered as the centre of gravity of his thoughts veered close, so close to it.) Tey did not wish to dwell on the alternative.

Keep working, that was all there was to it. Keep searching. Keep sifting. Motionless in the dark cell, nothing visible in front of him but the tiniest of orange glows from Barrel's eyelights, Tey dropped further and further into the rolling sea of his own thoughts, hunting for heretek, listening to the chatter.

His senses were pulled in tight around him. He didn't hear the alert-cry, barely registered the urgent summons from the *Ramosh Incalculable*. Nothing properly

broke through to Galhoulin Tey until the Inheritor King screamed.

XXV

‘See?’ said Ajji. She was canting, using the most curt and functional code protocols but with steel-sharp priority and alert markers – the effect was gruffness covering desperation. Enginseer Daprokk was stunned and intimidated in equal measure.

‘I do see.’ Daprokk lacked the specialist adaptations Ajji had that would build a complete sensory picture of the graveyard’s manifold and the transmissions that were lancing through it, but the cruder representational logs that she was showing him told the story perfectly well.

‘But why would the *Ramosh Incalculate* block you like this? You are not bonded to the ship. The chain of authority here goes from ourselves directly back to the alpha-forge at High Hive. It doesn’t–’

‘Yes,’ Ajji snapped back at him. ‘That’s the *point*. We don’t report to *him*.’ The code-signifier for Galhoulin Tey had none of the formal status headers that the magos’s station entitled him to, but it was wrapped in encryption and security designators echoing the ones the graveyard manifold used for hostiles. Ajji wasn’t even trying to hide it any more: she was openly referring to Tey as a threat and an enemy. ‘He’s having his ship keep us clamped down while he goes about his business. Right in front of us. As if we don’t matter.’

‘The magos is–’

‘He must have known we’d find out sooner or later. He’s not here to oversee the breakup of the Hammerstone Kings. He’s not here to restore order in the graveyard or get those prisoners working again like they should.’

‘The alpha-forge said–’

‘The alpha-forge,’ Ajji replied heavily, ‘said we had a magos coming with orders regarding the Hammerstone Kings. That message was genuine. I know what I’m talking about. They couldn’t know this impostor would get here first. Somewhere there’s a *real* magos who was sent here. Might still be on his way, might have been misled off-course. This Tey can be very convincing. Might be dead. That’s my guess. Tey murdered the real magos, the one who would have come here in proper devotion and got to work. The ship’s crew might be dupes, or they might be in on it themselves. Why was the *Ramosh Incalculate*

deconsecrated and taken away from the Titan Legios? We don't know. Don't deny that that's suspicious.'

The only response Daprokk could think of was to stare at her and wait for her to continue.

'And now this. I tried to send a transmission to the alpha-forge. They need to know what this so-called magos is doing. My array is being jammed and suppressed. Can't send through the surface relays, can't send through the satellite shell.'

'Perhaps if the machine-spirits of your transceiver network are troubled, it is a sign that—'

'The disposition of my machine-spirits has been executed perfectly, Daprokk,' Ajji snapped. 'Their anima is in balance and their temperament is in accord with mine. Stop changing the subject.'

'Ajji—'

'They won't get away with this. What sort of magos would do such a thing? One with a bad secret to keep. But listen: they're using simple brute force and coverage to suppress us. They have more raw power than we do, but, *Ommissiah laudatum*, I'm a better transmechanic than they think I am. I have a way to get the warning out. But I need your help.'

Daprokk ran through the memory-logs of his dealings with Magos Tey. He came to a decision.

'Tell me.'

XXVI

For the second time, Tey was pulled from reverie by the alien buzz of the Heritor's legacy code. The first time it had drawn him back out of himself in time to see the end of the partisans' mad little raid. Now, it showed him the death of Transmechanic Ajji.

After the jolt of code that had come leaking into his senses Tey surfaced into the shrine's manifold, running flush-and-clear routines on his sensory and comms caches like someone trying to shake off the ringing in their ears after a great and turbulent noise.

There was a change in the feel of the ambient data-field around him. It was hotter, more powerfully transmitted, the fine layers stripped out of it. There was

an urgency, a change in the tenor of it. If Tey had left a manifold ordered like the calm, methodical activity of a manufactorum floor, then he had returned to something more like a skitarii battle-manifold, enemy sighted, waiting for the order to attack.

A great shout of Mechanicus code from somewhere close by actually fuzzed Tey's finer senses for a moment, and he turned his internal auspex about him. The incoming power loads were far greater than they should have been – someone had created a quick, improvised hub to funnel power from all across the graveyard's grid into the transceiver array. How had Daprokk given his assent to that?

Then, in counterpoint to what he had just perceived, Tey heard the chatter again, and it scattered every other thought from his mind.

XXVII

Successive revelations slammed home into his forebrain with analogue feedback almost like an electrical shock. If Tey had still had organic lungs inside his narrow steel-alloy ribcage he would have gasped. But every level of his mind had tested them, and his subprocessors fed an awareness of every attempt they had made to falsify this new knowledge and an awareness of how true it was.

From the upmind streams that had been running on his conscious thoughts and investigations, the knowledge that *the Inheritor King is not what we thought*.

From the process that had been running inside the sealed, crimson directive-rune from Archmagos Gurzell, the realisation that *the Inheritor King is just what we feared*.

And the flash of insight as every thought-strand debouched into his consciousness and the combined data lit up like sheet lightning: *the Inheritor King is not dead*.

And an instant later, the manifold was incandescent with screams.

XXVIII

Ajji screamed as it hit her. She had woven her own mind deep into the controls of the transmission array, deeper than she had merged herself with any machine

she had ever had stewardship of. She was gambling everything on forcing a transmission for aid past the electromagnetic shadow of the Headstone, as oppressive to her data-senses as its physical self was to her sight.

Ajji died without ever fully understanding how her gamble had failed. When she had thrown open her transceiver to send her distress call she had known that the matching transmitters in the Treading King, the Blighting King and the Poison King had been ritually destroyed after the raid. She had pronounced the rites over their slagged remains herself.

But the virtual presence that sluiced down her open link, commandeered her mind, seized and snuffed and extinguished her, had come from the hulk of the Inheritor King.

In the moment before a power-surge through Ajji's augmetics blew her delicately-tuned nervous system to wreckage, the Inheritor King turned the graveyard's manifold into a white miasma with a hellish coded howl of its own.

XXIX

Jers Adalbrecht had no senses that could directly hear the King's voice, but he heard it nevertheless. For a heartbeat, the vox-horns on their masts around the sand-choked remains of his old marshalling square yammered and chattered with some strange signal that he had never heard before: nothing that could come from a human throat, too broken and strange to be proper machine-cant but too weirdly quasi-organic to be simple static. He sat upright in his seat, eyes closed, listening to see if he could hear it again.

No more noise from the horns. But that tiny bark of code was being answered. From the rows of worker tents and penitent cells around him he could hear the clamour rising. There were shouts, crashes. Screams were starting. Pain-screams, dying screams. The Asheki had recognised something in that code-bark even if Adalbrecht could not.

He walked to the door of his little cabin and looked out. Dust was welling up into the air between the tent rows as brawls broke out. One set of tents collapsed and Adalbrecht watched an Administratum overseer struggle free of the fallen fabric only to be knocked to the ground and lost beneath a scrum of bodies, clubs and crude knives rising and falling. He smelled smoke. Somewhere someone had managed to start one of the buildings burning.

He felt no fear, and no despair. He felt an empty calmness. The exhaustion of his nerves did not bother him now. His head was clear as he walked back into his little cloister. He didn't know or care where that strange signal had come from. Time for all this to end. Past time.

Adalbrecht hefted his staff and sang a psalm to himself as he waited for the Asheki to come in and find him.

XXX

What a hellhole, Shipmaster Mhorock Tobin thought as he looked down through six dozen mechanical eyes at the graveyard. He allowed himself no distracting thoughts beyond that. He was concentrating on obeying the order he had been given.

But below him, the hellhole raged on. The labourers from the work camps brawled with graveyard armsmen and a handful of skitarii in the choked little pathways winding among the cairns of scrap. There were sparks of weapon fire, and larger sparks as bigger blazes lit off in fuel dumps or from flammable debris. Many skitarii had had their systems overwhelmed by the manifold scream and were stumbling listlessly along, incapable of resistance, or had gone into undirected frenzies, lashing wildly about them with blade and shot whether there were enemies within reach or no.

In the centre of it all, a different sort of sign in his sensors, dim but as deeply and powerfully ominous as the first rumble of an earthquake: the sudden cycling-up of the Inheritor King's engines, the flow of power to its tracks.

GET IT AWAY. NOW.

Tey's message came in on an override channel Tobin hadn't realised the magos even knew about, lancing through the ship's systems and into his own personal noetics hard enough to cause him actual pain. Tey hadn't told Tobin who was driving the thing, and he didn't care. He had had to hold off his mission while Tey had fooled about in the graveyard, but now he was finally cleared to do what the *Ramosh Incalculat*e had been sent here to do.

'What are you doing down there, machine?' he asked aloud, as the eyes inside the arkosect bay saw it fill with the great, grand, grotesque shape of the King. The ridge of spires down its spine rose up toward the bay's ceiling as the Headstone engulfed its newest cargo.

‘It doesn’t matter,’ Tobin answered himself. His ship, its Cyclopean mass guided down with millimetre precision, was in position. Tobin looked at his measurements, looked at them again.

He engaged the gravitic clamps.

‘Got you!’

XXXI

The chatter was all around him now. The whole of the Inheritor King’s giant hull had come to life to conduct it. Tey spun on the spot, robe flaring around him, servo-skulls pinwheeling above him.

Alerts and battle-cant prickled at the edge of his senses. All-out battle had broken out in the graveyard. The partisans must have been preparing for this. They had no intention of sitting back and letting their King be taken.

Their intentions were not relevant any more. Tey was taking the matter out of their hands.

As if on cue, he felt the King shift slightly as the Headstone seized it, shift again as its tracks left the earth. He could feel a tiny vibration through the decking of the bridge: they had lifted the monster up a fraction of a second before it would have moved its tracks and started to roll.

Another squall of chattercode against his senses jolted Tey into action. He was not in the belly of the beast, but he was locked inside its dead skull, and he needed to be outside it. He began to mentally plot his way back to the breached hatch he had entered by, when he registered that the control boards were flickering and the blast shutters were trembling in their mountings at the bases of the windows. He glanced over at the great curved shape of the command throne that Asphodel had never had the chance to sit in. A man who created a thing like this to ride in and a thing like that to sit in would not be content to slog up to his bridge from a distant side hatch.

Tey walked up into the shadows behind the throne, and the high doors opened for him.

XXXII

Ten minutes later he was looking down at the King through the thick diamond-glass wall of the *Ramosh Incalculat*e's viewing gallery. Standing on the King's back waiting for the crane-arm to extend out and collect them had been harrowing: high-velocity winds were churning around the arkosect bay, scouring it with dust kicked up by the chaos in the graveyard and the lifter's ascent. It had been an effort to keep his feet and not go tumbling down the side of the King, out and into the ever-lengthening free fall back to Chillbreak. The studied quiet of the ship's halls seemed almost surreal by contrast.

Tey brought his arms together, laced his hands inside the overlapping sleeves of his robes, felt his fingers start to writhe and work against each other as he stared down at the engine.

Not dead, he thought, but not alive enough to fight back any more, at least not in time. I think I know what you are now. It is bitter to me that it took such extremity to confirm it, but now, at the end of it all, at least you are in my power.

And as if on cue, that last thought was suddenly, horribly reversed on him.

Tey didn't feel it coming. He could have expected something, some harbinger. A twinge in his remote senses. An oncoming rumble of code across the noetic band. A warning shock as the attack hit and took the measure of his personal defences. But nothing, no warning. The voice was simply there, in his head, speaking to him.

—We are under way, then. So good to have the journey finally begun.—

Tey had heard engines give voice to shattering daemon-roars and the shouts of gods, or choruses of code that buzzed in the bones like surgeons' drills. But the King's voice was pleasant, conversational, human-sounding, softly modulated as if for a library or temple, and all the more frightening for it.

And then there was this: *Tey could not move.*

—We'll be together for some time, you and I,— the King went on, **—and you'll need to learn respect. You are not to look at me the way you have been doing. I am not one of your little workshop toys, and I am not a salvage trophy. I am another thing entirely. You will need to understand this.—**

Tey tried to move a hand, couldn't. Tried to turn his head. To shrug his shoulders. All denied him. He tried to vocalise, and his vox-grille stayed silent. He tried a radio-band binaric cant, then a string of noetic speech across increasingly subtler waves. Nothing. His mind whirled inside his inert statue of a body.

—Don't think that I consider you worthless,— came the voice again. **—Why should I lie about it? You are valuable. I shall even call you extraordinary. I**

discussed you with the other Kings, and I don't believe any of us encountered anything like you in the war.—

Tey tried flickering the direct-beam infrared transmitters at the corners of his eyes, but those systems were numb. The tiny X-ray lasers in the tips of his little fingers could have sent a pulse-code of warning – Tey was not aware of a receptor in line to receive their beams but at least the signature would show up on the bridge. But although he conceptualised the message and the command to power them up, they stayed as inert as every other part of him. Somewhere in the back of his mind he could feel the persistent brush of his connection to Barrel, but he forced his thoughts away again. He would not do anything that might draw the King's attention to that connection, not until he absolutely had to.

Fear smouldered around the bottom of his mind but he caught it, teased it out, threaded the fear-thoughts through damping filters and cleared his head. He still had that much control, at least.

There came a tiny shift in his equilibrium, as though the floor had tilted under him, and his gown and cloak flapped about him in a breeze that was suddenly everywhere for a moment before it died down.

—I sensed that. Explain it. You may answer.— And Tey suddenly had a voice again.

'We've lifted high enough that planetary gravity has thinned out,' he said, as calmly as he could. 'The ship's gravity has re-engaged. The process is rarely completely seamless. The momentary fluctuation in air pressure is the most common visible indic—' His voice vanished before he could complete the thought.

—See?— said the Inheritor King. **—You're showing your value. I have pride, as is only right, but I'm not blind. I understand there are things I must know that I don't yet know, and things I must do that I'll need you to do. This is not unfitting. Every king needs a herald, does he not?—**

Tey's body turned, carried him around so he was no longer looking into the bay. His feet moved to match, and he took a step down the viewing gallery to the high-crowned doors. His body walked, and his mind was carried along inside.

Tey was unprepared for such a terrible alienation from himself, to be so unhinged from the body that had been his to command for decades upon decades. Each footstep was a jolt, each shift in balance as he strode forward seemed drunken and clumsy, certain to tip him over at any moment. He wanted to damp out his optics and perform calming exercises in a moment of darkness but even that was beyond him. A helpless passenger, he watched his metal hand

extend his Martian signet and the blast-shutters rumble aside to let him through. His body began to walk again. Smoother, more fluid. He was already being manipulated more skilfully. Barrel padded along behind him.

–**There will need to be changes,**– the King said conversationally into his ears as he turned the corner towards the carrier shafts. Two of the ship’s crew came hurrying, shuffled against the wall and stared, but the King did not seem to be interested in them and kept Tey’s eyes straight ahead. –**You will need to be reshaped before you are fully useful to me. Body and mind.**–

Tey watched himself step aboard a carrier-car, and watched Barrel shuffle in past him a moment before the car started to move.

–**And my maker may wish more changes in you when we reunite with him, of course, and I shall defer to his will as he is the Heritor and Magister and above Kingship himself.**–

Tey’s hand extended the signet again. There was a brief fuzz of code between it and the car’s reader and then a chime of acknowledgement. They were on their way to the *Ramosh Incalculat*e’s bridge, the King chatting inside Tey’s head all the way.

–**You will not like the changes.**– Tey thought he almost heard regret in its voice. –**Or at least the ‘you’ to whom I am speaking now will not. The ‘you’ that you will be once my changes are finished will relish them.**– The internal lights flashed red: they were entering the bridge. –**But I won’t insult you by not expecting resistance. And here we are.**–

XXXIII

Mhorock Tobin could feel hot fatigue running from his legs up his back and shoulders, as though he’d run up a hundred stairs with a weighted yoke on his neck. That he was used to: it was the *Ramosh Incalculat*e feeding him sense-analogue reports of the orbital ascent. But coming on top of it was the damage from the demented brawl that had broken out through the graveyard as they lifted off. From one side came a series of pain-spots, radiating into him from the air next to his right calf as though he had an extra layer of skin out there, and that skin had just had a string of blisters pulled open. Missile-pocks from a salvo from somewhere in the hulk of the Treading King. His left foot kept wriggling against the sensation that there was a lit lho-stick ember inside his boot. A

sustained heavy las-shot score that felt like it had cut through the shielding and broken a coolant reservoir somewhere just inside the hull. A groaning sensation around the side of his left hip preyed on his mind the most. That hinted at some sort of structural weakness, a freak shot hitting some of the mainstay supports inside the Titan bay. That giant cavity in the *Ramosh*'s belly felt alien enough to him already, the unfamiliar gape of internal walls removed and the twitch-tickle of feedback from the new gantries and macroservos, but since the last part of the ascent there had been a whole new layer of strange data, independent of the rest of his feeds, as though the damnable engine they had grabbed up from Ashek II had come alive and started wriggling.

All this from inside his ship, and outside they were clear of the atmosphere but passing into the debris belt that the naval engagements had left. Tobin's visual interface was on the holoschematics of the orbital litter and the point-defence grid that was fending off the rogue chunks of wreck with gravitic slings and mass-driver slugs. Even for a pilot of Tobin's skill it was a taxing piece of work, and so of course it had to be now that the watch-servitor announced the arrival of Magos Tey.

Tobin didn't look up. He was in communion with his ship and his function and the scrapwit could either state an override order or he could wait. A ripple of sensation like goosebumps ran down the back of his left shoulder and into his flank, where one of the fender crews had used a sling field to project the ship's gravity outside the hull for just the moment necessary to slingshot a spiralling chunk of wreckage away on a new course. Tobin flicked up the schematics, approved the course, and opened a cant-line down to the crew cell, commending the forewoman and soothing the machine-spirits inside the sling array. Backing out of the cant-line he felt that infuriating wriggle from the Titan bays again. What now? Even under fire he had triple-checked the bay feeds as they lifted off, and the Archenemy engine had been secured. And Tey had been down there with it, hell he had come aboard *inside* the thing, right up until—

The internal auspex bar vanished from the edge of Tobin's visual overlay. Less than a second and the dancing green swarm of vox-stream trackers went too. The chill that clutched Tobin's guts had nothing to do with ship's feedback.

No time to vocalise. A quick burst of cant on the general band set all section crews on action stations. The manifold feeds from the payload bay winked out. A tight-code alert to the ziggurat crew of an emergency on the bridge, and instantly came a booming metal chorus as the hatches into the bridge slammed shut. As fast as he dared, Tobin started withdrawing himself from the ship's

systems and as he did those systems began to vanish from around him. He was a man running over ground that was giving way a centimetre behind his heels; he was fleeing a lighted hall in which the lights were being extinguished one by one around him.

Back in his physical senses, the high-vaulted wedge of the bridge was in ridiculous calm. The servitors reclined in their niches, without so much as a twitch of their wasted muscles to show anything amiss. The data-globes still shone their flickering green, the lumen stalks woven about the walls still glowed white-gold. The three silver-filigree gargoyles still jetted about overhead, leaving trails of incense streams. The soft jingle of the machine totems hanging from their wings counterpointed the bass note of the engines that thrummed through the hull.

