STRAKEN
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A WARHAMMER 40,000 NOVEL

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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 Imperial Guard and countless planetary defence forces, the ever-vigilant Inquisition and the tech-priests of the Adeptus Mechanicus to name only a few. But for all their multitudes, they are barely enough to hold off the ever-present threat from aliens, heretics, mutants - and worse.

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

PROLOGUE

The box was dented and battered. Shiny new metal winked through chips in the green paint. Across the lid some servitor a billion kilometres away had stencilled the words ‘Departmento Munitorum XX Shotgun Shells’.

Straken held his gun in his left hand, and his steel right arm loaded the shotgun with a soft, hydraulic whirr. Each shell was only a few centimetres long. Strange how victory could come down to something so small, he thought. Like the twenty-two metres between this dugout and the last few tyranids on Signis VIII.

Captain Corris ran down into the dugout, stooping under the lintel. Like most Catachans, he was heavily muscled, and he only just fitted through the doorway. ‘Colonel Straken?’

Straken looked up. From far away, artillery roared, a low rumble that ran through the dugout like a growl.

‘Colonel, we’ve received a call from the Sixth Gordarian Artillery. They want to bombard the hill, sir. To wipe out the xenos once and for all.’

‘To hell with that,’ Straken growled. He got up and walked to the door. ‘Tell them to hold fire. We can take care of this.’

‘Yes, sir,’ Corris replied. ‘I’ll let them know.’ He followed Straken out the door.

The men waited in a loose half-circle. Their wargear was stripped down and modified, their uniforms torn, repaired and striped with dirt, but they still wore the red bandana of Catachan, the symbol that marked out the nine hundred remaining men as having the skill and toughness to survive one of the worst death worlds in the Imperium. In the centre, Corporal Thule hunched over the vox-rig, nodding as he relayed Corris’s order. To the west, a Chimera rolled forwards, its tracks grumbling and squeaking as they turned. Tinny marching music blared out of speakers welded to its side. Behind it walked men with motion detectors, sensorium rigs, even the odd psi-tracker. The tyranids in this region might be dead, but they were quite capable of sowing the ground with

dormant young.

It had taken three months to clear the planet out. Against an enemy like the tyranids, Straken thought, that was almost nothing. It had been tough going – it was never anything else, not against the tyranids – but the Navy had caught the infestation early. Then the Catachans had landed, among them the glorious Second, Straken's regiment, their mission firstly to scout, then to contain, and finally to eradicate. On the horizon, Straken could see the vast organic ruins of a bio-titan; they looked like dragon bones, slowly slipping into the mud. The job was almost done.

'Gentlemen,' Straken said, and nearly a thousand hard faces looked back at him. 'Over that ridge is one of the last psychic beacons holding the tyranids together. Kill it, and there'll be nothing more than animals left to fight – tough animals, but nothing meaner than you'd find back home. Whatever's over the ridge, it'll be big and angry.'

'So am I,' one of the men called, and there was a ripple of laughter.

Explosions rippled across the horizon, throwing black clouds into the air like soot across a painted landscape. Vendetta gunships swung in through the murk, lascannons slicing the sky. This might be the final great push against the tyranids, but the enemy would fight to the last.

'The Gordarian armour want to shell the hill. I've told them to belay that order. This started off as a Catachan job, and I mean to finish it that way.' Straken raised his shotgun. 'In a minute, I'm going to head out there and nail the last of these things. If anyone wants to stay here, they're welcome. You've done enough already, Emperor knows that. But if any of you layabouts want to give me a hand out there, and help take that tyranid's head for Catachan – well, sometimes I get tired of having to do all the hard work round here.'

It was about the mildest speech he had ever made, but his men deserved it. It would be wrong to order them to risk themselves when one allied barrage could finish things once and for all. But then, there was the honour of Catachan to consider.

His soldiers rose. Halda, the colour sergeant, grabbed the edge of the regimental standard and clenched his fist for a moment. Sergeant Pharranis cleaned the lens of his bionic eye on a rag, then folded it and screwed a fresh hydrogen flask into his plasma gun. Further down the line, a tough sergeant named Dhoi was testing the edge of his fang-knife, smiling grimly at the blade. Straken waited, hearing that familiar clatter of troops readying themselves to fight: fresh power packs clacking into lasguns; boots on mud; battered armour

being checked; low voices murmuring prayers, praising weapons and cursing the danger to come. Corris caught Straken's eye and gave him a quick, curt nod. Straken felt at once at home and ready for war. He took a deep breath.

'Then let's move! Who's with me here? Are you going to nail these alien scum, or do I have to do everything myself?' He turned to Halda. 'Colour sergeant, get that banner up. Now then!' Straken raised his metal fist. 'In the name of the Emperor – with me!'