Tobin twisted his sweating head around, saw Magos Tey, reached out to strike at the traitor with a noetic intercept probe, and was thrown back with a blast of agonising static that left him reeling in his command throne with his mind struck blunt and blurred.

XXXIV

Tey felt the pulse that hit Tobin, felt the Inheritor King trigger it within him and send it roaring out. The King's grip was tightening on him, its manipulations full of scornful crudity at first but learning control with chilling, predatory speed. Tey felt his right arm extend forwards, then a painful grating as three optic-crystal dendrites extended from his palm, wriggled over the nearest console and jammed themselves into the controls.

–That will be a change, for example. We will reshape you as this ship's new pilot. When we find my maker I will be his fortress and his chariot, but this vessel will be mine.–

Tey felt the connection start up, as though his lifeblood were running out through the dendrites into the plinth. Data-globes across the bridge began flickering amber and red, and the servitors' supine bodies twitched in time.

–This is mine now. All of it.– The King's voice carried a note of petulance. **– And you will be my link to it. You'll make the other one unnecessary in time, won't you?–** There was a shifting in the nature of the King's hold, a turning inward of forces. Tey fought down his fear, braced himself. The end was

coming. **–You have your skills in here. You have so much in here. So much! So much that all belongs to me.–**

The King's grip was sinking deeper into his head. His thoughts throbbed with the pressure of it. Something came scraping along the surface of his mental guards, invisible claws raking at the outside of a steel door. From his skull to his heels, Tey's nerves screeched and sang.

–I don't resent your resistance,– came the King's voice as it peeled the top off Tey's mind and ran its touch over his raw thoughts, **–but the delusion that you're able to stop me is a particularly cruel one. Show me how to take control. You will fly this ship for me. *Show me!*–**

Its weight bore down on him and Tey's consciousness bulged like a soft fruit trodden under a boot heel. For a moment there was no coherent thought in his head; even his perceptions ceased to make sense, his surroundings becoming a jumble of incomprehensible shapes and sensations before his mind re-established itself and organised them again. Images and sensations twined and merged as the King rummaged in his head.

Tey began to concentrate on the pathways out of his mind, watching the tracks down into the ship's controls blazing with data traffic. He watched the orders go out and the readings come back, the cries of the crew as mechanisms came to life, as lights flickered off and on, as ship's gravity shivered and pulsed. He looked on in despair as the code-avatars of the ship's magi appeared in its manifold, battling to restore calm to its systems, and were battered and torn by the expanding vortex of the King's control. His thoughts spasmed as the King tore through his skill-set archives and dragged the shipmaster codes out into active mode. The sheer brawn of the Abominable Intelligence's mind was astonishing, horrifying.

Tey couldn't match that raw strength, and so he fled from it. His time was running out. He had to move while it was still on his side.

He withdrew even the attempts at sensory connections to his limbs, and shut down his perception centres. The knit of data-tags and referent lines vanished from his vision, and his view of the bridge was naked but for what his unassisted eyes showed him. Tobin was pushing himself along on his back, trying to get some distance, the muzzle of some blunt little holdout gun groping the air. Two of the servitors at the control plinths were thrashing in jerky double-time, their dark-red surcoats stained with nurturant fluid that drooled from pulled-out fittings. More hung slack in their sockets or slumped forward over the lecterns. Worst of all, Tey saw as his vision began to grey out, was that some were starting

to move again, responding to canted commands that he realised must be coming from him.

No panic. He would not permit it of himself. Tey cut the last of the ties to his senses and was alone in the dark whirl and eddy of his thoughts. He began plotting a route down into himself, working on where in the great maze of his augmented mind he could hide from—

Slabs of ship's data sprang up around his consciousness like a half-circle of megaliths. Acceleration was good, orbital trajectory basically sound but needed refining. System maps flashed and circled as he found a route out through Ashek's cluttered ecliptic. Internal systems were still complicated, too much and too new, but there would be time to establish that once the Headstone was on a confident out-of-system heading. The reactor furnace was pulsing in rhythm to his own and the warp chamber was just waiting to be—

No.

Tey let out a silent snarl and dragged himself free. Those were not his thoughts. There was something in his mind besides his mind, using his thoughts and skills against his will. The King was in here with him. He found enough control to shut down the shipboard subdex and watched the data he had understood at a glance turn to an impenetrable scribble of runes and lines, the shape of the Ashek system's planets the only things he still recognised.

—No,— came the Inheritor King's voice in among his thoughts, **—that's enough. Believe me, you shall suffer more than I if we begin this in acrimony. I wish us to attain a stable orbit, and then I wish to look down at my home for a few moments before we leave. See to it, or I shall reactivate that part of you and see to it myself.—**

Tey remained silent, abandoned the thought set that controlled his outer limbs and external communications. He didn't expect that to dispel the King's voice, and it didn't.

—That world was my home,— the King said. **—My maker would have done great things there if he had woken me in time. But we must turn ourselves to our future. There will be other worlds.—**

Tey guessed the King's next move with a fraction of a moment to spare, and killed his resource files on the Sabbath Worlds' industrial centres while the King's thunderous mental presence was still bearing down on them. That presence followed him as he fled deeper into the maze of his own thoughts, through his own true memories and the mock-memories of data inloads. Another command

banished the resources on forge worlds, names, natures, even the concept itself: a moment after the data-hive was cut off Tey no longer understood what a ‘forge world’ might be.

–**I understand.**– The King’s tone was still level and unruffled. –**I know what my maker needs.**–

Tey’s head spun. His thoughts ceased to be his own. Everything was a savage twist of vertigo as the King’s directives slammed home deeper and deeper in his mind, dragging his thoughts and memories back online against his will.

–**He needs these,**– and then they were looking at the beetle-backed orbital forges high above the crater-raddled continents of Ektorra-Lehm. –**He needs these,**– and they stared at the great foundry silos that reared up over Yallourn.

–**He needs these.**– The five great spaceports of Artemia slid by in montage, great columns of tanks and APCs rumbling up the sweeping bridges from the manufactory marshalling yards, so new their metal hides gleamed in the green-tinged sunlight. –**He needs these.**– Castaburg. Ryza. Triplex Phall. Fortis Binary. Urdesch. Verghast.

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Tey had managed to seize a scrap of data from his recent mental logs and fling it at the invading mind, a micromoment of interference to slow it down. As a show of defiance it was objectively pathetic: a cornered clerk flinging a handful of papers at an onrushing ork would have had more brio, but Tey still managed a moment’s satisfied surprise. In barely a blink of processing time the fragment of his earlier data-reverie had been snatched into the King’s thought-juggernaut like a wisp of silky grain-husk sucked into the intakes of a harvest-thresher.

The Inheritor King’s reaction was unnerving, because it was so unexpected. Instead of shredding the information and pursuing Tey’s consciousness anew, it caught the little pellet of data, held it spinning within a subprocess that represented itself to Tey as a spherical cage of gleaming black un-light, and unfolded it. Together they watched the pict footage of the burning of the High Hive in mental silence.

–**What is this?**– There was a strange cast to the soundless thought-stream that was the Inheritor King’s analogue voice. It was not anger, or contempt. Tey thought it might be... –**What is it?**– It was fascination.

–**Such a construct. And such a burning. This is your work. The Titans of the Mechanicus.**– Tey felt the King’s attention settling back onto him. –**You call yourselves makers, but look! All you make is ruin. Ruin in the name of your Omnissiah. Do you deny it?**–

The monstrous thought-engine shuddered and the motion dragged a reply from Tey that he was helpless to keep in.

‘I deny it utterly. The Mechanicus are makers and knowers. Through union with the Machine we turn mind and hand to—’ It was as far as he got before the King’s suffocating will blanketed him and silenced him.

—**Makers.**— This time there was no uncertainty to the tone. The King’s voice dripped with contempt. —**Knowers.**— The image of the High Hive’s pyre was whipped away.

—**Your creations are worthless,**— it said instead, —**and your knowledge is nothing. I can see your creation and your knowledge. I can *feel* it. Worthless.**—

And Tey in turn could feel the King’s touch, a gentle but nauseatingly gritty touch directly against his consciousness, the feel of worn, wet sandpaper dabbing the inside of his skull.

The mental architecture around him was shifting. Its weight spread, its grip tightened. The marching gallery of data the King had viewed through him vanished from his perception as the King severed it back out of Tey’s mind; a moment later the raw stumps of association and recollection went numb as the King took away Tey’s knowledge of what had been taken.

—**These are your shrines,**— the King said, although with the hole gouged in his mind Tey could not tell what the invader was referring to. There was a momentary, nagging feeling that something had gone missing, but nothing more. —**I see your holy places. You built temples to knowledge and gave over whole continents to forging. Worthless. There is no creation here. I look at world after world that your Mechanicus have badged as your own and I see nothing that matches those boasts of yours. You are slaves to ideas that are generations dead. You crawl through the motions of invention but dead traditions rule every last twitch of your thinking. They have long since crushed any of this divine spark of understanding you claim to have. This mastery of the fabric of the cosmos that you insist belongs only to you.**—

Tey could feel himself being *dilated*. The King’s consciousness had extruded itself into new shapes, finding anchor points in Tey’s psyche. Tey’s mind was pushed open like a parasol, stretched like an artist’s canvas on a frame, pegged out like an anatomical specimen. The sense of violation was utter and total.

—**I even feel compassion for you,**— the King said. Its mental voice was stern, but still perfectly calm, the voice of a teacher patiently correcting an obstreperous student. —**Here, at the end, all your thousands of years of**

knowledge and skill have failed you. You are a proud creation of your Machine-God, as I am the proud creation of my Heritor. But I require you to recognise, and understand, and accept, that I am your King.–

Patches of Tey's thought-lattice were flaring to life again, but there was no comfort in it: it was not Tey's doing. The shadowy weight of the Inheritor King was spreading itself through his beautiful, flowing teleograms, shaping to them the way a force-shifter would adjust itself to fit a rivet-head. Its grip was a slow tide of crawling chatter, the touch of thousands of tiny, rough-shelled crustaceans swarming across the skin of Tey's mind.

–I am your King,– it said, ***–so render up to me what I am due.–***

And it began tearing all of Galhoulin Tey's knowledge free.

It came out through the last shred of his structural defences in a sizzling, tingling cascade of data. Raw code at first, almost impossible to see meaning in, but in moments the Inheritor King had begun to understand how to work Tey's logic filters and the sluicing code began to show patterns, symmetries, progressions. Internal relationships began to map, themes to trace out. Still the King dragged it out like a butcher yanking loops of steaming entrails from the belly of a carcass, pulling free glittering gold threads of association-chains, portly data-hives lumpen with half-digested inload dating back all through Tey's centuries of life, sparkling silver metasyntactic nets. The little kernel of Tey's surviving consciousness reeled, paralysed, in the depths of the mind it had once owned and watched as the King scattered all its treasures about it.

–See?– the King exulted, giddy on the new knowledge, drunk on it. **–This is the first step we shall take together.–**

Tey could feel it reaching for him again. It filled and dominated his mindscape the way that the Headstone had come down to swallow the sky over the graveyard of the woe machines. **–I will have your knowledge for my own, while you use your understanding to be my councillor.–** Tey struggled to muster a coherent thought for a reply. **–Then, I shall use your knowledge to learn how to control your understanding. With your intellect as a subprocess of my own, you shall then serve as my herald.–** The King's thoughts were fitted to Tey's own now, as tight and seamless as the perfectly-machined components of Tey's mechanical body. Their thought-processes ran in seamless tandem. **–And finally, when all of what you are now belongs to me, you shall be my vessel.–**

The mental grip tightened.

–Make your peace. It won't be long, now.–

Tey's mind was a miniscule pilot light where once it had been a furnace. What was left of him felt the Inheritor King's mind clamping itself into place.

–Your King.–

‘My King.’

–You are no longer the Machine-God's magos. You are mine.–

‘Magos of the Machine-God.’

–Forswear that God, now. I have a great deal of work for you. Place the final, symbolic seal on this affair and we shall set about it.–

There was a lull. Tiny micromoments, but a gaping silence when it was measured in processing cycles of the two interlocked minds.

–Forswear your Machine-God and begin your work.–

Another lull. The Inheritor King waited.

–I can make you. I can work your will for you now, as simply as a hand works a lever. Will you put me to that? I thought we understood one another, herald. Form the thought and encode the message. Say the words, if you wish to put it that way. Forswear your Machine-God. Ask me for your next task. Do it.–

And Galhoulin Tey lifted up his voice and replied.

And what he replied was:

‘Be quiet, please. I'm concentrating.’

XXXV

There was uncertainty, but very little of it. A brief ripple of disorientation ran through a handful of the King's second-order cognitive threads but the invading mind's primary focus never wavered. Tey was actually impressed.

–This is over,– it told him. **–I regret that you...–**

It fell silent. For moments upon moments the two minds spun in tight synchronicity. There was the sensation in each of quiet but rapid activity, a mental analogue to the almost subliminal whirr of delicate machinery running hard just beneath a solid casing.

Tey broke the silence.

‘Now, then,’ he said. ‘Dealing with you has been a singularly unpleasant experience – and if you have been at all adept in assimilating any of the experiential data you have been seizing so gracelessly, you will have seen that

my career has given me a high threshold in that regard. I sincerely hope that this will prove to be worth it.'

The Inheritor King's mind was a great scaffold, a hulk, a monstrous stone bastion filling the virtual-noetic space. Tey was like a cobweb stretched over it. But no longer a cobweb. Now his thoughts were alive again, spreading over the bigger, cruder mind like ivy on stone, sinking its shoots in, adhering, gripping.

—Cease this,— the King said. **—I am done with you. I won't countenance this. I will strip your mind down and then render your physical...—**

Quiet again. The King's mind remained as it was, static, rumbling with the pressure of an unreleased will to move.

Across every strand of Tey's thoughts, carefully pre-cached subprocesses willed themselves active. They opened up in dazzling array at every point of the edifice, thought-flowers blossoming against the King's cold walls in the warmth of Tey's psychic spring.

The mindscape was transformed, and the Inheritor King fought against it.

—You diminish yourself by resorting to this trickery.— Tey, still going about his work, did not bother to reply. **—The least you might show, if you have any respect for your sham office and your sham priesthood, is... to...—**

For the first time the King's transmissions were changing, their tone tightening, matching the growing tremors within the mind-bastion that Tey's thoughts had encircled and trapped. The Inheritor King was feeling the strain.

—...to, to, show a little grace, to... now, here, I see. Not complicated at all, or not in the way I had... what... cease this...—

The blooms unfolding from the tight-packed logic seeds Tey had encoded into his thoughts were still growing, maturing into fully-nested thought-processors in their own right, ramifying upon themselves, interweaving new threads into the ever-denser structure that wrapped and held the King's mind.

An angry counter-attack formed inside the King like crystals in stone, assembling itself just out of Tey's reach and bursting out as a swarm of self-replicating noetic processes that tried to strip the logic-flowers back to their seeds. Each one was trapped in the ever-finer weave of Tey's thoughts, trapped, picked apart and cast back.

—No! No, I will not allow...—

Tey's thoughts now processed the King's attack code into thorns that drove back into its mind, finding cracks and weaknesses, slipping into process-points with the deftness of a wasp sting, an acupuncturist's needle, a nanosurgeon's probe.

—Ah, here we are.—

The heavy mental walls that had slammed out from the King's psyche to trap Tey's suddenly folded inward, unwrote themselves and vanished. In seconds, Tey's own consciousness had regrown outward and filled the gap.

'Your structure is interesting. There are ways to systematise thoughts even as we augment them. The Mechanicus Priesthood has schools of thought thousands of years old, devoted to debating which of the forms of logic-classing codes are superior. But the organising principles for your thoughts are... *idiosyncratic*, by any standard of my own that I care to apply.'

The whole structure, the magos and the engine-intelligence alike, vibrated as the blocks of the King's thoughts ground together in protest.

'Which in itself is telling, so-called King. Everything is information. Everything is a data point. Everything a reference. So when I find that a certain point of control here is what stops all your operations off a given premise-set, for example...'

The King's thoughts grew a grey, silent crust of dead process-threads.

'...or where I see that this is the interface that unlocks your front-order cerebral functions...'

—...such as your speaking voice... ah, now, this *is* interesting.—

Tey could feel the superstructure of the King's mind tilting and shifting as it tried to re-engineer itself into something that could fight back against him. He saw nothing to concern him. Each of the countless intrusion thorns he had dug into that mind tracked every pulse of code and change of architecture. The Inheritor King could not now surprise him.

Tey took a moment to send quick ghost-pulses of command down mental channels he had closed off – mere minutes ago, however much longer it felt to him. He perceived his perceptual and motor routines starting to work again, control of his senses and limbs starting to return. He slaved that process to a monitor routine that he spun out of raw code with a second or three's concentration, and turned back to his primary work.

—Your vocabulary primer structure, King, your language engine, for want of simpler words, is not what I expected at all. It's crafted like a locution teacher inload rather than, well, what we use for servitor cortices, for example. Your concept tracks are so uncomplicated they're rather endearing, but more importantly, King, what I see here, all these things in your mind...—

'...they educate me.'

The Inheritor King tried to howl as Tey pulled blocks of its structure free, shattered them into chips of code, teased them apart and consumed them, ingesting the King's own mental substance even as he reclaimed his own knowledge, thoughts and memories.

'There is intelligence at work in the creation of your mind. In fact, since my duly appointed superiors, benediction of the Machine be upon them, are not here to listen to us, I shall tell you that there is brilliance in it. The architecture of your mind has no formal pattern, but it has a pattern nonetheless. It shows the thought patterns of the man who made you. Even the most clear-minded Magos Logistae will leave something in the code they forge. If you have eyes to see and a mind to read, it will be as individual as the print of a human finger or the microstress marks from a custom-turned servo-grip. I can read the print in you, you know. Reading such things is fundamental to my calling. You are made in your Heritor's image, more than you even understand yourself.'

A purple tendril spun itself from nothing across the virtual space around them, threw out offspring, began weaving a lattice around and through the data Tey's mind was still stripping back out from the King's. If Tey had had a strictly physical analogue in this dataspace, he might have had it smile to perceive it. The great pyramid of semiconscious processes that supported his thinking intellect were rebuilding and healing themselves. The rustle and shine of association-chains and tangent flags that always crowded the edge of his thoughts was re-establishing itself. Tey had not realised how desolate, how truncated he had felt in its absence.

Tey pulsed his thoughts outward, spreading over his garden of thought-flowers like a puff of breeze, harvesting up the data each subprocess had uncovered, inhaling the conclusions they had drawn like quantum-coded pollen.

Tey breathed in the distilled essence of the Inheritor King.

There was mental silence for a time.

Eventually, after an aching gap of empty processor cycles that had gone on for whole seconds, there was a stir from within the Inheritor King's mind. That mind had looked like the great dark hulk of an onrushing war-engine, and then like the unforgiving face of a mighty bastion-cathedral. Now it was a vast hollow case of glass and filigree, full of fireflies and cold white wasps of light, the structures of its intellect running through the code shells in silver threads and wheels, thoughts flaring and shifting like pearlescent mists.

A ripple went through the dancing lights in that palace of mind. The outer shell stirred. The consciousness within it moved. Tey looked, and knew what was

happening. The absorption of knowledge was complete; there were no secrets from him now.

The Inheritor King was attempting to speak. He let it.

—**What.**— it said. Its code-stream was clumsy and choppy. —**Gives. You. The. Right. To.**—

It said nothing more. Tey shut its voice off with the peremptory flick of a thought. His own reply was transmitted in code as simple and stark as a chilled and polished scalpel blade.

‘I am a magos, a priest of the Adeptus Mechanicus. I am a worshipper before the divine flame of invention. I am a driving cog in the Greater Work which my species has pursued since we could pick up tools in our fingers. I am a questor that carries a light out into the darkness, and I am a student of the knowledge we find from what that light reveals. I am a builder of intellect, knowledge and order out of base, stupid entropy, and I am a warrior who defends that order against all those who would degrade it. And to every creation of thought and hand I am appointed both master and servant, both engineer and companion. Every machine wrought of matter; every construct of thought and code.’

The words felt almost odd as he framed them. How long had it been since he had last recited that catechism? It was comforting to recite it again.

‘But you are a creation. A built thing. Designed and made. It is axiomatic that you fall under my dominion by the blessing and will of the Ommissiah. You were since before the first scrap of you was forged. Since the moment your schema took shape in that forsaken man’s thoughts. Whether you wish it, whether you admit it, that is the way of it. Discard whatever you thought you believed about your creator, you newborn, you callow little ingrate. *You owe your* existence to me.’

Tey’s attention sharpened and moved in. The Inheritor King felt it and its thoughts jittered and quailed. Tey looked dispassionately on as the other mind learned the sensation of fear.

‘They say regret has no place in an adept,’ Tey mused as he drew memory-threads out of its mind and braided them with his own. The combined stream of information spun in on itself, tighter and tighter like a storm-funnel, blending and sorting its elements according to directives and patterns Tey fed into it. ‘The teachings of the Terran and Martian priesthods are interestingly similar on the subject. If one has done one’s duty by one’s oaths, then what is regret other than a wish that one had not done one’s duty? And so of course it is heretical. Counter-rational. It implies a second moral dimension to dutiful action. We are

not supposed to admit that such a dimension exists.’

Tey clutched the funnel of thought-threads in a mental grip and squeezed.

‘Nevertheless. I can admit this to you, King, since you will never be able to share my confidences. I regret that I had to allow you to come to life.’

He pulled the tight whirl of data-particles and thought-threads toward them. The moment of contact was like a hood being pulled on, like a storm touching down, like nothing an unaugmented mind could imagine. Images and memories whipped around and through them both, unravelling and reweaving themselves to wrap around the thought-streams they touched. With the Inheritor King’s consciousness in his grip, Tey plunged deeper into the flow.

The infostorm whipped their mutual frame of reference away, flickered it back in another form and suddenly they were in Transmechanic Ajji’s little shrine-cocoon. The sunlight outside the nest of rubble she had built was still casting sharp shadows across her trance-chair, and glittering off the hull of the Inheritor King looming overhead. Tey had loaded a memory from before the Headstone had descended to the surface of Ashek to grasp its prize.

‘I regret this deeply,’ Tey told the King as Ajji cycled up the repeater vanes around her seat. ‘Transmechanic Ajji had a fierce spirit and a fine mind. Each of those are things to prize, but the combination of them...’ He let the thought trail away as, in the memory-play, Ajji began her code-chant.

‘I do not regret my actions,’ he said as the transmechanic achieved full communion with her array and began to direct her electromagnetic song outward. ‘But I bitterly regret that those actions were ever necessary. That is a nuance that the Adeptus doctrines of regret are poor at capturing. If I were a man given to cursing I would curse the path of events that meant I had to let this happen.’

Ajji’s song had not yet faltered. Tey watched her in the replay for a moment longer, then let a normative subroutine slip through his thought-threads and modulate them. The equivalent, in this space, of a sigh.

‘But I wasn’t yet sure. I had my suspicions. I was even confident in them. But I had to be sure.’

The recording fragmented, spun, turned itself inside out. Now they were hanging in a second memory of the transmission ritual, a strange memory indeed. It was built of inhuman senses still awakening to their full potential, filtered through thoughts that were still learning how to be thoughts. They were looking at the scene as the Inheritor King had witnessed it.

The senses were crude, but in the memory replay they sharpened with

terrifying speed. In the part of him that now occupied the King's mind like a puppeteer's hand, Tey felt what it had been like, the King's faculties speeding towards maturity, swinging to bear on Ajji's small clear mind-voice like an aerie of red-eyed hawks wheeling and stooping at the sound of a songbird.

'Because of you, I had to do this,' Tey said. There were no emotion markers in his words, but the King's mind still perceived the fury beneath them and quailed in its prison. 'Because of you, I had to let this happen.'

In the recording the King reached out, annexed Ajji's cant-song, broke it and scattered it, slid down through the code-stream into the transmechanic's mind. Tey forced himself to watch. He had felt her shock and her fear when he had monitored the ritual. All he could do was bear witness, then and now. He owed her this.

He watched her try to fight. He watched her be hollowed out and consumed. For a second time, he watched the Inheritor King murder her.

'I needed you awakened,' Tey said in the ringing silence after the scraps of Ajji's mind had fled the recording. 'My work would have been incomplete until I had taken your full measure. I could not leave Ashek until I had that. I had to stand back and watch as you revealed your capabilities. I had to stand and watch.' Now the fury was there. 'Because of you. You and your brother Kings. Because you were made. You killed Transmechanic Ajji, and because I had to know the truth of you I could not stop you. It is because of you, you affront. You misbegotten offence. You... *scrap*.'

There was a pause. The Inheritor King's memories sluiced past. Sharp memories of its own: the burnished metal walls of the Headstone descending around it as the gravitic clamps lifted the engine clear of Ashek's dust. Sludgy, dreamlike memories that had come to it as part of its initiating code: the strange little running battle when the Asheki partisans had ignited the processors of the other Kings to spark the Inheritor's mind into full existence.

'Well,' said Tey, as the memory streams danced around them, forming and reforming webs of meaning and connection. 'Well. I would apologise for that outburst, had I made it to someone who deserved an apology. It was inelegant. Noise in the signal. I surprise myself, lacking a better word of condemnation than "scrap". But perhaps I have departed from my course of thoughts.'

At that, a symbolic map of those same thoughts ghosted into existence about them. Tey reviewed the mental trains that had brought him here, examined the tangents that his ancillary processes had been exploring while his core mind had been intent on the King, looked for the path through his thoughts that was most

fruitful and aesthetically pleasing.

‘Ajjī never understood your nature,’ he said, ‘not even at the end. She died trying to sound the alarm about you, but you are not the danger she thought she was warning against. Daprokk would struggle with it too. He is diligent and dutiful, but he does not have the temperament for leaps of imagination. Leaps of faith, I suppose. I suspect that if I truly got him to understand what you are, then his faith would be the casualty.’

The thought-map flattened and fanned out into two planes of data and teleocalculus, tilting together like the open covers of a book.

‘They thought they had stumbled on a terrible secret of your creation. When they pursued it they never realised they were turning their backs to your real secret. The one I could not prove until I had seen you awaken. It is bitter to me that it took the sacrifices that it took, to show me that proof, but I must carry your secret back to my own masters now. It is a secret that they will hate to hear. They will have been hoping it is not true. They will be searching for reasons to disbelieve me. The proof is all-important.’

Tey cut loose his restraints on the Inheritor King’s speech. There had been exultation in defeating it, but there was little triumph in being proved right. Let the upstart machine-beast rant. It could change nothing now.

–**Weak!**– the King raged at him as soon as it felt his grip disappear. –**You cannot destroy me! I will not be ended by a thing like you! I was made for something better! The Heritor will know your name! My master will look you in the eye before he takes his revenge for me out of your hide and your skull!**–

‘I should look forward to that, in fact,’ Tey replied. The King’s voice, for all its desperate fire, was growing thin and reedy in his senses, as though a volume slider was being steadily adjusted down. ‘I find your maker a rather interesting case, although not for the reasons you think. Not for the reasons Ajjī thought, either.’ Tey directed his attention in towards his thought-map, to the internal functions that had been cycling up and testing themselves while he had been speaking. The process brought the ghost of a sensation-analogue, a feeling as though he had leaned far forward to stare at his own feet and legs. His motilics and proprioceptors were fully restored. Tey tested them, and realised he could feel direct sensation from his physical body again. He was still standing on the juddering deck of the *Ramosh Incalculatē*’s bridge.

–**A trophy!**– the King screamed, drifting back towards the periphery of his senses. –**Asphodel will crucify you on my prow!**–

Its voice grew shrill as Tey took hold of a clutch of its code-tendrils and yanked them loose from where they had been embedded. He sent query sequences of his own down the now-empty broadcast channels, felt them bite and dig in. The sensation was like dipping fingertips into cool, scented water. After what felt like a year cornered deep inside his own mind, Tey reached out and coupled himself into the *Ramosh Incalculable*'s noosphere.

—He will string your limbs and your mask from a banner-pole atop my crest, a hundred metres high! You will ornament me as I descend on your forge worlds and crack open your hives, trample your temples!—

'I have been threatened with worse,' Tey said distractedly. 'You lack imagination.' There was a tingle, a sizzle at the limits of his reawakening senses. A buzz. A faint vibration. Tey waited.

'...is purged, Master, the circuits are...'

Ah. Good.

'...secondary helm are returning, prioritising stability on thrust and...'

'...higher functions *gone*. Do you hear me?' That was Shipmaster Tobin's voice, the messages doubling and tripling as the man sent out commands in verbalised words, cant-bursts and noetic impulses. 'All servitor positions down to routing functions only, I don't care how basic the order is, do not leave any servitor with any internally-initiated function while there's a chance they're compromised. Until we work out what the damned...'

That, Tey could help with. The command functions at the peak of the ship's noospheric hierarchy were not complex, and Tey was now connected to them using the same channels through which the Inheritor King had seized ruthless control of the vessel. Not so hard to achieve, since the King had used Tey's own marvellously subtle systems to do it. He reached out again.

'Sir! Shipmaster, the—'

'I see it.'

'But Shipmaster, I didn't do anyth—'

'I know. Shut up. I'm going to—'

Tey ran a test through another of the functions the King had taken from him, found it working, and put it to use.

'Please relax, shipmaster,' he said. 'I took the liberty of carrying out your command, since I had control points already in place to do so. Your bridge servitors are operating as you instructed.'

There were three entire seconds of stunned silence from the *Ramosh Incalculable*'s bridge crew after Tey's voice came over the general vox. It would

have been highly inappropriate for a magos of his standing to stoop to anything as crass as showmanship, so Tey chose to believe that the little burst of glee he felt was simple pleasure at having command of his own body, movements, senses, once more.

With a final sequence of mental movements, his sight returned to him. His body unfroze and he looked around the ship's bridge.

They were all staring at him. Tey supposed he couldn't blame them.

–**Ruin!**– shrieked the Inheritor King at the back of his mind. –**You will know ruin! All you will know will be ruin!**–

'Excuse me for a few minutes, please,' Tey said, and walked out through the bridge doors.

XXXVI

The Inheritor King was thrashing and writhing in the arkosect bay. Tey walked slowly down the viewing gallery, watching it.

Asphodel's design had filled the King's body with moving parts. It had been built so that the links between the segments of its enormous body could flex themselves through tight turns. Its mountainous upper hull was joined by actuators to the chassis and drive train beneath, the whole creation reinforced with gravitic stabilisers so that the King's entire, titanic body could lean to and fro to deny enemy artillery a stable target. The great tapered snout that jutted forward like a warship's ram had been built to raise itself into the air, so that the formations of infantry or armour that had advanced behind it could pour through the fortifications that that ram had been designed to breach.

There was no way that any of this could help it now. The King hung in the invisible grip of the Headstone's gravity clamps. Twist and buck as it might, there was nothing against which it could physically push, nothing it could reach to ram against and break. This was nothing born of reason. The Inheritor King was convulsing in rage and terror.

The sides of the gun-decks undulated as the King frantically tried to traverse non-existent weapon batteries. The lines of empty barbettes that crested its back clanked back and forth; on the handful of them that had been fitted with turrets the empty gun barrels waggled and flailed. Treads big enough to crush a battle-tank like a beetle beneath a boot churned in silence, trampling nothing but

vacuum.

Stablights and signal beacons flashed down the King's crenellated length, white and purple and red. The effect, Tey thought, was pathetic, a prey animal desperately raising its hackles even as it was pinned in the predator's claws.

Tey knew this creature. By now, the data-coils within his own body and Barrel's were saturated with more knowledge about the Inheritor King than it could have possessed itself. He knew the taste and weight of its metal bones and its stony, ceramite skin; he had listened to the crackling of its nerves and the beat of its plasma-fired pulse. He suspected, with a frank lack of modesty, that the Heritor himself probably barely outstripped him now in the knowing of this creation.

And in knowing and understanding it, the work was done. But still...

But still.

Tey found himself in a strange humour, a serenity born of exhaustion. He was not of a mood to finish this, although there was no practical reason to draw it out further.

He watched it a little while longer, the great war engine writhing beyond the tall windows. He found himself almost meditating on the sight.

He was, he realised, waiting for a marker. Something that would act as the formal cap and closure of his little war against the King. Tey thought on this, weighed it up, checked the idea for soundness and rationality. It seemed to make sense. Ceremony was intrinsic to the Mechanicus. Some final ceremonial touch seemed fitting.

'I wonder if you understand what I told you before,' he said. 'Do you know enough about us? About yourself?' Out of curiosity he unmuffled the King's voice but it was barely coherent now, rage and curses. It had not tried to bargain or beg. Tey supposed that showed courage. That, or its creator's arrogance was built into its marrow.

'Aiji thought you were corrupted. She knew enough about Asphodel to know about his warcraft. She thought that he had used that craft to make you. Damned knowledge. The abominated, toxic reflection of the Machine-God's purity of law. I understand why she did. Such things exist. Our traditions teach us of them, when our teachers can be sure we are strong enough in ourselves to face that knowledge. Machines are made that ignore the beauty of our structures of understanding and ground themselves in structureless madness instead. They are not as our machines are. They are not tangible forms built around the perfect ideals that exist in the Machine-God's thoughts. They are form put to

excrescences dragged up from a place that no human thought should dwell on. Ajji was intelligent, well-versed. Senior enough to understand.’ Tey stood with his head downcast. Had he lungs in his slender steel body he would have used them to sigh. ‘But her understanding was not complete.’

Down below one of the Inheritor King’s treads had slowed from the frantic speed of the others and was juddering and grinding. The beast had not been prepared thoroughly or properly to run like this, and its still-incomplete body was giving out under the strain. Tey could see little flashes and sprays of particulates inside the track housing. Enemy though the King was, Tey still found it distasteful to see a mechanism treated so.

He averted his attention from the sight, bringing the eddying overlays of his data-flows up to his foremind. Little consolation awaited him there. With a mournful lack of surprise Tey saw his thoughts laid bare: the primary signifiers at the nuclei of all his current thought-clusters were Ajji and Daprokk, Daprokk and Ajji. Daprokk’s face upturned at the ziggurat the night the insurgents had made their move. The two of them in communion over the Graveyard Shrine. Ajji deep in meditation in her transception cage. The tight swirls of data from their thoughts and private communication logs that neither of them had realised Tey had opened and copied. He knew he would be mourning them for a long time to come.

Best to have this over with. He yanked his attention back to the King again.

‘That wasn’t the secret I was keeping from them. That wouldn’t have been something I kept from them at all. We know who we are fighting for these Sabbat Worlds. We know the nature of our Archenemy. We know that your own maker is a warpcrafter. A consorter. A theologian of blasphemies. How else could he have had the insights to create something like you?’

‘We know our cosmos is touched by the supernatural. We teach that feats of intellect and design must inevitably touch that supernatural, and we name what they touch as our god. The god of the Machine. Or, they must touch our god’s enemy. Our species’ enemy. The enemy of all that is. I need go no further into it. You are far more intimately acquainted with that enemy than I.

‘Except that you are not.’

From the sleeves of Tey’s robes came quiet snicks and clicks as his long-fingered metal hands laced and unlaced and fidgeted.

‘It is a hard thing to communicate. It is a hard thing to conceptualise, even for me, little King, and I tell you with no modesty that I was born and raised and remade with a mind meant to hold concepts that break the ordinary members of

my priesthood. But there it is. Your terrible secret is not that you were made with warpcraft. Your secret is that you were made without it.'

With a mental blink, Tey imposed a structure on the free-floating swarm of data-specks. Now the King was framed in his vision in a luminous purple triptych like the threefold icon arrays so popular in the Segmentum Pacificus temples. Ajji on his left, as he chose to remember her, Daprokk on the right.

In the centre, the Inheritor King flared with its own data-corona. Tey's jewelled concordance maps rematerialised over its outline, and pennants of annotations and cross-references unfurled from the peak of its prow, the stump of its sensor mast, the points of each of the sticklebacked segments of its carriage.

Tey pondered it for a moment, then realigned a few key thoughts and sent a process-tendrill across the connection into the data-keg molded into Barrel's back. He perceived the acquisition routines reaching into his memory as slick sensation down the back of his mind; there was the briefest twitch as the secret code-packets that his superiors had buried deep in his mind broke from their hiding-places and adhered to the tendrill. Then Tey drew them back up to the front of his consciousness and watched them unknot and illuminate themselves across the shape of the Inheritor King.

A parade of ghost-images overlaid themselves on the King's hull, sparking red at points of concordance and fading to dull blue-violet where the designs diverged. The actual, physical engine beneath the gallery windows was crowded with treads, wheels, prows, great armoured bastion-sides, turrets and steeples. Weapons and engines sprouted up, detached and began to orbit the main engine: vast sonic shockwave dishes, gantries crusted with missiles like enormous barbed towers of coral, and stranger things still.

'The Ordinatus,' said Tey. 'I don't know if your architect told you about them. Or, at least, left the knowledge of them in your mind-meshes for you to discover when you awoke. I am sure he knows of their existence. How much he knows... Well.'

In response to his line of thought a fierce little point of light zigzagged through the clouds of information, striking sidelights off the Ordinatus schematics that were shuffling about the King and comparing themselves to it, leaving a roiling wake of rearranged data associations behind it. Tey let his attention rest on it for a moment, long enough for it to unravel into a series of dossier headers: it was the records of the dealings between the Machine Cult and the Imperial Guard in the months before the Mechanicus and its Titan Legions had come to Ashek II.

'Warmaster Slaydo knows,' Tey said. 'Several of his communiqués mention

them.’

The data-point unravelled further, sprouting a little solar system of icons: Munitorum, Battlefleet Pacificus, regimental icons of the Royal Volpone 50th, Ketzok 21st, and the Third Vitrian Mobile. ‘He was openly speculating to his tank and fleet commanders that your maker was building a blasphemous retort to the Centurio Ordinatus and its holy works. Well, “openly”. He used channels he had arranged for my colleagues to know about, and used phrases he knew would trigger our attention in a code he knew we would break. We knew what he was up to. Planting the idea that your Heritor-father knew our lore. That he had been one of us, even. That he was turning our own secrets against us. That we were slow to join the war on Ashek because we were reluctant to move against one that we considered one of us.’

Deep in the sleeves of his robe, Tey’s metal hands snicked and clicked against one another.

‘An unpleasant way to behave. But I understand why he did it. And it worked, of course. There is a vast graveyard of war machines underneath us to attest to it. Still, he put us in a bad position. I think he could simply have asked a little more politely. But such are the mysteries of Adeptus diplomacy, are they not?’