Bellowing, he rushed into the open. A bugle blared and his men cried out behind him, as if their voices alone would speed them towards the enemy. They raced up the slope, boots pounding, roaring like beasts. As they reached the top, a lithe, blood-coloured alien leaped into view.

Straken saw it first: a mass of fangs, armour and spindly limbs ending in claws the size of scythe-blades. He glimpsed bestial eyes glaring with something more than just hunger – and then it sprang at them. 'Kill it!' he called, and half a dozen lasguns cracked. The tyranid fell backwards, ichor pouring from several wounds, and Straken suddenly saw the edge of the pit from which the xenos had emerged. The hole was almost ninety metres across, and deep: an ideal nesting place. A second tyranid loped from the bottom of the pit, hissing and snarling. It stood almost twice man-size, its uppermost pair of arms fused into a pulsing mass from which a bone tube protruded. *Deathspitter,* Straken thought. The beast's gun fired once, and a gobbet of whirling sludge shot over Straken's head. Then the rest of the enemy burst from their hiding places and attacked.

A monster with serrated blades instead of hands leaped onto Private Carne, one of the demolitions men. He fell down, flailing, and for a second Straken thought the man was finished. The next moment Carne was on top, stabbing down with his long knife as the alien thrashed beneath him.

Movement came from the left, and Straken whirled and fired. The shotgun kicked against his ribs, and a second leaper twisted in mid-air and fell dead. The tyranids poured out of the crater and were met with a vicious wall of lasgun fire. A Guardsman on Straken's right took a direct hit from a deathspitter and stumbled aside, his screams drowned out by the terrible hissing sound of disintegrating flesh. In three seconds he had melted to nothing. A grenade flew overhead and hit a pack of slithering brutes as they rushed from their burrow. The explosion threw sinuous bodies into the air, dropped them thrashing into the dirt.

Sergeant Pharranis unloaded his plasma gun into one of the monsters, and it collapsed in a sizzling, bubbling heap. On the right a corporal called Balt hacked

at a wounded tyranid, sawing at its neck for a trophy-kill. He yanked the head away from the still-twitching body, a row of skulls already gleaming on his belt. Something exploded behind Straken – he couldn't tell whether it was a weapon or see the beast that fired it – and he glanced round. Where six men had stood, there was now carbon and reeking smoke.

Fire burst on the horizon. The crater rang with the crack of lasguns and the roars and yelps of the horde. Scythe-armed beasts leaped up from the ground as if hurled by catapults, sailing up to land among the Catachans. One trooper was eviscerated with a single swipe, beheaded by a second. Guardsmen drew long knives and swords, and waded in. Through the chaos, Straken heard a chainsword rev into life. Lieutenant Trask, always quick with a joke, staggered away, his right arm clutching his left.

A tyranid sprang down on Straken like a swooping hawk. He dropped to one knee and blew it in half, pumped the shotgun as he rose and finished it before it could crawl towards him. On his right, a hunter-slayer knocked a private to the ground and leaped on him, snarling like an attack dog. The man tried to push the alien's head back with his left hand and it bit off half his hand.

Straken cursed and raised his shotgun to blast the creature, but Corris grabbed the tyranid before he could fire, yanked its chin up and drove his knife through the side of its neck. He sliced down, cutting the beast's throat, and heaved it away. Straken blasted a second hunter-slayer as it aimed its bio-gun at him, and glanced back to see Corris dragging the wounded soldier to his feet.

'Nice work,' Straken said.

'One for the knife,' Corris replied, and Straken saw a dozen deep notches on the blade. 'Medic!'

The xenos fought wildly, but they were losing. The Guardsmen killed the aliens quickly, and now they had the advantage of numbers, there was nothing the tyranids could do except die. The last few hunter-slayers were shot down, or wrestled to the ground and stabbed. Men cheered – some cut trophies, others took the chance to reload.

Straken felt fierce pride, and then checked himself. Where was the node-creature, the big one they had come here to kill? The aliens that lay dead and dying around him were just the small tyranids, the foot soldiers. They were the things that the hive sent in to scout, or to use up the ammunition of its enemies. Something was wrong. Straken didn't know much about tyranids beyond how best to kill them, but every soldier in the Imperial Guard knew to shoot the big ones first.

He stopped and looked back. One man sat on the edge of the crater, his teeth gritted and his arm held across his chest. The unit medic crouched beside him, spraying the wound with anti-toxin. Tyranid creatures dripped with poisons worse even than those on the Catachan home world.

'That all of them, boss?' Halda called.

'Not yet,' Straken replied. 'Stay ready.'