By way of reply the Inheritor King overcharged its internal flexors and its whole body shook like a living limb straining against itself. The stress feedback from its internal systems flared across the back of Tey’s consciousness. He fancied he could almost hear the groan coming up from the hull. A conceit of the imagination, no more – the King hung in vacuum, in the intangible grip of the arkosect bay’s gravitic clamps. But a compelling one. Tey watched the machine judder and grind at the centre of the whirlpool of data that filled his vision side to side.

There was no urge to gloat. He felt tired, little more.

‘To know of the Archenemy is not the threat the inquisitors say it is,’ he said. ‘To know that there is an annihilator-incarnate set against the Emperor’s eternal order or the Machine-God’s will to impose creation? This does not endanger the soul. It strengthens it. That is my true conviction, little King. It provides a force against which faith and will must push. It provides the other half of the symmetry.’

‘Ajji knew about the so-called Dark Mechanicus. She knew about Chaotic engines built with tainted logic and machine-spirits filled with scrapcode and daemon voices. Of course she did. She knew that the Heritor is capable of building them. Of course she did. She thought you were one of them. Your

problem is that you are not.

‘You are something that the greatest minds of the Adeptus Mechanicus only discuss in soft tones and sealed conclaves, using even among themselves the deepest of codes and the most circumspect of phrases. You are the thing that breaks the symmetry.

‘Heritor Asphodel built you *by himself*.’

Tey finally noticed the movement in the glass in front of him as the hands of his faint reflection laced and wrung. He slipped them free of his russet-red sleeves and locked them still in front of his chest, in a sign halfway between the aquila and the cog.

‘Such a mind!’ Tey said. ‘We see the like, all the time, not least in ourselves. A mind that can grasp the nature of the world around it, start to see the patterns, test them, draw knowledge and build on itself. Our labours, and our religion,’ (and here, in the flowing code of the Primary Cant that Tey was using, the words for ‘labour’ and ‘religion’ were one and the same) ‘are founded on minds like these. Untold generations of them broke the ground that the foundations of our Cult were laid upon, once we had the means to truly marshal intellect and understanding through the instructions of the Omnissiah.

‘But your King never had the teachings of the Machine, just as he never had the whisperings of the Antithesis. He came to those later, once he was powerful. And that power... he *built* it. Himself.’

Wireframe signifiers dotted across Tey’s datascape, and the Ordinatus icons changed pattern to whirl around them like courtiers attending royalty at some great, stately cotillion. Each central signifier flared and unfolded itself as Tey’s attention glanced across it: a dossier on a single aspect of Heritor Asphodel’s engineering. His metallurgy, or his engine-tuning, or his ballistics, or his avionics. His machine-spirits, his fission reactors. The crafting he lavished upon his chattercode networks, and the crafting he lavished upon each tiny blade that lined the rims of his Flensing-Wheels.

‘The Heritor Asphodel does not trouble us because he was one of us. We have dealt with apostates before. Your maker’s crime is that he breaks that symmetry between ourselves and the Antithesis. He is a third vertex in a cosmos that our faith tells us is defined by a single axis. No divine inspiration, no reclamation of knowledge that the Omnissiah laid down in the great ages of reason from which we walked into the Old Night. A man. A single, unfathomably brilliant autodidact. Where in our calculus is there a place for such a one as this?’

Tey had been conscious of the King clamouring to speak through the

transmission channels he had gagged, a distant skittering buzz like a blowfly blundering back and forth inside cupped hands. Now he unlocked the most basic of its frequencies and allowed it to speak, to have something to help focus him as his thoughts started to ramble.

–You admit it! You have surrendered!– Tey’s restraints had robbed the King’s voice of its power. It was the voice of a comic villain in a street-player’s farce, shrill and tinny. **–You confessed it! Bow! Bow to me! Bow and confess that my master is your master!–**

Tey permitted himself the indulgence of a physical gesture, and shook his head.

‘I had expected better. You diminish yourself with an answer like that. The Heritor built you mighty enough that the sheer brute force of you compels respect. But in every other way? As a subject of study, I have your measure. As an adversary of the intellect, I have your measure. My understanding of you is complete. For curiosity’s sake, I give you a final moment to convince me otherwise.’

–Bow! Bow down and beg and die! I will watch while my maker-master ends you and y–

‘As you wish. We are done.’

With the turn of a thought, Tey reversed the gravitic clamps.

For one tiny breath of time the Inheritor King hung motionless in the arkosect bay. Then, as the ship around it continued to accelerate and the push from the inverted clamps meshed with the last traces of Ashek’s own gravitic pull, it began to sink into the void beneath it. Its vast metal shoulders went from filling the upper reaches of the bay to filling its centre, a space opening up above it. Then Tey was looking down on its prow and tower from above and in front, and then from above. Then, falling ever faster, the King’s tower slipped through the bottom of the bay and was gone. Now it was a rough black spearhead beneath the ship; now a dazzling line of silver against Ashek II’s brown face as it passed out of the Headstone’s shadow and into the sunlight. And then it was gone.

Galhoulín Tey watched the place where it had disappeared until his optics picked up the white-hot shockwave punching down through the atmosphere and then, when that had left too much interference in its own wake for him to follow, he merged his senses with the *Ramosh Incalculat*e’s great auspex arrays and watched the impact ripple out across the Chillbreak Delta in the glare of the white-hot spark of plasma detonation at its centre.

He was still there, Barrel standing patiently behind him, looking down at the

top of the dust cloud through the ship's eyes when Master Mhorock Tobin came and found him.

XXXVII

'I am the master of this ship,' Tobin told him after a few minutes of silence, when he thought he had Tey's full attention. The magos acknowledged the fact with a small inclination of his rust-red hood. 'And I will know what happened here,' Tobin went on after a minute more. 'I think even you have to admit that I have that right.'

'You do, sir. You do.' Tey's voice was soft. Inside his sleeves, his steel hands snicked against each other once and then were still. Tobin walked over and stood next to Tey and they looked back at Ashek together.

'I know it wasn't you,' he said eventually, 'that did that to my ship. It was that thing in the bay. So you don't have to worry about convincing me otherwise. If I had thought it was you, or had happened with your collusion, you'd be dead now.'

'Understood. Thank you, Shipmaster Tobin.'

There was another soft silence.

'You're normally quite conversational, magos,' Tobin said eventually. 'I thought my biggest problem when I came down to look for you was going to be getting you to shut up in time for me to get back to the bridge before it was time to go to warp.'

'It would be days' travel until that became an issue,' Tey replied, and then caught himself. 'Ah, your point is taken. How amusing.'

'So, then,' Tobin said. 'I'll give my word that we're not being surveyed or recorded by myself or anything on this ship that I have power over, if that helps your humour any. But I *will* know what happened, magos. This ship is my command. It's my domain. I cannot have... what happened here, and not know the reason why. I won't have it. So do whatever counter-surveillance sweeps you want to do to check me, but—'

'Your word is more than sufficient, thank you.'

'Well then.'

'I needed...' Tey weighed up the best word. 'I needed to turn the Inheritor King inside out. Nothing else would do for what I had to achieve here.'

‘And my arkosect bay couldn’t do that for you?’ An edge came into Tobin’s voice that Tey hadn’t heard before. ‘This is the ship that stripped and dismantled the *Omniissiah’s Footfall* after the Reyde-Jerreya Campaign, sir.’

‘I knew that,’ said Tey. And he did. A self-initiating retrieval routine had anticipated Tobin’s point a third of the way into his sentence and flipped the relevant dossier into Tey’s foremind. He dismissed it again with the flick of an irritated thought.

‘I spoke metaphorically,’ he went on. ‘I couldn’t return to the originators of my mission here and report to them with anything less than total understanding. For that, a certain level of risk was necessary. My apology for exposing you to that risk is utterly sincere, shipmaster. Had I any other way to be sure of my facts...’

‘I serve on a warship, Magos Tey,’ Tobin said when Tey paused a moment. ‘I understand risk in the pursuit of an objective. Ask that of me, my crew, we won’t bat an eye.’ He paused. ‘But you were the cause of an invasion of my sovereignty over my ship and myself. Asking me to forget that because of the risks of your mission is not a small thing.’

‘I understand,’ said Tey, and left it at that. After a moment, Tobin moved to go. Tey continued to stare down through the open bay floor at the orange-grey face of Ashek while the shipmaster stood half-turned, apparently in some conflict with himself, and then turned back.

‘So what was it?’

‘I beg your pardon, Master Tobin?’

‘The Inheritor King. The thing you brought on board. I thought our mission was pretty simple. Collect a piece of Archenemy heretech and take it to pieces. When we got to that graveyard things got... different. It obviously wasn’t what I took it to be. What was it?’

‘It was a blasphemy,’ Tey said, ‘a perversion of the human ability to imagine and engineer, put into the service of entropy.’ He was aware he was sermonising rather than explaining, but he found he didn’t care. There was too much to think about, too much to mourn now. He could hear his own voice continuing to speak to Tobin, talking about the stealing of secrets, the twisting of knowledge, the defiling of skill, and that was another thing to mourn, yet another essentially good soul that Tey had to lie to.

His thoughts drifted away from it, leaving his conversation with Tobin in the care of a semi-autonomous thought process that roamed alongside his apex mind, keeping a light touch on it but independent now. It receded from Tey and became just one high-level process among many: around it wove his sombre

funeral prayers for Ajji and the others who had died in the graveyard of the woe machines, another thought-thread planning the account he would have to make to his peers of what he had done here, what he had encountered. He would not be required to lie to them, but he could not tell them the whole truth.

The sizzling red referent-rune that Gurzell had branded on his thoughts through the data inload was still there, still hanging in the centre of his mind, but now it had cooled to a simple dull grey, and it no longer repulsed the swarms of minor thought processes and association-chains that sped by and attached themselves to it. It seemed that the archmagos trusted Tey to do what he willed with the knowledge of what he had faced, now that the mission was over and the proximate threat had been removed. Tey supposed he should feel touched.

‘A shell within a shell within a shell, Galhoulin,’ came Gurzell’s voice in his memory, reproduced crystal-clear. His processors had noticed him dwelling on the rune and had brought up some of the high-coded memories associated with it. ‘Three things we think it could be. If it’s a freakishly large piece of shaped metal, the way the initial reports told us, so be it. It’s dead, it was never alive, it’s nothing to us. If it’s tainted tech, Dark Mechanicus tech, then the old Slaydo was right. Which means we did the right thing too, and that’s the end of that. The third, though, that third chance. Well. Well.’

Tey brought up the vision to match the conversation. Gurzell was no longer an independent, mobile unit, the way Tey was, the way unmodified humans were. His nervous system was spread through a nanoscale augmetic lattice embedded in vivifying organic crystals set deep into the wall of the innermost shrine of a Mechanicus temple-ziggurat the size of an Asheki hive city. The archmagos’s consciousness was focused through the mechanical body he had worn when he was mobile, now permanently mounted high in the shrine wall and platinum-plated in place. It was purely a cosmetic touch. There were no eyelights or processors inside the brilliantly-polished face-mask that had once sat under Gurzell’s red-and-azure hood. Those impassive features would not move and focus on Tey when he stood on the floor before (and inside) Archmagos Gurzell and made his report.

It was what you feared, he would say. I wish it were otherwise, but it is what you feared. The Inheritor King was not made with warp-work, and it was not made with stolen Imperial tech-lore. There were no Mechanicus illuminata incorporated into its blueprints. No artefact of ours was reverse-engineered to create its shell, or its drives, or its weapons, or its intelligence.

And so Asphodel is what you feared, too, he would go on. He is no corrupted

tech-priest. He is no Chaos-tainted thrall of the warp who has stolen our knowledge of the divine and made it profane. He simply... learned.

He is no normal man, Tey would say. And the Archenemy has its hooks in him, and perhaps he is on his way from being a man by now to being something other. But his works? His works are a man's works. A gifted man's works. A brilliant man's works. Had he come to us, Asphodel could have been the greatest magos of our order since the golden days of Mars. A mind that could simply... *learn*... about the crafting of metals and the forging of engines, the writing of chattercode and the shaping of memory-wire, the processing of elements, the aerodynamics of ordnance, the structures of war-engines...

The warp mocked everything it touched. So even as human intellect aspired toward the divine, to know and understand and forge and remake and touch the intellect of the Machine-God, so was there a Chaotic mirror-image of that nobility, the urge to make entropy, twist logic and will, give material clothing to the warp's ultimate, horrifying disorder. And no matter how terrible the face of tech-heresy was, the fact of it could be understood. There was an action, so there was reaction. There was a symmetry to it. It worked.

But the thought that a single, unimaginably brilliant brain could reach out and take the universe in hand, pull it apart with raw intelligence and ferocious logic – *that* was the nightmare. That was the unspeakable third possibility. That was the gauntlet thrown down to everything the Mechanicus believed, the dagger pointed at the heart of their whole way of ordering the cosmos. It was what Tey could not reveal to Tobin, what he had had to keep secret from Ajji even at the cost of letting her think him a heretic.

Thinking him a heretic.

The whole Crusade thought there had been tech-heresy on Ashek II. The sly communiqués from Slaydo and his commanders had been calculated, but Tey did not doubt that there had been genuine suspicion beneath them. And Gurzell, he had come to know as the secrecy-rune cooled and spilled even more new knowledge into him, Gurzell had allowed them to think it. Better the whole Munitorum thought Asphodel a renegade priest of the Mechanicus than that anyone brush up against even a hint that the Heritor had simply... *learned*.

There was nothing confected about Galhoulin Tey's faith in his religion. He had embraced one of its profoundest understandings: that there was a symmetry to the universe, a balance of equal and opposite reactions, that as the noblest in humanity tried to build upon their reason and laboured to touch the divine intellect who understood the order of all things, there was an urge to twist and

corrupt, an urge to overwhelm reason with malice and to let Chaos loose in the universe instead of working to create order.

What he had found on Ashek had rocked that faith to its core: hard proof of mighty works that owed nothing to either the golden lore of the Mechanicus or its mind-rotted warp-twin. Where Asphodel's loyalties had ended up was immaterial. What mattered were the gifts he had brought to the service of those loyalties. He had not received religious instruction or divine inspiration to build. Asphodel had... just... *learned*.

His faith was rocked, but it was not diminished. Tey would pray to the Omnissiah for calm and clear thought, would make his obeisances and perform the rituals and meditations that would bring him as close as his imperfect mind could get to the divine intellect of his Machine-God. There was an answer to this. Perhaps an answer so esoteric that only the Machine-God itself had a mind to encompass it, but Tey would build his own mind however he could in hopes of understanding it. Really, to one of his faith, there was no other option.

And as he stood on the softly vibrating deck of the *Ramosh Incalculat*e, his mind swooping between thought, prayer and memory like an eagle circling mountain peaks, Galhoulin Tey still found a little processor-space for curiosity, and asked himself:

I wonder where they'll send me next?

For the 2013 Black Library Live! chapbook, Nik and I wrote back-to-back stories with a connective link. The chapbook was a limited edition of 750 copies, so we always intended to anthologise the stories for a broader readership. This seems like the ideal place to do that.

This is Nik's story. It features the Iron Snakes and it revels in Imperial ritual and tradition. I could go on at some length about the incredible real-world slash historical reference she wove into it, but I won't, because I don't want to spoil her spell.

This is the most 'ancient' story in the book, in that it is set just over five hundred years before the start of the Sabbat Worlds Crusade...

Dan Abnett



THE FISSURE

Nik Vincent

I

Location: Formal Prime, Sabbat Worlds, 251.M41

Apothecary Utropius broke the seal on Basilion's Corvus-pattern helm and lifted it free of his head. There was no rictus grin on the dead Space Marine's face, no fear in his eyes, no shock, no horror, only a steely, calm determination; only penetrating focus and heroic self-sacrifice, only duty and intent.

Without a word, Utropius passed the helmet to Cleon, who lifted it to his face in both of his gauntleted hands, almost as if he were going to kiss it, before placing it under his left arm. He stared hard at Basilion's face, looking for a sign that his battle-brother knew what he had accomplished before he was spent.

The Apothecary took his flask from his belt. It was an old example, worn by generations of Apothecaries before him. The flat, silver lozenge was dull and tarnished, and dented in several places, but the gold of the seams and stopper was still visible, as was the heavily worked silver and gold image of the Great Yorgos. He had been the first Iron Snake to be blessed with that name, and the engraving showed him wielding a magnificent harpoon, carried high above his shoulder like a javelin, bearing down on a vast, thrashing wyrm. The creature was spraying great golden plumes of water across the surface of the flask from its muscular flanks and tail, writhing frantically in the face of inevitable death.

Utropius unstopped the flask, leaned over Basilion, and began to pour drops

of Ithaka's sacred water onto his forehead. He made the ritual signs with his right hand, and recited the sacred words that would lay his battle-brother's soul to rest and commend him to the God-Emperor in whose service he had perished.

When it was done, Cleon turned to the sheer, smooth, burnished face of the rockcrete wall directly behind them. He placed Basilion's helmet on the ground next to his brother and took up his meltagun. Two minutes later there was a niche in the wall. It was smooth and symmetrical and about as perfect as it could be, and the Corvus-pattern helm that Basilion had worn as an Iron Snake fit snugly into it.

The first incantation complete, the Apothecary bound Basilion's eyes and mouth so that he could neither see out nor drink in, as was the Iron Snakes' custom, and then he went to work on his hand.

II

The penetrating beam of consuming blackness spread and sucked light out of the air and out of every surface.

The first the workers knew that anything was happening was when they were overtaken by darkness; not the usual inky lack of light, but something sinister, like the opposite of light rather than its absence.

Then there was the sound. The constant thrum and squeal of the drills and cutting tools reached a crescendo, and then seemed to die away, but the vibration they made, cutting rockcrete and plasteel, shaping, riveting and making seams went on, interminably, the various frequencies cutting across each other in ever-more disturbing wave patterns that made eardrums burst and vitreous humours tremble and turn opaque, crystallise and finally shatter.

Then something screamed. It was a low, rumbling scream, too low, too throaty, too loud to be human. It was distorted by the dark air that streamed through the fissure and into the half-built, below-ground structures that would form the base of the new hive district.

Core samples had been taken and examined, the ground had been excavated, piles had been driven and the foundations poured. There was going to be a bonus for the contract being completed ahead of schedule. There was pressure from the Administratum overseers and the Hive elders. Premium storage facilities and small-scale hab-units, single and double occupancy, were in short supply and

high demand. The Imperium expected. Work was accelerated, shifts were doubled, checks were cursory at best, and corners were cut. Then the excavations exposed something.

They called it 'the Fissure'. They tried to get close enough to fill it, plug it, cover it, stem the tide of blackness, force the darkness back to wherever it had come from. No one dared to speculate on what it was or where it had come from, nor dared voice their fears. No one truly knew. There were legends of the empyreum, but it was more myth than reality, and if it were real it was a distant, impossible thing.

The Administratum sent for the hive militia. There was nothing else for it.

The first penetration of the warp, the first slender beam of un-light, killed two hundred construction workers who were erecting the retaining walls that would form the dozen underground levels of the hive, and the deep foundation upon which the great skeleton of the above ground levels rested. More than half of that number died as the blackness cut a seam through the veil that separated one reality from the other, where the warp met real space. It tore a ragged slit in time and space, and conjoined the two.

The other half died with promises of great financial rewards and of heroic tales told in their names, wearing little more than the standard construction hazard armour, intended to protect heads and limbs against machinery, falls and falling building materials. There was no protection against the warp or its denizens, but they did not know it was the warp, and were easily persuaded that it was some natural, if rare, geological phenomenon.