They fanned out around him, instinctively forming a loose circle in the centre of the great crater. Straken felt exposed here, and knew his men would too. After fifteen years on Catachan, and nearly three more decades in the most vicious guerrilla wars that the Imperium could provide, he was as used to having cover as he was to the sound of lasgun fire.

Captain Corris said, 'It's a big one, right? Not like this.' He prodded one of the hunter-slayers with his gun barrel.

'That's what they said,' Straken replied.

The crater wall exploded in front of him. He turned aside and debris bounced off the metal side of his torso. A trooper shrieked and fell, clutching his face, and two men pulled him away.

Something huge burst through the cloud of dust. Multi-limbed, covered in armoured plates and over twice Straken's height, it opened a mouth crowded with fangs as long as fingers and roared at the sky.

'Bring it down!' Straken yelled, and he fired his shotgun, racked the slide and fired again.

The beast rushed forward on massive hooves, agile for its size, and Straken saw a pair of two-metre blades in its hands. Men yelled. Lasgun fire pattered off the monster's armoured hide.

Captain Corris leaped forward as he stabbed, but he was too slow. The alien's sabre swung down like a great pendulum, almost lazily, and buzzed as it sliced off Corris's arm and half his head.

The tyranid stood over the captain's body and bellowed at the Guardsmen. The adepts back in the rear echelon said that tyranids didn't have a language, that they didn't need to speak, but Straken knew what that roar was: a challenge.

He glanced over his shoulder. 'Demo!' he yelled, and a soldier sprinted over, shrugging his pack off as he ran. Straken snatched a thick, thirty centimetre-wide disc and clocked the dial to four seconds.

'Everyone clear!' he shouted, and as the Catachans drew back, still firing, he ran in and threw the charge as hard as his metal arm would allow, sending it skimming across the dirt.

It hit the tyranid's leg. The monster twisted round, saw it, and reared away. *It knows*, Straken realised. *The damned thing knows…* Then the charge went off.

The explosion threw him onto his back. For a moment he felt nothing, heard nothing and wanted just to lie there in the quiet. Then the world burst back into his senses, and Straken hauled himself to his feet.

'Get up!' he yelled at the men around him. 'Any wounded? No? Then follow me!'

They advanced, legs bent and guns ready. The smoke of the explosion was starting to clear. Within the crater, a fresh hole marked the place where the localised charge had gone off.

The beast lay on its side. Its two left arms were completely destroyed and both legs were twisted awkwardly. As Straken approached, he saw that his men had not missed either, for the massive body was pitted with las-burns.

Somehow, it raised its smoking, shattered head and snarled at him. Straken looked at it. *You're not so much,* he thought. *I've killed bigger things than you back on Catachan*.

He turned and looked back at his men. 'This is the smart one,' he called out, 'the one we've been looking for. Not looking so clever now, is he?'

'Can't be smart to mess with us!' someone shouted.

With its last strength, the tyranid lunged at him. 'Sir!' a voice cried. Straken whipped aside, and the creature's fangs slammed shut on the air in front of his chest. His hand shot out, caught the alien's smouldering neck, and his fingers closed.

Straken drew his long knife, the traditional weapon of a warrior of Catachan. Even with the added strength of his bionics, it took four hard blows to sever the alien's head.

'This is for Corris!' he cried, and he threw the smoking head onto the ground.

Tired as they were, the soldiers cheered. The crater was theirs, and now the war – this war at least – was over. The Catachan II had achieved their last objective, and Signis could be left to the local defence regiments and the cleanup teams.

Distantly, as if to applaud them, the artillery boomed. Under the sound of cheering, quiet at first, Straken heard the first thing to genuinely frighten him on this world: the high-pitched whine of a demolisher shell, reaching the peak of its firing arc above them – and then falling…

'Emperor,' he gasped. 'Incoming – everyone down!'