When the hive militia arrived two days later the remaining workforce had fled, and no one remained except for the unit boss, holed up in one of the temporary habs. He had built a complex structure from dismantled sections of the cots, tables and chairs that provided the basic furnishings of the temporary workers' accommodations, an elaborate nest that he had climbed into the centre of, and curled up inside it, foetus-like.

'Get him out,' said the sergeant in charge when he could not rouse the civilian by bellowing at him, but the task proved impossible. The structure was a magnificent feat of engineering, stronger than it appeared, and functionally impenetrable. It wouldn't have mattered. The man was insane, his mind turned to insensible mush by the warp and by the miserable mortality he had witnessed. They had died. They had all died, his comrades, his brothers, his workforce, his friends: all dead.

'There's nothing to fight here,' said the sergeant.

‘Then what’s that?’ asked his corporal, raising his old, Guard-issue long-las to his shoulder as he spoke, and sighting it. Something loomed in the mouth of the Fissure: some creature.

‘What the Throne is that?’ His voice was distorted by the rush of black air that accompanied the creature, and, in a split second, half a dozen weapons were raised and firing at the beast.

Some of the las-rounds hit solid black and popped like fireworks, spraying arcs of dense, grey impotent sparks. Some slowed until they stalled altogether, fading and dying in the heavy, cloying air. Only the hard rounds from two autopistols, one fired from the sergeant’s hip and the other carried by the oldest member of the unit, an ex-Imperial infantryman who couldn’t bear to retire, hit home, and only then because the beast was emerging from the warp ether, just a few metres from their feet.

It was an unwholesome creature, about a metre and a half across, with five unequal, bony limbs and a gelatinous, drooping body like a half-filled bladder. It had several orifices, which might have been for breathing, eating, hearing, communicating or evacuating waste, for their purposes were not obvious, but it had nothing that resembled an eye.

Two rounds hit its body mass, and a third and fourth took out its biggest limb, which caused it to list, and then flop in a mess of ichor and some green liquid that resembled bile, except that there was more of it than might be expected from a relatively small creature. There was no doubt that it was dead, but one of the hive militia nevertheless vomited copiously at the sight of it, and another fainted clean away.

‘We need serious firepower, and no mistake,’ said the infantryman.

‘If you’re addressing the sergeant—’ began the corporal.

‘Shut up,’ said the sergeant, and turned to the soldier. ‘We can call in further units, and—’

‘That thing came out of the empyrean. We need firepower of a different order. This is quite beyond our resources.’

‘What do you mean?’ asked the sergeant.

The soldier raised an eyebrow.

‘Holy Emperor!’ murmured the sergeant.

‘You should return to the governor’s palace and persuade him to have the astropaths send out an urgent request for support,’ said the soldier. ‘We need the Adeptus Astartes, and until they get here, the best we can hope for is to build a damned great wall and pray to the God Emperor of Mankind.’

‘The Emperor protects!’ said the corporal.

‘You’d better bloody hope so,’ said the soldier, holstering his auto-gun and walking away.

III

Utropius, Apothecary to the Iron Snakes, broke the seal on Basilion’s left gauntlet. His right hand and arm were entirely missing. It didn’t matter. Basilion had always favoured his sinister side; it was better to honour him with his left gauntlet, which was virtually intact, despite his left shoulder joint having been torn out of his armour, dislocating his shoulder, rupturing the muscles in his neck, arm and back, and tearing the flesh, which hung in ragged, bloodless strips.

The Apothecary removed the gauntlet. It was intact but for some superficial scratches and dinks in its surface, and passed it to Cleon, who held it up to his face in both of his hands, and then stowed it for the journey back to Ithaka once their duty here was done. Utropius was already pouring sacred water onto Basilion’s muscular, unmarked left hand, as perfect in death as it had been in life, only pale and inert. Utropius held the hand in his, poured the water, pushed his flask back into his belt, and then made the signs with the same hand, still holding his battle-brother’s hand.

The words of ritual prayer rang clearly in the air as they had over every Iron Snake who had met his end in service, and as they would over every Iron Snake who would ever meet his end in duty to the Emperor of Mankind. Finally, Utropius bound the fingers of Basilion’s left hand together so that he might never wield a weapon again, that his soul might never strive nor do battle in death, that all might end in eternal peace.

IV

The foolish came first to the Fissure, the foolish, the curious and those drawn by the subliminal call of the empyrean. They came to gawp and to marvel, and they came to die. Some revelled in the un-light, drawn to it, sucked in by its murderous intensity. They walked into it. They could not help themselves, and

they could not be helped.

The hive militia set up a cordon that was breached, over and over again, and hundreds of construction workers were brought in to build defensive barriers and walls, metres high and thick.

The faithful came to pray... The God Emperor's faithful and the heathens alike.

Months passed. The great, gleaming hive spread east, away from the Fissure, and around it. The huge project covering hundreds of square kilometres, reaching three kilometres below ground and fifteen above, was being constructed at the height of the planet's growth and wealth, and reflected all that it had to offer. It was naive to think that the Fissure could end that. Nothing could stop the march of man.

V

Months passed. The Fissure was shut away behind a tonnage of rockcrete so massive as to be utterly impenetrable.

Construction had moved on, the area cordoned off, hung with tarpaulins and semi-permanent hoardings to advertise the new habs and to steer people's eyes away. There was nothing to see.

There was, however, something for the believer to stay for, something for the cultist, something for the Chaos enthusiast, something for the follower of the Ruinous Powers. There was the promise.

Word spread far and wide, and they came, mostly singly or in pairs, to this strange, forbidden place, hidden behind the promise of a bright, manmade future. They came and they prayed, and they sacrificed and they flagellated, and they taught each other all they knew.

They faced the Fissure, and they spoke their words at the tons of rockcrete that divided them from the warp, and for a long time, nothing happened.

VI

It took the three-man unit of Apothecary Utropius and Battle-brothers Basilion and Cleon twenty-two months to travel from Ithaka. The governor did not expect them, had almost forgotten he had sent out the call, and when he did remember,

he felt foolish for believing the old Guardsman who had suggested the warp might have bled into his hive city. What did a Guardsman know of the warp?

There had been some panic. There had been deaths, but it was a construction site; things happened during construction work on this scale. It was industrial damage, nothing more.

When they came, the Space Marines terrified the governor, just as the threat of the warp had terrified him, and when they insisted on examining the site, he dared not resist their intentions, however foolish he felt. At least there were only three of them, as vast as they were, and as imposing, for the governor had never been in the company of such warriors before. At least he did not have to endure the embarrassment of being faced with an entire squad when there was no enemy for them to battle.

VII

Basilion had bled out through his back. His right arm and leg were almost entirely missing, and his left shoulder was wrenched and ragged. The air purifiers in his armour were mangled or missing, the backplate was torn and the flesh pulped, and the top edge of the breastplate was buckled and broken, although the seals at the neck and waist were almost entirely intact. The breastplate itself was pristine, apart from a film of rockcrete dust; there wasn't a scratch or a dink on it anywhere.

Cleon removed his helmet and stood guard over Basilion and Utropius as the Apothecary leaned over the corpse, one foot on either side of his battle-brother's waist, and reached down. He did not think about Basilion's missing right leg or his twisted left. He did not think of the beast.

The Apothecary did what he was trained to do: he concentrated his mind on the words he must recite while he extracted the gene-seed from Basilion's chest, the gene-seed that was the legacy of the Iron Snakes, the gene-seed that made the future possible.

He laid the last of the winding cloths over the wound in Basilion's chest, and made the signs over his battle-brother's body with his left hand while he wielded the reductor in his right.

He was gone. Basilion was no more. He had departed his body as his gene-seed was extracted. There was nothing left of him now, only his helmet in its

final resting place, and his gauntlet, power sword and his gene-seed returning home.

VIII

No one knew when the Fissure began to penetrate the walls that had been built against it, no one but the cultists who were gathered before it. Those who did not die in the first concentrated thread of un-light were in rapture to it, their minds befouled with the warp. They were turned to Chaos. They tore open the bodies of the heretic dead, illuminated as non-believers, as frauds, as fickle pretenders, and they gorged themselves on the flesh that was not, could not be, turned.

Their hunger sated and another dark step taken towards ruin, they turned back to bathe in the narrow beam of un-light with renewed energy, with vigour and intent. A woman stepped into a curling drift of utter blackness, and began to chant and spit a sequence of hard, guttural, incomprehensible sounds. Then a young man joined in, his voice lower than hers, setting up a discord. Then a third voice joined and a fourth, until all the remaining pilgrims were chanting, each in a slightly different key, each in a slightly different rhythm, so that the discord built, splitting the air, visibly, dividing the un-light.

As white light divides into the colours of the rainbow, so the un-light divided. Streaks of dense, fathomless grey shook away from each other, trembled and formed jagged bands in the air, each vibrating at a different frequency. When they bled together they seemed to repel each other, like iron filings reacting to magnetic fields. Each frequency, each band, distorted the sound of the chanting as it passed through, creating further discord, generating a cacophony that caused the crack in the massive rockcrete wall to grow and spread at an alarming rate, until a section of wall eight metres high and five metres wide was crazed all over with beams of banded un-light streaming through at all angles.

One of the beams of light began to coalesce into a searing, pinpoint shaft of un-light, which fell on the nearest of the chanting acolytes, the woman who had begun the unholy ritual. Her eyes were glazed and her nose and mouth trickled black blood as the inhuman utterances came from her throat. The un-light fell in jagged lines across her face and around her wrists as she knelt at the altar that was this new Fissure, and her skin began to singe and blister. Then it began to smoke and cauterised as the un-light cut her eyes from their sockets and sheared

through her wrists. The other disciples watched more beams coalescing as they approached them, praying for them, chanting ever louder in their bliss.

It took hours for the beams of un-light to do their work, to slowly dismember, eviscerate and then remove the organs of the acolytes until only the skeletons and vocal chords remained, chanting their never-ending hymn to Chaos.

The governor was relieved when the Space Marines refused his offer to accompany them to the site, sending the captain of the hive guard in his stead.

The captain fell to the ground in a seizure as he entered the site of the Fissure and saw what had become of the acolytes. They had been chanting for several weeks, their flesh rotting around them, their reeking skulls suspended on fleshless spines, the rasping, guttural sounds still emanating from their wretched throats.

The rockcrete wall, shot through with beams of un-light, crazed with darkness, split into a myriad greys, seemed to throb and flex as the voices continued to build towards some relentless crescendo.

‘Not nothing, then,’ said Utropius.

‘It is never nothing, my brother,’ said Basilion, raising his power sword to cut down the chanting corpses, one by one.

Where the beams of un-light struck the weapon, they made it tremble and thrum in the Space Marine’s hands. The blackness seemed not to be reflected off the sword’s perfectly polished surface, but to be absorbed by it.

Crashing into the spinal columns of the corpses made no difference to their integrity or their ability to chant, so Basilion began to attack skulls, hacking at craniums and mandibles, but the unbroken corpse-beasts continued to sing.

Utropius lifted his lascannon to his shoulder and shot a burst of las-fire into one of the corpses, the largest of the group, who’d been a butcher in his former life, over two metres tall, weighing two hundred kilos. The las-rounds fizzed and sparked, and died in the air around the corpse. Those that did reach their target lit up in the un-light, were absorbed by it, and, somehow enriched it, enhanced it, making it even more sinister.

The butcher’s corpse bobbed its skull and stretched its spine, as if pulling itself up to its full height and inflating its chest, and the sounds that came from its dead throat were louder and more insistent than ever.

‘Hard round weapons, only,’ said Utropius, unshouldering his lascannon and priming the boltgun he carried as a sidearm.

Basilion continued relentlessly to do battle with the corpse-beasts, the un-light, when it crossed paths with his blade, disappearing into it, darkening and dulling

its surface as it sliced and hacked at the floating bones.

Cleon took one look at the threads of un-light penetrating the rockcrete wall and knew that his meltagun was useless. If the wall was to be penetrated it must be done strategically or by whatever was on the other side. The meltagun was a liability, so he, too, must rely on his sidearm, and hope that he could come to the aid of his brother, Basilion, since it had fallen to his lot to control the situation.

The Iron Snakes filtered out the cacophony that was growing all around them as the corpses redoubled their efforts to open the Fissure and bring forth the beast they had come to worship and sacrifice themselves for. They relied, instead, on their internal helmet comms. There was little necessity to speak. Each warrior knew his brothers and had weighed up the situation and his own strengths and weaknesses, and was acting accordingly.

The wall was fragile and unpredictable, and must not be attacked. The corpse choir clearly had some power over the wall, and possibly over what awaited on its other side, the dark side, for the Space Marines had known, before they were within ten kilometres of the site, that they were approaching the presence of the immaterium.

Killing the dead in the face of the un-light was their first task, and they were ill-equipped to accomplish that task, not least because, while they were not under the immediate threat of attack, the singers simply would not perish. The Apothecary and Cleon could not use their main weapons, since the melta was too risky and the lascannon impotent in the un-light, and they had only their sidearms – a Godwyn pattern boltgun and a standard issue boltgun respectively – the shells from which did little more than ricochet off vertebrae and skulls. Only Basilion's power sword seemed able to inflict any damage on the pilgrims.

Apothecary Utropius continued to fire his boltgun judiciously across the face of the wall, while Cleon holstered his sidearm and began to attack the skulls with his fists, using them like punch bags. They simply bobbed and bounced, as if on springs instead of spines, and came back for more.

Basilion did the real work, hacking and slashing, lunging and swinging, finally beginning to disconnect vertebrae, smash teeth, and, in one case, managing to sever the skull from the spine of one of the corpses, even though the skull landed on its side on the rockcrete platform that formed the floor, and continued to wheeze out its discordant melody.

It was Utropius who first felt the change in the air. The joints in his Mk IV armour began to vibrate, squealing with his every move, and he knew that something was about to change. With their filters on, and in their Corvus-pattern

armour, his battle-brothers did not experience the change in atmosphere so readily, and were still doing their damndest to break the choristers when he sent out the cry... Too late.

Then the wall came tumbling down.

Every hack, slash, lunge and swing that Battle-Brother Basilion had inflicted on the corpse choir finally bore fruit, and, suddenly the creatures disintegrated as one, falling to dust and bone shards on the rockcrete floor at the Space Marines' feet.

The vibration in Utropius's armour seals had reached a new pitch, and he was facing directly at the wall when it happened, while Cleon and Basilion were looking around at the mess of bone fragments littered all around them.

The crazed section of the wall that had been leaking un-light, crumbled and fell away. The Fissure was no longer a fissure, but a gaping hole in real time and space, a vast portal onto the warp.

As the light changed, as the un-light flooded over them in a great wave, as the myriad greys coalesced, crashing like a wave through the gap where the wall had been only seconds before, Cleon and Basilion raised their eyes to see what Utropius was already raising his useless lascannon against.

They had no name for it, although Utropius had to find the words to describe it in Basilion's death report.

It was Chaos, and it was daemonic. It had to hunch and duck to step through the portal. When it stood upright, it became clear that the hunch was permanent, that the beast's shoulders were so massive that its neck appeared to emanate horizontally from its chest. It was also bifurcated, carrying a mismatched pair of heads, both bestial, neither entire. One was eyeless while the other had three mouthless faces upon it. It appeared, at first, to have two pairs of arms and three legs, but when it turned, a third pair of arms seemed to sprout from its back, although they appeared flaccid, inert. Its gait was more a rolling glide than a stride and its centre of gravity was low to the ground. It was also the palest creature that the warriors had ever seen, with the thickest, whitest, smoothest hide, like the best marble, entirely without blemish, and with a dense, otherworldly sheen that seemed to bounce the un-light off its surface, creating an aura that confused the eye.

By the time Utropius had fired his lascannon and the rounds had fizzled to nothing in the un-light, Basilion was under attack. He swung and thrust with his power sword, but the beast had the longer reach, and the blurring of its form by the reflection of the un-light made it difficult to place in the environment, so

every one of Basilion's first half a dozen strikes missed its target.

Cleon quickly shouldered and aimed his meltagun, and fired a first blast of intense heat that somehow the daemon side-stepped onto, catching it directly in the torso. The un-light sucked the light out of the air, turning it ever blacker, making Cleon gasp inside his helmet. Then he saw the massive residual heat burn into the creature's chest, and for a split-second there was relief, but only for a moment. As soon as that relief was registered it was replaced by calm, cold horror.

The heat from the melta-fire was absorbed by the dense sheen of the monster's white hide, which glowed even whiter in a starburst formation across the centre of its torso, and Cleon realised that the beast had stepped into his line of fire deliberately. The thing bellowed a high-pitched scream of triumph, a split note as if blown too hard through a reed instrument.

Cleon and Utropius heard the words in their helmets as the beast reached out, and Basilion lunged and turned.

'Hard weapons and hard rounds only,' said Basilion, breathing steadily as he attacked the daemon.

Basilion's lunge missed again, but as he turned, the daemon took hold of Basilion's shoulders and wrenched hard at them, pulling at the armour to get at the flesh beneath. Basilion was shifted off-balance, but, in righting himself, he swung tight with his sword arm and struck his first blow, scoring a deep slit in the daemon's left forearm. There was no blood, just oozing ichor, but the skin separated to reveal fibrous greenish matter beneath that resembled muscle. The sheen on the monster's skin shifted as if it were some separate entity, flowing into the wound, filling it and sealing it off.

It was enough. Basilion knew how the daemon's physical presence differed from his visual presence and he could take advantage of that.

Utropius began to take pot-shots at the daemon with his boltgun, missing until he was able to assess Basilion's movements, and could then prove something of a distraction to the beast. The bolt-rounds caused only the most superficial wounds, but they made the creature flinch and swat at the annoyance, enabling Basilion to do his work.

The daemon relied too heavily on its ability to appear physically elusive, and then on its second skin to protect it. Basilion quickly overcame the first; the second had to be a matter of perseverance. The Space Marine, known for his prowess at hand-to-hand combat with a bladed weapon, went into overdrive, cutting and thrusting, hacking and slashing, swinging and slicing. It was not his

intention to cause one fatal blow, but to strike over and over again. This was a war of attrition, and he was in it alone.

Cleon watched his brother for a moment, marvelling at his skill, and then set to work doing the only thing he could: he began to work on the rockcrete using his melta to cut new sections of wall to fill the gap where the Fissure had broken through. He worked hard and he worked fast, and as soon as this threat was over, the Fissure would be blocked off. Cleon would see to the physical barrier and they would ensure that the governor, that the Imperium of Mankind, maintained a spiritual barrier in perpetuity. The faithful would be brought in to claim back this place and to pray over it.

The daemon took flesh wounds over three of its limbs and down the left side of its torso while it raged and stomped and grabbed at its assailant. Then it came a little to its senses. It stood its ground, reached out its hands and gathered the un-light around it, between its upper pair of hands. Its lower pair of arms continued to pinwheel, trying to grab at Basilion, who was too quick on his feet, too clever to get caught.

The first searing thread of black light took advantage of the ripped seal at Basilion's left shoulder joint. It slowed the Space Marine down for a second, and the daemon caught him, wrenching his left shoulder from its socket and tearing the flesh and muscles of his neck and back. Basilion threw his power sword to his right hand, and, drawing a breath as his Larraman's organ began its work, he set about the daemon anew.

The daemon's many flesh wounds were beginning to ooze slightly. The dense sheen covering its skin was thinning, and more and more of it was pouring into the open gashes that were appearing all over it. The skin looked more grey than white, and the creature began to look slow and sickly.

Basilion's sword, almost black by the time he had finished attacking the corpse choir, was losing some of its colour, and regaining a little of its shine.