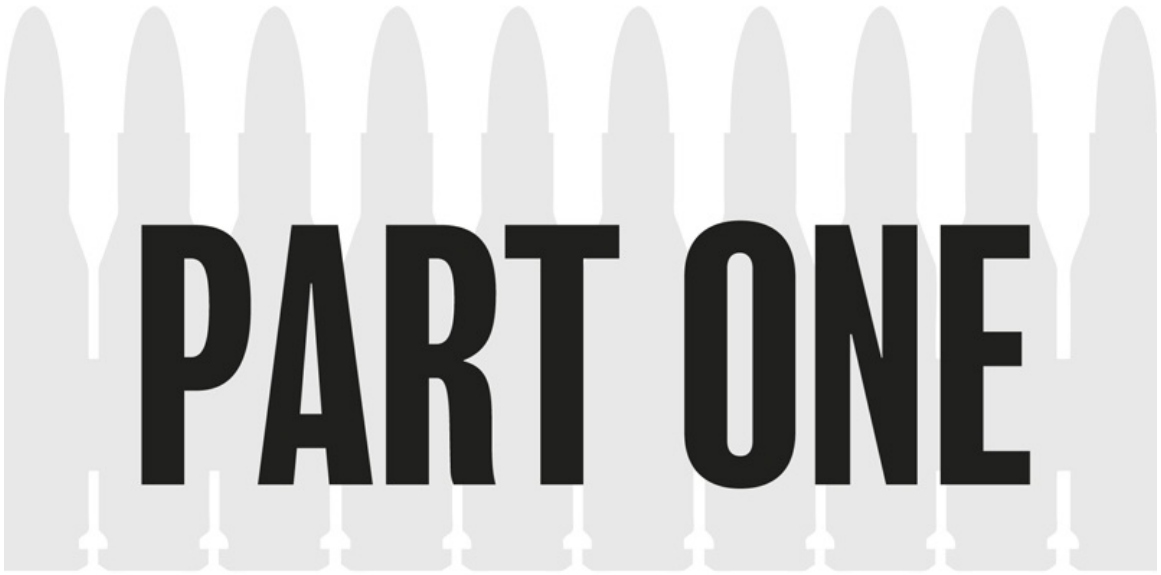
Men scattered to the edges of the crater, throwing themselves onto the ground.

Beside Straken, a trooper stared at the sky, astonished. ‘Those Gordarian morons are shelling us!’ he cried.

‘Then get down, stupid,’ Straken snarled. A hundred metres beyond the crater, the first shell hit the ground, hurling dirt and scraps of tyranid twenty metres into the air. Straken strode over to the vox-operator, flexing the fingers of his metal fist. By the Emperor, he’d have the balls of whoever was responsible for this.

‘Comms,’ he called, ‘get on that link and tell those morons–’

The second shell landed twenty metres away. The world spun. Straken heard and felt clods of earth battering down on him, a storm of dirt, and then the world went black.



PART ONE

1.

Straken awoke to find half the world in darkness. The left side of his vision had gone. That meant that his bionic eye had been deactivated. He tried to flex the fingers of his mechanical arm. Nothing moved.

Above him he saw a grey, vaulted roof. A red robe moved at the edge of his vision. He shut his eye and waited, knowing that even without his right arm, his left could still draw a knife.

'Please open your eyes, Colonel Straken,' a voice said. 'You're back on the *Radix Malorum*, in space. You're perfectly safe here.'

He opened his eye. A man in a white tunic stood over him. The doctor had heavy spectacles and a goatee beard.

'Are we in orbit?' Straken's voice sounded more threatening than he'd intended.

'We're being transported to another battleground. I'm told that Signis Eight has been successfully pacified.' The man turned aside to check a row of dials on the wall, then looked back. 'My name is Locuris, surgeon-superior of the *Radix Malorum*. You took a bad knock to the head, colonel. One way or another, you've been out for almost three days. It's lucky you've got so much metal in your skull already – had that tyranid not hit your cranial plate, you'd be more than just concussed.'

'It wasn't a tyranid that hit me.' Memories returned like a fire rekindling. 'The artillery shelled us. Throne-damned Gordarians…'

'Well, I wouldn't know about that. At any rate, you're fine. At least, the biological parts of you are.'

'As are the machines.' A new voice spoke. It was high and mechanical, not the product of vocal cords. Straken turned to look, realising the significance of the red robe he had glimpsed.

A tech-priest stood on the other side of the pallet, almost entirely hidden by its heavy garment. A metal hand, much like Straken's own, protruded from one

sleeve. The other arm ended in a ropy mass of mechadendrites, blades, drills and micro-manipulators, grafted straight into the flesh. Straken turned his head to see what was under the adept's hood, and glimpsed wires and metal sutures pushed into pale skin suffused with something that was not quite blood.

'The workmanship is most exquisite,' the tech-priest said. The high, flat voice was not comfortable to hear. 'There was some minor disruption to the servos, but all parts have been fully tested. A degree of organic matter was lodged in the gearing, polluting the mechanism.'

'That'll be tyranid,' Straken replied.

The robed head nodded. 'The purity of function has been restored.'

'Does that mean it works?' The tech-priest made Straken uneasy. All adepts of the Machine-God had that effect on him. There seemed to him something subtly yet deeply wrong with a person willing to replace his or her own flesh with machinery. He had acquired his own bionics like scars, in the line of duty, each a mark of a different campaign. To have them admired by such a creature made his skin crawl.

'Of course it works. Sublime functionality,' the tech-priest added. It occurred to Straken that the priest was several centimetres shorter than Locuris. He wondered whether it had started out as a woman, which did not make him feel any less uncomfortable. 'You are, albeit by chance rather than design, closer to the Machine-God than most men will ever be. You should be thankful for that.'

'Just get my arm working,' he replied.

The priest moved behind Straken's head. He heard the clatter of typing. Suddenly, his field of vision widened as his bionic eye flared into life. He raised his metal arm and slowly flexed the fingers.

'The purity of gears is the purity of motion,' the tech-priest observed, apparently to itself.

Locuris had moved back from the pallet. 'You can sit up,' he said.

Straken grimaced and sat up. He felt a thin, high-pitched whine at the back of his head, as much a sensation as a sound, like a whirring drill. Probably something to do with his eye.

'I suppose I ought to tell you that you're very lucky,' the surgeon said. 'Your men brought you back almost dead.'

'They're good soldiers,' Straken replied.

'That's not really what I meant. I meant that medically, you were fortunate not to have sustained greater injuries.'

Straken got to his feet. He was bare-chested. The long knife, almost sword-

length, was still strapped to his left thigh – few people would have tried to take a Catachan's blade – but the lucky skull was gone from his hip.

'Your personal gear's in your quarters, colonel,' the surgeon-superior said.

He looked down. The dull metal of his implants spread down his side and across his chest like a parasitic plant, as if slowly consuming him. Straken pushed that thought aside, willing the tech-priest to leave. He pulled on a vest and his combat waistcoat. It was unusually light: someone had removed the grenades. Rolled up in the pocket was a simple red bandana, the symbol of the blood oath of his home world.

It was time to find his men. 'Thanks,' he said as he tied the bandana over the metal plate that lay flush with his scalp. Locuris smiled, and the tech-priest made a sort of tiny bow.

As he left the medical bay, Straken was struck by how quiet everywhere was. Somewhere far below, the hull of the *Radix Malorum* creaked. He realised that by now everyone from the Signis encounter must be dead, healed or comatose. It had been a long while since he had been in a medical bay and not seen someone in the process of dying from their wounds.

Growing up on a death world, your home became the place you chose to make it. After years of campaigning, the *Radix Malorum*'s holds had begun to resemble shanty towns – in fact, Straken reflected, the temporary billets were considerably more sophisticated than many of the settlements he'd helped liberate in the course of his career. The air was old and smoky, full of grease from cook shops, the odour of lho-sticks and even at times the odd forbidden whiff of low-quality obscura, smuggled in from who-knew-where. He'd have to look into that – he couldn't allow his men to lose their sharpness. Straken walked through the first hold, a hall large enough to generate its own atmosphere, and into a second. The walls were covered in a huge frieze, executed three times life-size, depicting Lord Solar Macharius addressing pristine ranks of troops.

Compared to the figures in the frieze, the men below seemed unruly and rough. Straken saw converted uniforms, cut-down lasguns in racks, pictures that were anything but pious pinned up against partition walls. Soldiers came to life: men put down their food and stood up to salute him; some smiled. A few bold individuals greeted him by name.

But there was no celebration of Straken's awakening – at least, none that he saw. Nobody seemed at all surprised that he had recovered, as if getting back up from a serious head injury were no more unusual for Iron Hand Straken than

waking from a good night's sleep.

Iron Hand? he thought. *They should call me Iron Head*.

At last Straken climbed narrow steps to the officers' quarters. The first two doors were marked 'Tanner' and 'Lavant'.

'Lavant, eh?' he mused. The name was familiar, but he couldn't put a face to it. Still trying to recall the man, he knocked on Tanner's door and walked in.

Captain Tanner was bulky even by Catachan standards, with a round face that continually seemed to be about to break into a wry smile. He was jovial outside battle and berserk in it, and followed Straken's policy of leading from the front. Straken remembered the last time he'd seen Tanner fight: the man had run screaming at a pack of tyranid hunter-slayers, a knife in his fist.

'Good to see you, sir,' Tanner said.

'It's good to be back,' Straken replied. 'I gather we're done with Signis.'

'Done and dusted, Emperor be praised. On to the next one.'

'Are we still with the Gordarian armour?'

'No. When they heard we had a new mission, they had to run home and change their breeches.' Tanner grinned.

'That's a damned shame. I was hoping to find the idiot who shot up my position. And then beat some sense into him.' Straken realised that he had started to flex his metal fingers, as if readying them to punch. 'What's the new mission?'

Tanner frowned. 'Orks. We're liaising with a bunch of other regiments in orbit of some place called Dulma'lin. General Greiss is heading out to take command. He'll want to know you're awake.'

'I'll check in with him. These other regiments, are any of them Catachan?'

The captain shook his bald head. 'Not as far as I know. There's not been an official briefing, but from what I've heard, a lot of it is fancy armoured companies – pretty pictures painted on the sides of their tanks, that kind of stuff. Whatever they could scrape together, from the sounds of it. Command must want the orks off the planet pretty quick. Beyond that, I don't know much.'