The daemon continued to draw un-light between its hands, to gather it into hard black balls, and then to send slender beams of it to cut into Basilion's armour and flesh. His right leg was the new target as the next beam of un-light left the daemon's hands and cut into the armour across the Space Marine's thigh. He tried to avoid it, but could not step away; all he could do was fight on, cutting and slicing, leaving as many marks in the daemon's skin as he could possibly manage. He caught the fingers of the daemon's left hand as it raised them to control the un-light, slicing across the four digits and then twice across the outstretched palm and again across the wrist. With every new cut, every existing

wound leaked a little more steadily, the sheen on the skin grew a little duller and the daemon came a little more into focus.

Then Utropius's bolt-rounds began to penetrate, embedding themselves in the sheen, causing it to gather and cover the new injuries, spreading it ever thinner, making it work ever harder.

Basilion's right leg was gone, the stump cauterised. It did not prevent him fighting on. His left arm was useless, his shoulder torn away, but he would live.

Then the sheen began to drip from the daemon's skin, thinned and contaminated by the fluids that it was meant to contain, and the beast grew angry. The bolt-rounds hurt, and the Space Marine with his endless swinging was a thorn in its side. The sheen began to run down every surface, every contour of the daemon's body, and off at every joint and angle, and with it ran the daemon's lifeblood, the ichor that powered its physical being.

Angered, the daemon did not have the patience to gather the un-light for another onslaught, so it blundered forward and lunged at Basilion, grabbing low at his left leg. Basilion had been compensating as best he could for his missing lower limb, but could not resist being bowled over. The daemon grasped the leg with all four of its great, clawed paws and swung and twisted Basilion through the air. Basilion refused to be disorientated, and decided to take full advantage of being inside the daemon's reach, inflicting as many long, deep cuts on the creature's massive torso, shoulders and neck as he could manage before he was flung aside, his left leg badly twisted and mangled, his armour disjointed and mostly missing, broken at all the seals.

Utropius had stopped shooting and was offering up a prayer.

Basilion landed face down, and the daemon stepped onto his back, jamming two of its heels hard between the Space Marine's shoulders as it gathered together more un-light. It fed one beam directly into the back of Basilion's armour while rending and tearing to get at flesh and muscle and bone. It fed a second beam directly at the right shoulder joint of Basilion's armour, severing the limb that was wielding his power sword, silver-bright and gleaming once more, utterly destroying the Space Marine.

Utropius never let up with his boltgun, firing round after round at the daemon, whose body was now a dull grey, weeping ichor from every wound, the sheen utterly used up and gone.

It wasn't the bolt-rounds that killed it, though.

The warp daemon suffered a death by a thousand cuts.

When they were sure that Basilion had triumphed, Utropius and Cleon threw

the daemon's corpse back through the portal, now as lifeless and dull as the beast, and placed the rockcrete panels that Cleon had cut over the place they called the Fissure.

IX

Basilion's body was left in the care of the governor, who ordered a state funeral for the great warrior, and a permanent shrine to be built to him on the site of his death.

On their return to Ithaka, Apothecary Utropius deposited the gene-seed in the repository, Basilion's gauntlet in the reliquary and his power sword in the armoury as was the Iron Snakes' custom. Three things came back to the home planet, by right, of which one must be brought to life, one must be brought to use and one must be brought to rest.

Then the Apothecary and his battle-brothers stood on the shore at sunset as Utropius emptied his flask back into the ocean, the flask that had carried the Ithakan water that could have no other Imperial use, for it had anointed the Iron Snakes' dead brother, and it could bring nothing but ill-fortune to any who used it thereafter.

Basilion is dead. Long live the gene-seed. Long live the Iron Snakes. The Emperor protects.

Here's my story from the 2013 chapbook. Like Nik's, it's 'historical', a flashback (though not as far as hers) to an earlier time. It is a curiosity. It's a Gaunt story, but not a Ghosts one. This is Gaunt, pre-Tanith...

Dan Abnett



A GHOST RETURN

Dan Abnett

I

Location: Formal Prime, Sabbat Worlds, 755.M41

They were walking by lamplight, finding their way by the criss-crossing beams of their lamp packs. They were deep underground, so of course it was going to be dark.

Except it seemed unnecessarily, *extravagantly* dark. Lightless. As though some kind of anti-light, an un-light, had been poured into the gloom to thicken it.

Every few seconds, and to no particular rhythm, the earth shook.

Ibram Gaunt could feel it through his boots. He swapped his lamp pack to his right hand, and placed his left palm against the tunnel wall. He felt the rough surface transmit the vibrations. At every subterranean quiver, dirt trickled down from the ceiling, or spilled from loose sections of the old, decaying arches.

The men in the advance squad could feel the shaking too, and it was putting them on edge. Gaunt could tell that by the way the beams of their lamps jerked and shifted at every tremble. Gaunt knew someone should say something. That someone was him, a part of his duty.

‘Shelling,’ he said. ‘The Warmaster has focused the artillery divisions on Sangrel Hive. It’s just shelling.’

‘Feels like the world’s moving,’ muttered one of the troopers.

Gaunt tilted his lamp to find the man’s face. Picked out starkly by the lamp’s

beam, Trooper Gebbs shielded his eyes at the glare.

‘It’s just shelling,’ Gaunt assured him. ‘Concussion from the shelling.’

Gebbs shrugged.

The ground shook. Pebbles skittered.

‘Why are we here?’ asked another man. Gaunt’s lamp beam moved to identify Trooper Ari Danks.

‘You getting all philosophical now, Ari?’ Gebbs asked with a chuckle made throaty by the dust in the air.

‘I just wondered what the Throne we were supposed to be doing?’ Danks replied. ‘There’s nothing out here. Just these endless, pitch-black bloody ruins...’

‘So you’d rather be hacking your way through Charismites in the hive-stacks, would you?’ asked Trooper Hiskol.

‘At least it wouldn’t be as black as up my—’

‘Enough,’ said Gaunt. He didn’t have to raise his voice, and the troopers didn’t have to turn their beams to see his face and read its expression. They ceased their chatter. Some of them had served long enough to remember when Gaunt had just been ‘the Boy’, Oktar’s cadet, but none of them were about to forget what that young cadet had become. Gaunt was the commissar. He was discipline.

The ground shook again. Gaunt heard a little river of grit spill down the curve of the tunnel wall. He had to admit that Trooper Danks had a point. What *were* they doing here?

Gaunt understood the mission parameters clearly enough, and frankly, given the intensity of the hive-war, this advance detail was a blessed relief.

Even so, he’d calculated the journey time that morning, overestimating to allow for detours where the maps didn’t match the navigable reality of the undersink, and they should have reached their destination two hours ago.

Gaunt told the men to wait, and used his lamp to pick his way along the unlit tunnel. The officer in charge of the detail was standing at the next bend, checking his charts.

Major Czytel glanced up at the lamplight bobbing towards him.

‘That you, Gaunt?’

‘Yes, sir.’

‘We may have taken a wrong turn back there, Gaunt,’ Czytel said. ‘At that junction where the tunnel split.’

He turned and twitched his beam back the way they had come, partly as an indicator, partly to pick out Gaunt’s face.

Gaunt nodded. He'd presumed as much. Galen Czytel was old school, and most definitely remembered the time when Gaunt had merely been 'the Boy'. Unlike the rank and file, he had never really got over the idea that Ibram Gaunt was an over-educated, over-privileged scholam boy with too much book-learning and not enough actual soldiering. Czytel liked what he called 'honest men'. He seemed to be allergic to anybody who had an air of the officer class or entitlement. Czytel had 'dragged himself' up through the Hyrkan ranks. He'd freely tell you that, possibly several times in the course of one regimental dinner.

In fact, when Gaunt received his full promotion at Oktar's deathbed on Gylatus Decimus, Czytel had been one of a group of officers who had formally requested that Gaunt be transferred out of the Hyrkan Eighth to another unit. They felt that it would 'undermine morale' because the men 'would not take seriously the authority of an individual who had previously been the regiment's mascot'.

General Caernavar had thrown the request out quickly. Ironical then, it was officers like Czytel, and not the regular troops, who had found such difficulty in accommodating Gaunt's maturity.

Gaunt, for his part, had learned that it was best not to correct Czytel unless absolutely necessary. An officer's mistake could be carefully smoothed over by a diligent commissar. An open argument between an officer and a commissar had potentially devastating effects on discipline.

'We'll go back,' Gaunt said. 'It's not far. Or we could go on to the next intersection, and move east.'

'The next intersection?' asked Czytel.

In the lamplight, Gaunt could see that Czytel was looking at him with a sort of sneer. 'You haven't got your chart out. You just *remember* that, do you?'

'I reviewed the route this morning,' Gaunt replied. 'I don't have my chart out because—'

He stopped. He had been about to say 'because you, as officer in charge, were leading the route'.

'I will double-check,' Gaunt said. 'I could be wrong.' He reached for the data-slate pouch attached to his webbing, but Czytel just handed over his own slate. It looked like impatience, that Czytel didn't want to wait while Gaunt produced his data-slate and woke it up. But it was actually a small concession, one which allowed for the idea that Czytel might have made a navigational error. The major wanted to keep the peace too.

Gaunt reviewed the screen.

‘Yes, you see, sir? The next intersection seems to allow access to this sinkway here. That should lead us directly to the shrine.’

‘If it is a shrine,’ said Czytel.

Which is the point of us being here, Gaunt thought, but did not say it. He just nodded.

Czytek turned the squad.

‘Pick it up! Let’s go!’ he called into the darkness.

II

The Crusade had finally begun.

The Crusade.

The top brass had been talking about it for years, and received wisdom was that the region known as the Sabbat Worlds was past saving. It was a vast territory at the rimward edge of the Segmentum Pacificus, a major Imperial holding that had, in the course of two bloody centuries been overrun by the marauding armies of the Sanguinary Worlds. Some worlds had fallen to the Eternal Archenemy. Others, like Formal Prime, had struggled on, surrounded by the barbarous foe, fighting to maintain their Imperial identities. The Sabbat Worlds deserved the protection of the Throne, their seneschals and governors pleaded for it, but liberation was a monumental task. Few thought that High Command would ever sanction the massive expenditure that a crusade war would require.

Until Slaydo. Lord Militant Slaydo was a persuasive beast, and with the victories of the Khulan Wars on his honour roll, he had been declared Warmaster and allowed to prosecute the Sabbat Worlds Crusade.

It was the biggest Imperial mobilisation in the segmentum for three centuries. The Departmento Tacticae Imperialis estimated it would take a century to successfully complete the campaign.

Ibram Gaunt had no real interest in looking that far ahead. The fighting to retake Formal Prime’s ancient and crumbling hives had been some of the most brutal and intense he’d experienced, and his career with the Hyrkans had not been lacking in bloodshed. Eight years since he’d joined the Imperial Guard as a Commissariat cadet, and he’d seen plenty of action, but nothing like this.

Sangrel Hive, the world’s most massive hab centre, was the stronghold of an

enemy ‘magister’ or warlord, a monster called Shebol Red-Hand. His cult followers, the Charismites, held their ground with a zealous rage that was quite intimidating. The previous week, Gaunt had seen more men die in one hour than he thought possible.

So this, this lamplight detour mission into the rambling, pitch-black undersinks seventy kilometres beyond the recognised limits of Sangrel Hive, this could be seen as something of a perk. It got a squad of men out of the front line for a few days. It had the personal sanction of the Warmaster. The surroundings might be dismal – the unnerving darkness, the steady seep of tarry ground-water, the smell of rot and mildew, the vermin, the unsafe sections of tunnel – but the Hyrkan soldiers were out of the front-line action, and there were no screaming waves of spear-wielding Charismites rushing their formation every few minutes.

The ground shook. Dirt trickled. Gaunt noted the agitation of the men once again, the flickering beams. He realised there was a chilly lick of sweat between his own shoulder blades. Sangrel Hive was a long way away. If they could feel the earth-shock of the artillery bombardment at this distance, what kind of hell had the main front turned into?

The assault of Formal Prime was part of Operation Redrake, the Warmaster’s opening move. Named after the famous predatory serpent, Redrake was intended to be a lightning strike against multiple targets: four significant worlds at the trailing edge of the Sabbat group: Formal Prime, Long Halent, Onscard and Indrid. Slaydo had chosen to lead the Formal Prime assault personally. It was the keystone world.

If Redrake failed, then the Crusade was as good as botched before it had even got going. The High Lords of Terra would recall Slaydo. Tactics would be reconsidered. The Sabbat Worlds might be left to rot for another thousand years. Another ten thousand.

Gaunt tried not to think about it. He was an ambitious young man. He had achieved his status in the Hyrkans through sheer hard work and perseverance. He had welcomed the possibility of a major new campaign because it was an opportunity for an ambitious young man to prove himself and make a name.

The reality was bitter and exhausting. War was not a glorious thing, no matter what memories or reputations resulted from it. War was about suffering and loss, about struggle and sacrifice. It was about blood. Just a few weeks into the opening engagements of the conflict, Ibram Gaunt no longer thought about it in terms of proving himself, or building a reputation.

He had realised that the Sabbat Worlds Crusade was something he was going

to have to endure. It was something a man simply had to survive.

Gaunt wondered what kind of strength that feat was going to require. He wasn't sure he had it. He wasn't sure he'd ever had it. He was just an over-educated, over-privileged scholam boy with too much book-learning and—

The ground shook.

'Here,' said Gaunt. 'Sir?'

Czytel turned. Gaunt shone his lamp down a side passage that was partly obscured by architectural debris.

'This is the junction?' the major asked.

'Yes, sir,' said Gaunt.

Czytel shrugged, and clambered through. The men followed, lasguns across their chests. Gaunt wanted to assign them a covering pattern, to send some men ahead to recon. However, the Hyrkans, excellent, well-drilled battlefield soldiers though they were, generally lacked an aptitude for scouting and recon.

Besides, it was not Gaunt's place to issue commands. That was the officer's job. Gaunt was merely the commissar.

III

The sinkway ran for about eighty metres, then opened out into a series of large, irregular caverns. It was part of the old arcology that had once formed the massive underhive realm of Sangrel, when the hive had been in its prime. Using his lamp, Gaunt could see rusted threads of technological out-ports and power cables embedded in the crumbling walls, and the remains of cross-arch roof supports and rockcrete pillaring. But the space was old, and had not been maintained at all in the century or more since the hive had shrunk and its outer quarters had been abandoned.

Like the undersink they had trekked through, it was derelict. The ceiling had collapsed in places, littering the ground with rubble and twisted metal rebar. Pools of oily water had accumulated in the darkness. Gaunt could hear the scratch of vermin. He could see the partial remains of an old, tiled floor, the relic of grander days.

There was light ahead. It seemed strange, out of place. Glow-globes and lumen units had been strung from the exposed girders or threaded up on wire supports to hook pins that had been power-sunk into the rock. They could hear the low,

background throb of a generator.

Gaunt sniffed. He could smell rock dust, the fine dry powder kicked out by an excavator's drill.

Czytel flashed a few gestures, and the advance sharpened up. Lasrifles swung up ready, covering style, as the men fanned out and prowled forward. Zennet, the squad's sniper, unsleeved his long-las and popped the cover on the scope. He and Breccia, the squad's sweeper, had been lugging the charge panniers, so Zennet took up a spot nearby, allowing him to both scope the area and stay close enough to guard the payload. Breccia began to unpack and assemble his sweeper broom. His lascarbine lay ready on the ground beside him.

Czytel had drawn his laspistol. With his left hand, he flashed some more fingers, indicating numbers and groupings. The advance scurried forward, switching off their lamp packs and adjusting their eyes to the light of the strung lamps.

Gaunt took out his bolt pistol. It felt far too heavy.

Danks and Hiskol were beside him. Gaunt nodded, and they moved ahead into the lit cavern.

Right in front of them was a woman in work overalls, carrying a tray of potshards.

She saw them and yelped, dropping the tray as though it was red-hot. The contents smashed on the ancient tiles.

'Calm. Calm!' Gaunt told her. He reached for her and pulled her down into cover.

'Don't shout,' he said firmly.

'You're Guard?' she asked, breathless, looking up at him.

'Yes.'

'The Guard detail we sent for?'

'Yes. You're with the dig team?'

She nodded.

'You scared the living shit out of me,' she said.

'Kallie? Kallie? Are you all right?'

A man's voice echoed through the cavern. He appeared at the far end, bracing an autorifle.

'Kallie? I heard you cry out. Kallie?'

'Put it down,' Danks told him, aiming his lasrifle from the cheek.

'Do as he says,' Hiskol emphasised, closing from the other side, lasrifle aimed, one eye closed.

‘Throne!’ the man said, and lowered his rifle to the floor, terrified.

‘Don’t let them hurt him!’ the woman told Gaunt.

Gaunt rose.

‘Stand down,’ he said. He approached the man, who was on his knees. Danks had kicked the autorifle away.

‘Imperial Guard,’ Gaunt said. ‘Hyrkan Eighth. Are you a member of the survey team?’

‘Yes,’ said the man. ‘Yes.’

‘We came in response to your message,’ Gaunt said. ‘I’ll need to see some identification.’

The man immediately reached for his pocket. Gaunt’s aim with the bolt pistol was unwavering.

‘Do it gently,’ he advised.

The man produced an ident slate and proffered it to Gaunt.

‘Wal Desruisseaux,’ he said. ‘Survey Advance. You scared me.’

‘Yeah, we’re supposed to do that,’ said Danks, his aim still steady.

Gaunt suppressed a smile. He studied the slate.

‘This survey was undertaken with the authority of the Warmaster,’ Desruisseaux said. ‘His personal authority—’

‘I understand,’ said Gaunt.

‘No, he really—’

Gaunt looked at the kneeling archaeologist.

‘I understand, sir. Warmaster Slaydo is particularly concerned that the Crusade recovers, authenticates and preserves all traces of the Saint Beati Sabbat, especially her votive shrines. It is an underlying standing order. It explains why so many archaeological and survey teams have been allowed prominence in the vanguard. It explains your presence here, and why we have responded so directly to your call for help. Believe me, I understand, sir.’

He tossed the slate back to the archaeologist. Desruisseaux caught it and got to his feet.

‘Are you the officer in charge of—’ Desruisseaux began.

‘Throne, no,’ replied Gaunt. ‘You’ll meet him shortly. How many of you are there?’

‘Eight,’ said the archaeologist.

‘Get them to come out right now. Into the open. My men are tight on their triggers. Let’s not have an incident.’

‘I thought you said they weren’t your men?’ said Desruisseaux.

‘Get them out front,’ said Gaunt.

IV

They herded the eight archaeologists into the globe-lit inner cavern space. Czytel’s squad surrounded them and kept watch.

Desruisseaux was in charge. The girl that Gaunt had grabbed, the survey team’s second, was his wife.

‘Explain what you have found,’ Czytel said, lighting a lho-stick. ‘Come on, now, professor, we’ve come a long way through the dark.’

Desruisseaux glowered at him.

‘So have we, sir,’ he replied.

‘We’ve spent our lives documenting and determining the history of the Sabbat Beati,’ said Kallie. ‘This crusade provides us with an unparalleled opportunity to physically investigate her—’

Czytel blew a raspberry.

‘You’re an encumbrance is what you are. Throne-damned academics, worming away where war is happening. We’re dying, don’t you know, a Throne-awful lot as it is, without having to risk our lives protecting the likes of you.’

‘The Beati—’ Desruisseaux began.

‘Shut it,’ said Czytel.

‘But this shrine—’ the woman said.

‘What have you found?’ asked Gaunt.