'Orks. Hell. I can't walk a kilometer sometimes without running into the Throne-damned orks. Ah well. The less of 'em there are in the galaxy, the better.'

'My thoughts entirely.'

Straken nodded. 'Is Lavant going to be Corris's replacement?'

'That's right. The general chose him personally.' Tanner lowered his voice a

little. ‘He’s a little… eccentric, but he’s good.’ He glanced at the door. ‘Demolitions,’ Tanner added, as if that explained everything.

‘I’ll see him now. Then I’ll find the general.’ Straken took a step towards the door, then looked back. ‘Is there a commissar on this job?’

‘Of course, sir. Man called Morrell.’

‘What’s he like?’

‘More-hell Morrell? He’s about an inch taller than the last one.’

‘You know where he’s from?’

Tanner shrugged. ‘Not from Catachan, that’s for sure.’

Straken sighed and left the room.

Lavant answered his knock so quickly Straken wondered if he had been listening in. The new captain was a big man, perhaps a little wirier than usual for a Catachan. He wore his bandana as a necktie, and sported a neat little moustache. It looked ridiculous, Straken thought, and he realised that he had seen Lavant before. He had been a lieutenant back on Signis, crafty and eager. From the looks of it, the higher brass had chosen well.

Lavant flicked up a quick, sharp salute. ‘Colonel Straken. It’s a pleasure to see you well, sir.’

‘Yeah.’ Straken walked into Lavant’s quarters. On a small table, the captain had been cleaning a plasma pistol with a bottle of blessed oil. A scrimshawing needle lay beside it. A small pile of books stood beside the desk.

‘How’re you finding being a captain, Lavant?’

‘Very good, sir.’

‘Good. Fight hard, do what I say and trust in the Emperor.’ Straken looked at the table. ‘Is that a plasma pistol you’ve got there?’

‘Yes, sir. I requisitioned it a while ago. Munitions were convinced its machine-spirit had deserted it. Personally, I think it just needs a little work.’

‘Looks like more than that. You know, I’ve seen plenty of people mess with a weapon and displease it, and then have it blow up on them for their trouble. I’d hate to think one of my own officers was taking a pistol apart without proper authorisation – badly.’

‘Sir,’ Lavant replied, ‘when you work with demolitions, you learn to take proper care.’

‘Well said. Carry on, then. And Lavant? Do something with that moustache.’

As a mark of rank, Straken had his own quarters: two tiny rooms at the end of the corridor, full of engine hum as if located in a giant beehive. Guard doctrine stated that he was supposed to have his own servant, but it had been a long time

since anyone had tried to supply him with one. After telling one quartermaster that, metal hand or not, he knew how to wash his own backside, they had left him alone.

His spare clothes hung waiting. In an alcove he found a Munitorum supply box. It contained a data-slate, a box of foul-tasting cigars that had been a gift from a Cadian major-general he'd once helped out, a machete in a grox-skin sheath, and a small vox-phonograph, together with a row of neat little cylinders, each holding one of Guttman's symphonies. Straken reached into the box, took out the data-slate and activated it at the *Libram Devotio*. He flicked it to a random page and, silently invoking the Emperor, read the first line he saw. It had been a superstition of Captain Corris, now deceased.

'And they gathered at that place, for to make a host, and took the battle unto the unholy.'

No doubt about that, Straken thought. *A good omen*.

On the thin pillow on the fold-down bed, someone had laid the long skull of a land shark. It was the same one that had bitten off his right arm, the one he had killed back on Miral, when he had been certain that he was about to die. He'd carried it into a dozen battles since then, tied to his belt. The skull was cumbersome, but it brought him luck. At any rate, he hadn't seen a land shark since. He tied it back in place and, feeling ready, strode out to meet the general.

2.

Some generals liked to surround themselves with officials, so that their quarters looked more like a scribarium than a war office. General Greiss had a personal staff of eight: six orderlies, a jittery servitor-scribe, whose circuits seemed to have been permanently set to ‘grim disapproval’, and one bodyguard. He only needed one.

As Straken entered the room, men saluted and got back to work, monitoring the humming banks of cogitators along the wall. By the far door, an immense figure lumbered to its feet.

Nork Deddog, ogryn and bodyguard, made Straken look like an infant. He was huge, almost two-and-a-half metres tall, a parody of the tough men around him. Heavy armour plates, rumoured to have been torn off a tank, roughly covered the monster’s shoulders. His face was a battered mess of scars, like a prize-fighter’s fist. The ogryn’s eyes were deep-set and vague, and his heavy brow creased into furrows as he tried to work out if he remembered Straken from before.

‘You,’ he said after a while. There was something both childlike and threatening about him. If he wanted to, Nork could just swat a man out of existence, the way the larger orks could do. Even Straken, with his bionics, would have found the ogryn a very difficult opponent.

‘Colonel Straken. I’m here to see the general.’

‘Uhuh.’ Nork squinted. ‘Yep, I remember you.’ He reached out and prodded the intercom with a finger like a fat pink cigar. ‘General? I got… er… Colonel Sacking here. You want to see him?’ Nork put one flat, ragged ear against the intercom. ‘Yup, gotta show you in.’ He paused again. Straken waited. Nork would get there soon enough.

‘In,’ the ogryn said, and he stepped aside from the door with surprising quickness. Straken went through, Nork following him like a tame bear.

General Greiss had reached that level of seniority where his age no longer mattered. Provided his bionics didn’t give out, and provided he kept up the

rejuvenat treatment, he would stay looking eighty for a hundred more years. He was tall and broad, like any Catachan, but time had dried him out, leaving him wiry and gaunt. But as he saw Straken he smiled, and there was a kindness in his face rare in an officer of the Guard. No wonder some of the veterans called him 'Grandaddy' Greiss – strictly out of earshot.

Straken's metal arm gave the general a crisp salute.

'Come on in,' Greiss said, waving Straken forwards with one wisp of a hand. 'Commissar Morrell and I were just debating the finer points of ork intelligence.'

'Unsurprisingly, the provost-major found him guilty of dereliction of duty,' a voice declared from the far side of the room and Straken got his first good look at the man speaking.

The faces of a few political officers flicked across Straken's mind. Von Blacke, who had won the respect of the Catachans. Rammad, whom Straken had despised. Bulowe, who had died in the Urgan Rebellion, bayoneted by forces unknown. The commissars had all looked similar: thin, iron-hard, with long undertaker's faces. Commissar Morrell was a different shape, but no less intimidating.

This political officer was a bull of a man, one metre ninety, muscular and thick-necked. His hands were broad and murderous. He looked as if he could pick Greiss up and unscrew his head like the lid of a jar. Straken glanced at Nork, who was watching the commissar very carefully. Clearly Nork had realised the same thing.

'Leave us please, Nork,' Greiss said.

'Be just outside,' the ogryn said. 'Anything you need, you call.' He squeezed through the doorway.

'I was telling the general about an interesting court martial at which I assisted,' Morrell continued. His accent, the product of some distant agri-world, made him sound pugnacious and hoarse. 'A certain Lieutenant Gordo. His men were overcome by orks – taken by surprise, he claimed. I'd never heard such nonsense. Deviousness is about the only vice the orks *don't* exhibit. The ork is, ultimately, a creature of instinct, intent on satisfying its base and sacrilegious urges.'

Straken felt sure that he'd seen exactly the same words in the *Imperial Infantryman's Uplifting Primer*. Greiss turned to look at him.

'What do you think, colonel?' the old man asked.

Straken, used to bellowing commands, had to choose his words carefully. 'I

think the orks are good at what they do.'

'Which is?'

'Killing. Killing and smashing, pretty much.'

Morrell stood with his hands behind his back and his shiny boots apart, a stance the schola progenium seemed to teach its commissars as standard. 'Indeed. When we land, we can expect nothing but mindless brutality. Which I gather the Catachans are well-equipped to deal with.'

Straken said, 'Well, you don't expect an ork to paint a picture, that's for sure, but if you want a wall kicked down, it can do that easily. The way I see it, if you imagine a man, and take out all the parts of his brain that aren't for fighting, then make him crazy and big – that's pretty much what an ork is.'

'Orks are animals,' Morrell said.

'Yes, they are. But smart animals. Sure, every ork wants nothing more than to bite out your throat, but if it has to build a tank to get there, or creep up on you first – it'll do that too.'

'You seem to have a very good understanding of the ork, ah, psyche,' the commissar observed. He had small, deep-set eyes. *Like a boar,* Straken thought.

'I've fought them more times than I can remember. But if you ask me, the best way to fight anyone is to be ready for anything. And that's what my men are.' Straken looked straight back at Morrell, and for a moment the political officer seemed to understand the challenge in Straken's glare.

Morrell nodded and glanced away. 'I'm glad to hear it. Because once we make planetfall, we will have waves of them to fight.'

There was a moment's silence. 'Commissar, I want to request an investigation,' Straken said. 'I want the moron who allowed those tanks to fire on my men severely disciplined.'

Morrell looked puzzled as well as angry. 'What?'

'Colonel Straken is referring to the incident that rendered him unconscious,' General Greiss explained. 'Troops from the Gordarian Sixth Mobile Artillery incorrectly–'

'Ah, them. They've been removed,' the commissar replied. 'The tank crews, that is. One of my colleagues took care of it. Criminal waste of munitions.'