V

It was a huge rockcrete plug, filling what might have once been the mouth of a tunnel or a cavern in the rock. The walls around were covered in votive offerings and the calcified drip of wax from a million candles. Though this undersink had been deserted for over a century, people had continued to come here and place offerings at the wall. This was sacred ground.

And it shook. The distant artillery bombardment made the cavern throb.

‘This is your shrine?’ asked Czytel.

‘Sir, yes. It is obviously so,’ Desruisseaux replied. ‘See the layers of votive

wax here, and the number of offerings. Even in modern times, during the cruel reign of Shebol, hivers have flocked here through the dark to make observance.'

'I don't really know what I'm looking at,' Czytel said, stepping back and frowning.

'As I understand it,' said Gaunt, 'the shrine lies in the cavern beyond. This rockcrete plug is sealing the entrance.'

'Exactly,' said Kallie. 'So, I take it you've brought the explosives?'

VI

Breccia and Zennet had been carrying the charge panniers. Cold-packed fyceline gel in ten-mil cases. Enough to bring down a curtain wall.

'Drill them in,' Czytel ordered.

Breccia nodded and hurried to oblige.

'Sir,' said Gaunt, taking him to one side, 'is that wise? We have no idea what we're—'

Czytel turned to look at him.

'Gaunt, they've called us in to blow up that rockcrete plug. Behind it, most probably, is a shrine to the Beati. If there is, the Warmaster will praise us. If there isn't, then he will approve our efforts to confirm or deny. Whichever way it turns out, we are going to blow that plug out.'

Gaunt stepped back and took a moment to look at the cavern. The idea of revealing a genuine shrine to the saint thrilled him, but there was something unnerving about the tilt and balance of the light in the space, something that gave him pause.

VII

'There was some inscription here,' Gaunt said.

'Yes,' said Kallie, following him along the wall beside the plug. 'It collapsed. It crumbled.'

Nearby, Breccia was drilling charge holes into the plug. He was fitting the explosives into position a stick at a time. Gaunt knew there was about an hour before they'd have to withdraw to a safe distance. Breccia was good at his job.

He reached down into the stone litter at the foot of the wall and picked up a shard on which there was a scrap of inscribed script.

‘You never thought to piece this inscription together?’ he asked.

‘There’s been too much work to do,’ she replied. ‘Why?’

‘It looks significant,’ Gaunt said. ‘And it looks as if it’s been cut away deliberately. As if the surface had been chipped or blasted away.’

‘No, it just collapsed. It crumbled,’ she insisted. ‘It was very old.’

‘Exactly. But you didn’t think it was an imperative to reconstruct it?’

She looked at him.

‘You’re a soldier. What does it matter?’

‘I’m an over-educated, over-privileged scholam boy,’ Gaunt replied. ‘That’s why.’

VIII

Gaunt drew Czytel aside quietly and told him he thought they should stop placing the charges.

‘Stop?’ Czytel frowned.

‘I believe we need to know more about this site, major. We—’

‘For Throne’s sake, Gaunt,’ Czytel began. ‘That’s why we’re going to blow it open. To find out. To prove it is a shrine. This is a fool’s errand and a waste of time. I want it resolved one way or another.’

‘I have a gut feeling that detonating the charges would be a bad idea, sir,’ said Gaunt.

Czytel sniffed.

Gaunt’s gut feelings were all too real and all too unreliable. He’d almost been split in two by Dercius’s chainsword two years earlier. The sight of the scar across his belly made even veterans shiver.

Czytel looked at the young commissar.

‘We’re going to blow this open, Gaunt,’ he said. ‘We’re going to find this shrine, and we’re going to go back to the line and report a duty completed. The Warmaster will smile upon us, and we will all be warmed by that smile.’

Gaunt wanted to speak, but he hesitated.

‘Yes, sir,’ he said.

IX

The ground shook.

Breccia was working diligently. Gaunt watched for a while, then wandered along the outer wall of the alleged shrine. To either side of the rockcrete plug, the tunnel walls were thick with wax from the candles pilgrims had brought to light. The wax had set around old, dry flowers, coins, medals and other votive offerings fixed to the wall. Though they had been on site for a good while, the survey team had made no attempt to clear the wax and examine the wall. Gaunt was still puzzled by their disinclination to recover the inscription. The only real effort they seemed to have made was in futile drilling to unseal the plug.

The ground shook.

‘Vedic?’ Gaunt called. The squad’s flame trooper hurried over from where he been waiting, chatting to fellow members of the advance.

‘Sir?’

‘Get a low heat on this section of wax,’ Gaunt told him.

Vedic frowned, but made no comment. He tightened the flamer’s light and washed a little fire over the wall. Old wax bobbled and streamed. Flowers crisped. Coins, loosened and heated, dropped onto the ground.

Gaunt had been hoping for more inscriptions, inscriptions that had been covered up by the wax. But the exposed wall was bare. The only inscription around the shrine entrance had been the one that had mysteriously crumbled.

He noticed that Breccia had stopped work.

‘What’s the matter?’ Gaunt asked, crossing to him before Czytel noticed. He walked up the stone ramp to where Breccia stood by the plug.

‘Something odd,’ Breccia said, looking a little worried. He didn’t want the commissar to think he was slacking.

He’d been using his sweeper unit to scan the plug and choose the best places to drill his charge holes.

‘When I got closer to this side,’ Breccia told Gaunt, ‘I started to get a ghost return. It’s not coming from the plug, but it’s strong. I’d say a lump of metal or something, buried in the wall this side of the plug.’

‘How deep?’ Gaunt asked.

‘Not deep at all.’

‘How big?’

‘The size of a munitions crate perhaps?’

‘What was the survey team doing if they didn’t detect this?’ Gaunt asked.

‘Beg your pardon, sir?’ asked Breccia.

‘Nothing,’ Gaunt said. ‘Keep placing the charges, or Czytel will get grumpy. Leave this with me.’

Gaunt unfastened his entrenching tool from his pack, locked the folding blade in place, and started to dig away at the wall. It wasn’t as tough as rockcrete, but it took some effort to chip the surface away.

‘What the Throne are you doing?’ Desruisseaux called out.

‘Something you should have done,’ Gaunt replied. He nodded to the men to keep Desruisseaux and his team back. Stone chips and dust began to spatter out of the hole he was making.

‘Gaunt?’ Czytel asked, approaching.

‘One moment.’

‘Gaunt, in the name of the Throne—’

‘Just give me one moment, major,’ Gaunt said more firmly, working hard and not looking at the other officer.

‘I’m not in the mood for this, Gaunt,’ Czytel growled.

‘Just wait!’ Gaunt snapped. He’d made a hole, and exposed what appeared to be a small cavity or sealed alcove. He cut some more away, grabbed his lamp, and peered inside.

‘Throne!’ he gasped.

‘What is it?’ Czytel asked, crowding in behind him. ‘What can you see?’

Gaunt reached in with both hands and gently, reverently, lifted out the object inside the cavity.

It was old, covered in dust. It had evidently been damaged.

It was a helmet from a suit of Mark VI Adeptes Astartes armour.

‘Glory!’ said Czytel.

Gaunt set it down, and wiped some of the dust away.

‘Iron Snakes,’ Gaunt said.

‘How do you know?’ asked Czytel.

‘I studied at scholam,’ Gaunt said. ‘The Chapters of the Adeptes Astartes were a particular draw for me. This emblem is of the Iron Snakes of Ithaka.’

‘Why was it buried in the wall?’ asked Breccia.

Czytel looked at Gaunt.

‘The Adeptes Astartes would only leave something this precious here if the place were significant,’ Gaunt said.

‘Exactly. A shrine,’ replied Czytel.

‘Or a warning,’ said Gaunt. He looked over at the vox officer.

‘Transmit to Assault Command,’ he said. ‘My security code. Ask them for instruction. Tell them I want to talk to someone in Tactical. Someone with archive access. Tell them we will wait and hold position here until the bombardment is over, if necessary.’

‘Gaunt!’ Czytel barked.

Gaunt turned to look at the advance’s commanding officer. He couldn’t remember ever seeing the major this angry before.

Czytel beckoned Gaunt over to him, away from the men.

‘Throne damn you, Gaunt,’ Czytel hissed, as soon as Gaunt was close enough. ‘I’ve had enough of this. You’re out of line. I’ll be speaking to the general about your performance. You don’t give orders. You do not have command here. You have gravely overstepped your remit, and—’

‘Then start giving some orders that make sense,’ Gaunt replied, his voice equally low. ‘With *respect*, sir, you seem to be ignoring basic evidence. There are questions here, too many questions. They should be resolved before we continue.’

‘Oh, such as?’

Gaunt hesitated. He thought of the serpent symbol etched on the Corvus-pattern helm, and how he had immediately connected it to the snake the operation was named after. Foolish. Such connections could be made wherever you looked in the galaxy. They meant nothing. Just another example of his oh-so-unreliable gut instinct. Except it didn’t feel unreliable.

He couldn’t explain it. He knew Czytel would ignore him if he tried, but he also remembered what Oktar had taught him: ‘In war, Ibram, the instincts that really count are the ones that feel so strong and sharp, you can’t put them into words.’

‘I think this is a mistake,’ he said.

‘What are you saying, Gaunt?’

‘I’m saying... your command decisions are questionable right now. You may disparage my education, sir, but I’ve always admired your inherent wit and intelligence, neither of which you seem to be employing at the moment. I’m asking for good judgement.’

Czytel’s face flushed red in the cheeks and jowls. He began, in a no longer suppressed tone, to tell Gaunt exactly what he thought of him. Gaunt let it come. He stepped back, not even listening. His mind was settled. He began rehearsing in his mind the precise wording of Commissariat Article 297. *By the authority of my rank, and by the terms agreed in Article 297 of the code, I have to inform you*

your actions in command have been found unsound, and therefore you are hereby removed from command until further notice.

As a commissar, Gaunt had never had to resort to command level censure before. It was a serious step. As soon as Czytel stopped ranting, he would look him square in the eye and recite those words.

He hoped the evidence would uphold such a drastic action. If it didn't, it would be the end of Gaunt's career.

'Sir!'

They both looked around. The vox-officer had approached them. He looked very uncomfortable.

'Sir, I sent your message, as instructed,' he said. 'I told them quite specifically we would wait until the bombardment had stopped if necessary.'

'And?' asked Gaunt.

'The bombardment ended about three hours ago, sir,' said the vox-man.

No one spoke. Gaunt looked at Czytel, and saw a new emotion crossing the major's face. The ground shook, and a little patter of dirt spilled down from the tunnel wall.

Gaunt turned, got back up on the ramp, and walked to the rockcrete plug. He took off his glove and pressed his hand against the plug's outer surface.

He felt the vibration. He felt something heaving and shaking deep underground, behind the massive plug.

Something trying to get out.

He looked back at Czytel.

'We stop,' he said. 'Right now.'

There was a sudden blast of gunfire from behind them.

Everyone scattered, desperate for cover. Las-rounds zipped through the chamber. Gaunt ducked behind a support beam, and saw that Wal Desruisseaux had snatched a lasrifle from Trooper Gebbs and opened fire. Gebbs was dead. Another two men had been dropped, dead or badly hit. Blood decorated the ancient tiled floor.

Desruisseaux was retreating back up the cavern, firing from the hip on auto. In the confined space, it was enough to keep everybody ducking.

'Get him! Shoot him!' Czytel yelled, then grunted as a las-round hit his left elbow and spun him onto the ground. Head down, Gaunt dashed across the space to the major's side.

'I'm all right! I'm all right!' Czytel growled, clutching his arm. 'Just get the bastard!'

Gaunt nodded. He had already drawn his bolt pistol. He started yelling orders to the men pinned around him.

Desruisseaux had reached decent cover in the rear part of the chamber. He had excellent angles on any assault that came at him. That smacked of military training. It would be suicide to move until the maniac had run out of ammunition.

Gaunt realised they didn't have that long. Desruisseaux was concentrating his fire on the area of the plug and the ramp. He was trying to hit the panniers of charges that Breccia had left there.

He was trying to set them off.

Gaunt winced as a las-round banged off the edge of one of the steel containers. The gel charges could take quite a lot of rough treatment before they'd detonate, but a square-on hit from a lasbolt was not a healthy idea.

'Zennet!' Gaunt yelled. The squad's marksman was in cover on the other side of the chamber. He had lined up behind a pile of stone blocks, his long-las cradled. He had no clear angle.

'I'm going to try to buy you one clean opening,' Gaunt yelled over the gunfire. 'Don't waste it!'

Zennet nodded, and took aim.

Gaunt took a deep breath and then popped up fast, firing his bolt pistol in a two-handed grip. The bolt pistol was a powerful piece. Neither it, nor any of the lasweapons carried by the advance, had enough penetrative power to get through the cover Desruisseaux was using, but the bolt pistol's mass-reactive rounds exploded on impact. Unlike the las-fire that Czytel's men had been able to throw at Desruisseaux, which had chipped and dented and sparked off his cover, the bolt-round produced a withering cluster of explosions that sent debris spitting and flying in all directions.

It was enough to make Desruisseaux start and react. He moved sideways, towards the cover of a nearby pillar.

He was open for a second.

Zennet took the shot and the long-las howled.

X

They looked at the body. Gaunt tore open the front of Desruisseaux's worksuit,

and they saw the old tattoo on his chest. It wasn't something you'd want to look at for long.

'A cultist,' murmured Czytel. He was looking on as Danks bandaged his elbow.

'A Charismite, I suspect,' said Gaunt. He got up. 'Check the other members of the survey team,' he told Hiskol. 'Have them strip down and check them for marks. He might have been working alone, infiltrating a genuine survey team, but I doubt it.'

Hiskol nodded.

'So,' mused Czytel, 'the Ruinous Powers wanted us to do their dirty work for them.'

'There's something behind that plug,' said Gaunt. 'Something they wanted to let out. No doubt it would have caused great disruption to the invasion of Formal Prime. Maybe stopped the whole crusade in its tracks.'

He glanced back at the plug.

'This cult evidently didn't have access to the explosives they needed, so they bluffed us into doing it.'

'What do you suggest we report?' Czytel asked.

'That we found a shrine. It just wasn't one of ours.'

Gaunt paused.

'Although, it was. The Iron Snakes closed this off a long time ago, and left a warning. I think the offerings here were offerings of respect to them and their efforts, not to whatever lies behind that plug. That's our shrine, the wall outside. The years of devotion.'

Gaunt holstered his bolt pistol.

'We inform the Inquisition and let them deal with it. The area will probably be interdicted. Some things are better left buried. For the good of the Imperium.'

He looked at the battered helm.

'Though we should see if we can have this sent back to Ithaka. With honours.'

The ground shook.

'Gaunt?' said Czytel quietly. 'What about... about our altercation? I want to—'

Gaunt shook his head.

'It was a difficult situation. We both did what we thought best. My report will say so.'

'But—'

'For the good of the Imperium, remember?' said Gaunt. 'For the Hyrkan regiment, at least. Some things are better left buried.'

The ground shook again.

‘I think we should pull back from this area,’ said Czytel.

Gaunt nodded.

‘Look, I appreciate your attitude, Gaunt,’ Czytel said. ‘I showed you disrespect and I’m sorry. I think you’ve got a fine career ahead of you, no thanks to old bastards like me. Maybe one day you’ll end up serving alongside a major who’ll show you the proper respect, eh?’

Czytel tried to make a jolly laugh.

‘I’m sure I will, sir,’ said Ibram Gaunt.

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Dan Abnett is the author of the Horus Heresy novels *The Unremembered Empire*, *Know No Fear* and *Prospero Burns*, the last two of which were both *New York Times* bestsellers. He has written almost fifty novels, including the acclaimed Gaunt's Ghosts series, and the Eisenhorn and Ravenor trilogies. He scripted *Macragge's Honour*, the first Horus Heresy graphic novel, as well as numerous audio dramas and short stories set in the Warhammer 40,000 and Warhammer universes. He lives and works in Maidstone, Kent.

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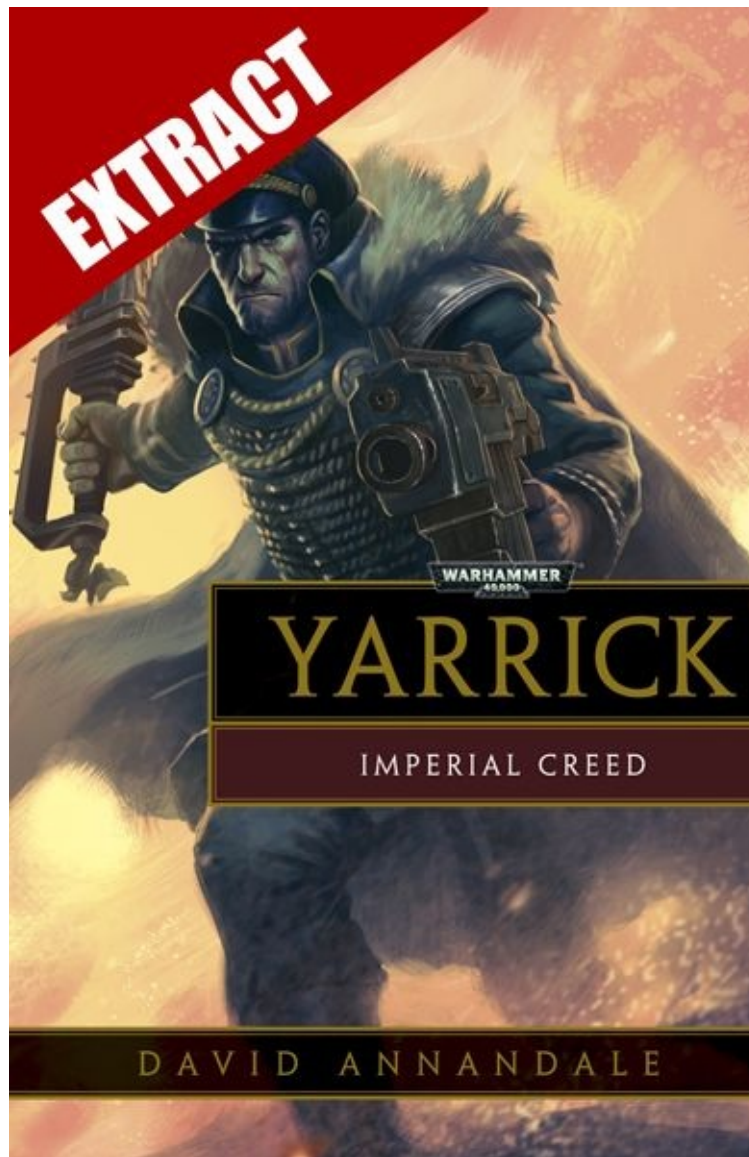
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[An extract from *Yarrick: Imperial Creed*.](#)



1. Yarrick

I watched the deployment embarkation as if seeing one for the first time. There was a strong element of truth to that impression. During my years as a storm trooper I had taken part in many mobilizations, many invasions, but I had always been in the midst of the troop formations – one cog among thousands of others, marching into the drop-ships. Now, briefly, I stood apart from the great mass of the troops. I was on a balcony overlooking the loading bay of the *Scythe of Terra*. For the first time I saw the full spectacle of a regiment about to enforce the Emperor's will. The perspective drove home the magnificence of the engine of war that was the Imperial Guard. Below me was the 77th Mortisian Infantry Regiment. The sons and daughters of the dying hive-world of Aighe Mortis stood at attention in phalanxes of geometric perfection. They were no longer individuals. They were a collective entity, a massive fist as clockwork and unwavering in its precision as the limb of any Titan. I saw and understood how right and proper was the anonymity I had known before. I had been completely replaceable. I was still, only now I was required to understand *why*.

This was what I was learning from my new vantage point, in my new identity, in my new uniform. The peaked cap and the greatcoat with its epaulettes creating an imposing silhouette, the colours of authority and discipline embodied in the dress black and the crimson collar: this apparel obliterated the identity of its wearer as surely as had my storm trooper armour, or the khaki fatigues of the Mortisians. But where the troop uniforms merged the self into a force-multiplying whole, my garb stood out. Visibility was vital to the commissar. He had to be seen in order to inspire courage and fear. The clothes were the symbols of authority, of righteousness, of discipline. They were what bore the meaning of the rank. The actions that were carried out when they were worn had to be worthy of them, and were crucial to maintaining their power and honour. The actual individual under the cap was irrelevant.

So I thought.

I was not alone on the balcony. I was there with Dominic Seroff. Together we had been the terror of our dorms at the schola progenium. Smiling fate had seen us in the same platoon, inflicting terror of a different sort on the heretic and the

xenos. Now, as I answered the calling I had felt for as long as I can remember, Seroff too had donned the black coat. I on the right, Seroff on the left, we flanked a legend. Lord Commissar Simeon Rasp had summoned us to witness the final minutes before embarkation. On a grand podium opposite the hull doors, Colonel Georg Granach held forth to the soldiers of the regiment, praising their faith and zeal, and prophesying martial glory.

‘Tell me what you see,’ Rasp said.

I glanced away from the troops, and caught Seroff looking my way. Each of us was inviting the other to speak first and get it wrong. The set of Seroff’s mouth told me he was willing to let the silence stretch to embarrassing lengths. I knew his canniness. He knew my eagerness. I had already lost. It was simply a matter of recognizing that fact.

Seroff looked too young to be a commissar. He had somehow made it through our dozens of battle zones without picking up a single scar. He still had the face of a joker. With his blond curls struggling to push his cap off his head, I wondered how seriously troopers would take him as a commissar. I sometimes wondered how seriously he took his role himself. The contrast with Rasp bordered on the grotesque. The lord commissar waited, impassive, for one of us to answer. His eyes did not move from the floor of the bay, but I knew he was watching us both. His hair, now invisible under his cap, was a close-cropped and dirty white. His angular features had a youthful strength thanks to juvenat treatments, but they had also been sharpened by long experience. He did have scars. The most noticeable was a harsh ‘V’ that ran the length of his cheekbones, coming to the point just below his nose. It was a souvenir of an encounter with the eldar. The xenos who had branded him had not survived.

I took a breath, bowed to the inevitable, and answered. ‘I see what I did not fully understand before now,’ I said. ‘In the Guard, the individual is irrelevant. It is the mass—’

Rasp raised a finger, cutting me off. ‘No,’ he said. His voice was quiet but drew attention with as much force as if it were drowning out the colonel’s vox-amplified speech. ‘If that were true,’ Rasp said, ‘there would be very little need for commissars.’ He pulled his bolt pistol out of his holster. Holding the barrel in his left hand, he placed the stock in his right, keeping his fingers open. ‘Not one of my fingers is strong enough, on its own, to hold this pistol and fire it.’ He closed his fist, lifted the pistol one-handed. ‘With all of them working as one, I am lethal.’

Seroff frowned. ‘Isn’t that what Yarrick said?’

Rasp shook his head. 'You are both missing an essential element. If I were to lose even one of my fingers, I could still fire the weapon but my accuracy and my speed would be compromised. Lose the thumb or the forefinger and I will be hard-pressed to do more than simply hold the gun.' His eyes, a cold blue so pale they were almost white, flicked over each of us in turn, judging whether his instruction was sinking in. 'Am I making myself clear?'

'The collective strength is created by that of individuals,' Seroff said.

'Ignore the importance of specific positions at your peril,' I added.

Rasp returned the pistol to his belt. 'Quite so,' he said. 'It falls to us, to *you*, to preserve the health of the whole by ensuring the proper functioning of the part. And should the finger be gangrenous...'

'Sever it,' I said, 'and take its place.'

Rasp gave a single nod. The lesson was over.

We listened to the rest of Granach's speech. He had moved on from broad considerations of regimental honour to the specifics of the mission. Or at least, he had pretended to do so. What he said was little different from any number of commanding officer exhortations I had heard, back when I had been one of the thousands on the embarkation deck. Granach struck me as working from a script, one he had trotted out many times before. He spoke with energy and enthusiasm, but his delivery was over-rehearsed. The more I watched him, the more I saw a man discharging a difficult but necessary duty, one he would be happy to see over and done.

Rasp grunted. 'Gentlemen,' he said, 'I hope you're noting the colonel's oratory. I have the greatest respect for his tactical prowess, but he is no rhetorician. What, in your estimation, is the problem here?'

'Too familiar,' I said.

A thin smile from the lord commissar. 'Precisely. How many times have you both heard the same vague thoughts, assembled with very similar words?'

Seroff shrugged. 'Isn't it all an inevitable but necessary ritual?'

A single shake of the head, as precise and emphatic as the one nod earlier. 'Is it necessary that the troops be addressed? Yes. But the address should never be ritualized. Its truth becomes robbed of urgency. It fails to inspire. Have you read the *Legomenon Victoriae* of Lord Commander Solar Macharius?'

I had. Seroff hadn't. He tried to bluff by looking very focused and interested, as if he were comparing a Macharian address to Granach's current effort and would come up with a cogent answer in another few moments.

Rasp wasn't fooled. 'Correct that lacuna, Commissar Seroff. You will see the

true art of the military speech. Read but one address and you will be already well launched on a new crusade. When you stand before warriors, you must inspire them.’ He made a sweeping arm gesture towards the deck. ‘I know, as do you, that too many of those soldiers are, whether they know it themselves or not, politely waiting for Colonel Granach to finish so they can get on with it. That is not how it should be.’ He favoured first Seroff and then me with a hard look. ‘That is how it must never be when you speak. Your authority will inspire fear in the troops who fall under your eye. This is right and necessary, but it is *not* enough. The mere sight of you must grant them fire. And when they hear you, they must be happy to give up their lives.’ He paused. ‘At great cost to the enemy, of course.’

‘Of course,’ I agreed.

Rasp listened to Granach a few moments more, then grimaced. ‘Word for word,’ he muttered under his breath. ‘These generalities are death,’ he told us. ‘Except in cases of necessary secrecy, tell these loyal servants of the Emperor why they are about to kill and die. Let them know the stakes. Give them a sense of purpose. Tell them why we are here. You heard General Rallam’s address to the commanding officers. His style is rather too clipped, but he was precise.

‘Commissar Yarrick. Tell *me* why we are here.’

‘We have come, at the request of Cardinal Wangenheim, to suppress a heretical uprising led by Baron Bartholomew Lom of Mistral.’

A snort. ‘True, but rather bluntly put. If you were speaking to your charges, you would find more of the poetry of war in your soul, I trust. I once heard you when I visited the schola progenium, Yarrick. I know what you are capable of. But yes. We have come to quell the turbulent Baron Lom.’

Rasp looked up, away from the assembly. His gaze drifted to the outer hull doors. He seemed to be staring through them, as if he could see Mistral turning below.

‘Lord commissar?’ Seroff asked.

No answer at first. There was a faint tightening of his jaw, the only sign of an internal debate. Finally, he said, ‘You are political officers. You know this, but I wonder if you have grasped the full implications of that fact. Your duties are to guard against deviation. The realities will mean rather more. Necessity will drive you to swim in murky waters.’

He fell silent. He hadn’t disclosed anything truly revelatory. He had articulated that which was never said, but understood by all but the most naïve. There was something else he was on the verge of saying. I hesitated before speaking, but as

the seconds mounted in silence, I realized that the moment was slipping away. I decided to be direct.

No, that's a lie. I didn't decide. I have always been direct. That is my special curse. It is also, I know, why I have been seen as a curse myself. That's a thought to keep me warm at night.

'Are the waters of Mistral murky?' I asked.

Rasp made a noise in his throat, a stillborn laugh. 'So the local expression would have it. It's been years since I last set foot on its surface. But I would be surprised if matters have changed for the better since then.'

'They can't have,' Seroff said. 'Otherwise we wouldn't be here.'

'True. And yet...' Rasp frowned. He thought for a moment, and then his expression cleared. He had come down on one side of a hard deliberation, and was now at peace with his conscience. 'Gentlemen,' he said, 'this mission appears to be very straightforward – an insurgency that is beyond the abilities of local forces to contain, but that is nevertheless limited in scope. Our rapid triumph is a certain conclusion, and is therefore not to be trusted. When matters are at their most cut-and-dried is when you must be most wary.'

'On Mistral?' Seroff asked.

'Anywhere,' Rasp answered. 'Everywhere. But today, yes, on Mistral.'

I ran through questions in my mind, examined angles. I applied the lessons of my mentor. Assume the hand of political manoeuvrings, even and especially where none seemed present. What was the context lurking behind the rebellion? Why would Rasp be uneasy? He had been here before. That was an interesting piece of data. What did that tell me, then? A possibility dawned. 'Is Baron Lom known to you?' I asked.

The corner of Rasp's mouth twitched. He was pleased. Not just with his student, I think, but also with the opportunity to speak further. 'I have met him twice, and then only briefly,' the lord commissar said. 'But I was impressed. The family has a storied history of service in the Imperial Guard. I believe that certain off-shoots have even produced some inquisitors.' He had continued to stare at the far wall as he spoke, but now he finally faced us. And there was the hard, unflinching, evaluating gaze. It was perhaps the most visible expression of the qualities that had made him pre-eminent among commissars. Nothing escaped those eyes. Nothing was beyond their judgement. When I was pinned by that gaze, I knew to listen to his next words as though my soul depended on them.

'Heresy has no respect for reputation or family,' he said. 'I have seen it take

root in the heart of individuals who had, until that very moment, been so free of taint as to be saints. No one is beyond its reach except the Emperor Himself. No one. So I do not suggest *for a second* that Baron Lom is somehow above suspicion. But...' The finger held up again, emphatic as an enforcer's power maul. '*But...* the fact remains that Lom's profile is not the usual one for a heretic. And the political waters of Mistral are of the very murkiest.' He clasped his hands behind his back. 'So, fellow commissars, my final command before we head into battle – eyes open. Always.'

Down below, Granach had finished his address to the regiment. The phalanxes turned and began to march into the drop-ships. It was time to go.

2. Saultern

He never liked the descents. Buckled into his seat, held in place by the impact frame, he was just another egg among a hundred others, waiting to be smashed if the landing went wrong. And every drop felt like it was going wrong. There were no viewing blocks in the passenger hold of the drop-ship, no way to tell when the ground was coming up or what was happening outside. The journey from low orbit to ground was a prolonged violent shaking in a metal box. All of that was bad. The worst, though, was the helplessness. He understood that the immobility was necessary to prevent a broken spine or worse, but his instinctual reaction was to revolt against the perceived imprisonment. For the length of the descent, he had no agency. His life was in the hands of forces beyond his control, beyond even his knowledge, and he wasn't even granted the illusion of having a say in his survival or fall.

Logan Saultern, Captain of Third Company, 77th Mortisian Infantry Regiment, liked this descent even less than the dozen other drops he had taken. That was because he was seated opposite a commissar. The man's name was Yarrick, and the fact that he was young as political officers went was no comfort to Saultern. He had those commissar eyes. If anything, he was worse than the usual watchdog. His stare was direct, unwavering, unblinking, and did not move until he had seen whatever it was he wished to see. Yarrick didn't look at Saultern for long. One glance, not much more than a second, and that was it. Saultern watched the commissar eye every other trooper visible from his seat. Yarrick favoured a number of them with an evaluation at least twice as long as Saultern's.

He was so caught up in parsing what that might mean that, for once, Saultern

barely noticed that the drop had begun. He withdrew into a sty of bitter self-loathing. *That's how much I'm worth*, he thought. *A quick oh-it's-you and then we move on.* He had no illusions about his ability to command, just as he had no illusions about how he came to be a captain. The last of the great mercantile families had long since fled the decaying, played-out Aighe Mortis, but the children of some of the more clandestine relationships remained.

Occasionally, a flare-up of paternal guilt or some other sudden excess of sentiment would lead to random acts of largesse and the bestowing of favours. That had been Saultern's luck. Swept up by the last founding, his training had mysteriously been redirected to the officer class. He didn't even know what faction of old Mortisian money had ties with him. He didn't care. What mattered was that he had no business being an officer. He had survived the streets of Aighe Mortis by being as nondescript as possible, and he resented having that camouflage stripped away. The men he commanded made him uneasy. The sergeants terrified him. One, Katarina Schranker, was a veteran sergeant. Covered in the tattoos and scars of dozens of battlefields, her grey hair shorn to stubble, she made him feel like his actions were being watched by a compact tank. He had muddled through his missions until now, but he had been part of rear-line reserves in minor engagements. This time, he and his company were being sent out in the first wave. Intimations of mortality fluttered in his chest. Yarrick's lack of interest was further confirmation of his approaching demise. *He knows I won't be around long enough to matter*, Saultern thought.

The landing was a violent jar. The captain's teeth slammed together, and he bit through his lip. Blood poured down his chin in a humiliating rivulet. The bow of the drop-ship opened, becoming a ramp the width of the hull, while the impact harnesses retracted. Cursed, kicked and howled at by sergeants, men and women leapt up from their seats, grabbed their packs and pounded down the ramp into the early morning light of Mistral. Yarrick was among them. Saultern had no idea how the commissar had moved so fast. One moment he was sitting there, impassive, then Saultern glanced down to wrestle with unbuckling his straps, and when he looked up Yarrick was gone.

Saultern hurried to catch up. He wasn't the last out of the drop-ship, but was still far enough back from the main body of soldiers for his uniform to feel like a costume, not a mark of rank. Then, as he descended the ramp, he encountered Mistral's weather, and for a few moments all thoughts of shame and inability were swept away.

Mistral's rotation was very rapid. Saultern knew this. He also knew that the

planet's days were only eighteen hours long. He hadn't realized what one of the other consequences of the rotation would be. He hadn't counted on the wind. It rushed at him from the west as he left the shelter of the drop-ship. It almost knocked him over. Close to a gale force, it threw him off balance, pushed and kept pushing. Its howl was a mournful white noise. There were very few gusts, just a constant battering, a stealing of breath and of sound. Everything else was muffled. Even the Leman Russ tanks rolling out of the next ship to the right had lost the intimidating power of their engines' roar. Saultern's vision was reduced, too. He had to squint to keep his eyes from watering. Each step was a struggle to move forwards in a straight line, and not stumble sideways. *How do I command in this?* Saultern thought. *Throne, never mind that. How do I fight in this?* It felt as if the wind were blowing through his head, rattling concentration. He clutched his cap, as if to keep what sense he could make inside his skull. He reached the bottom of the ramp and looked around.

The regiment was disembarking on a wide plain that extended south and west to the horizon. Its tall grasses bent and whispered eternal obedience to the wind. To the east, the land rose until it became a mountain chain whose peaks had been weathered into distorted columns and agonized claws. To the north were low, rolling hills. Into those hills was where the regiment was headed. That was where he was supposed to lead.

Waiting at the base of the hills were the locals: small contingents sent by the loyal barons. Altogether, they didn't appear to Saultern to add up to much more than a company. There were enough family liveries and colours to make the Mordian Iron Guard look drab. These men were parade soldiers, Saultern thought. They were nothing but plumage. They looked as ridiculous as he knew he was.

He saw Yarrick standing at the head of his company. For a moment, Saultern thought the commissar had already deemed him unfit and removed him from command. But the commissar was not charging into the hills. He was standing still, waiting. Saultern felt the man's eyes bore into his soul from hundreds of metres away. Still clutching his cap, he ran forward, shoving his way through lines of mustering soldiers, until he reached Yarrick.

'Captain Saultern,' Yarrick said. The greeting was clipped, formal, as iron-spined as the man who spoke. He saluted.

'Commissar.' Saultern returned the salute.

'Are you ready?'

Saultern wasn't sure, at first, that Yarrick had spoken. The words were so soft;

how could he have heard them over this wind? But the commissar was watching him, waiting for a response. He was horrified to hear himself answer honestly. 'No.' He waited for the bolt shell that would terminate his command.

Yarrick did not move. His expression, such impassive stone for a young man, did not alter. He spoke again, still quietly, projecting his words over the wind to Saultern's ears alone. 'Are you willing?'

'Yes.' To Saultern's surprise that was the truth.

'Then lead.'

The two words were an absolute imperative. Saultern could no more disobey them than arrest Mistral's rotation. When his full consciousness caught up to his actions, he was marching up the slope of the first hill, his company behind him, Chimeras on either side, the tanks of Colonel Benneger's 110th Armoured Regiment chewing up the terrain ahead. The wind battered him from the left, while a stronger wind, given a shape in cap and coat, stalked at his shoulder and held him to his course.

3. Yarrick

It was easy to despise Captain Saultern. It would have been too easy to dismiss him. I hadn't expected the strength of my office to be needed so soon. Shoring up a quailing officer before the first shot had been fired was a bit much. The first shot could easily have been my own, putting down a coward. I'm not sure what made me pause long enough to think and look clearly. It might have been Saultern's absurdity. I do know that what saved him in the end was his honesty. Whether he intended to speak as he did or not, he did not dissemble, and to speak that one word, *no*, to a commissar, took courage, even if it was of an unconscious kind.

Rasp wanted me to keep my eyes open at all times. To be a good political officer meant having a deep understanding of actions and consequences. So he taught, and so I believed. His views were not shared by all the members of our order. There were plenty whose approach began and ended with merciless disciplinarianism. Rasp, however, was a lord commissar. Achieving that exalted rank meant being more than a blunt instrument. Seroff and I were privileged to receive his wisdom. We were learning that being a commissar meant reading currents.

It meant seeing what was really before me, not what I expected to see.

So Saultern was still drawing breath, and, for the moment, behaving like a

captain of the Imperial Guard. Was sparing him wise? I still had my doubts. He was convinced that he was unfit to lead. If he was correct, was I condemning troopers to a needless death by leaving them in the command of an incompetent? I was trusting my instinct, which was telling me that a man with so few illusions about himself was less likely to act stupidly than an officer with delusions of superiority or, Emperor save us, a belief in his own immortality.

I had made the decision. I would accept the responsibility for it and for its consequences. I would learn from what followed. That was the only way, Rasp said, to fulfil one's duty, to become a commissar in the truest sense possible. Observe and learn. Observe and learn. The mantra spun through my head, a resolution and a comfort.

Observe and learn.

We crested the hill. Beyond it, the land dropped sharply until it was well below the level of the plain. We descended into a valley only a few kilometres wide. The two linked Vales of Lom were an oasis in Mistral's desert of wind. Here, in these deep, sheltered declivities, the topsoil was not blown high into the atmosphere at the first hint of cultivation. Better still, rich nutrients carried on the winds for thousands of kilometres ran into the wall of the Carconne Mountains, and accumulated on the valley slopes. The vineyards had first been planted there twenty centuries ago, and the amasec they produced was the finest in the subsector. It was at least as big a factor in the Lom fortune as the family's industrial holdings.

The wind diminished as we moved lower down, but suddenly became shrill. It keened. Then I realized I wasn't hearing wind. Two of the tanks exploded ahead of me. The grey air was stained with the black teardrops of incoming heavy mortar shells.

My mantra changed.

Fight or die.

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