'Never mind the crews. They did what they were told. What about the fool who gave the order?'

'The *officer* who gave the order, you mean?' Morrell's face had lapsed back into its surly scowl.

'Same difference.'

‘I’ll take it up with High Command,’ Morrell replied. ‘A formal request for inquiry will be sent through the appropriate channels.’

No doubt he would, Straken thought, and no doubt High Command would inscribe it into some tome a billion kilometres away, with a billion other grievances, and no doubt in a thousand years some notary-subordinate would pass judgement on men who were nothing but dust. He had been a soldier of the Guard too long to expect much else. Justice was either so distant as to be almost meaningless, or so random and brutal as to be hardly worth the name.

‘Let’s talk about the campaign,’ Greiss said. ‘Or to be more precise, your part in it.’

Morrell sniffed. ‘In which case, I shall leave you gentlemen. I have a report to write. Rest assured I have already studied the briefing, Colonel Straken. General.’ He tugged the brim of his cap down and strode past in a hiss of soft black leather.

Straken closed the door behind him. ‘Pleased to meet you too, commissar. Enjoy your report.’

Greiss sighed and shook his head. ‘Seventy years in the Guard and they never change,’ he said. ‘Puffed up like a barking-toad. Commissars – all the same.’

‘Some are smart and let us get the job done,’ Straken replied. ‘Others aren’t so smart.’

‘Some are so stupid they walk into their own men’s fire,’ Greiss said, turning to the cabinet by the wall. ‘Some even trip over and fall onto their own soldiers’ bayonets. Let’s not have any of that, not this time.’ He took out two mismatched glasses and poured a couple of centimetres of amasec into each. He held out a glass.

Straken took the glass. ‘I would never dream of wishing ill to a noble commissar,’ he said, ‘and nor would my men.’

‘You’ve always been a bad liar.’ General Greiss smiled. The expression looked unnatural on his dour face. ‘I prefer not to drink to victory,’ he said. ‘It always seems presumptuous, somehow.’

‘Tempting fate?’

‘Exactly. Welcome back.’

The general finished his glass in one quick, hard swallow. Straken, never much of a drinker, sipped carefully. The amasec burned slightly on the way down.

Greiss lifted a flat box onto the table. It was polished red wood, beautifully constructed. He opened the case and a tiny projector hummed into life inside. The general’s long fingers turned a little dial, and a map of the galaxy formed in

the air before him, a three-dimensional projection.

'A present from the Mechanicus,' he said. Greiss turned the galaxy, rotated it and zoomed in. Straken recognised the planets in front of him. They constituted the great warzone of the Ultima Segmentum, with Ryza in its centre and Catachan at one edge.

'The Navy have widened the response zone around Ryza,' Greiss said. 'They thought they had the orks contained, but they've come to realise that their calculations were rather, er, optimistic…'

'That sounds like the Navy.'

'It's not their fault, for once. The orks are flocking to Ryza like pilgrims to Saint Celestine's cloak – or flies to a turd, if you prefer. And that means that the worlds around it are a lot less safe than they thought they were. One of those worlds is Dulma'lin, and that's where we're headed.'

'So,' Straken said, 'apart from the commissar, who's with us on this one? You made it sound like a joint mission.'

'The bulk of the invasion force is coming from the Selvian Dragoons,' Greiss replied. 'They're not my first choice, but you know how it is. The Munitorum provides, as they say, although what it provides you with, that's another matter. The Selvian colonel is a man named Richello. I don't know what to make of him. From what I've heard he's got his own Leman Russ, covered in his heraldry. Likes to ride into battle on it, sword in the air.'

'Keen, huh?'

'That's one way of putting it,' Greiss replied. He glanced at Straken's metal hand, still holding the glass. 'Are you drinking that,' Greiss demanded, 'or just taking care of it?'

Straken sipped. Greiss motioned him to sit down.

'Dulma'lin is, by galactic standards, a rather unimportant place,' the general said, his back to Straken as he fixed himself a second drink. 'It's pretty inhospitable. The surface is dry, for the most part, and windswept. And I do mean windswept – up to five hundred kilometres an hour, in the storm season.'

Straken nodded.

'There's some native flora, but it's evolved to survive in the wind. Only a Catachan could get through the stuff. As far as the Imperium is concerned, there are half a dozen cities, all underground, most of them small. Power comes from heat sinks. Food is grown underground as well. There's some xenos life but nothing much that can pose a serious threat, at least not to us. The only really dangerous things to come out of Dulma'lin were diseases, and they were wiped

out long ago.'

Straken nodded. Predators were one thing, but disease was far worse. It would be better to land on a world populated entirely by Fenrisian wolves than to have to struggle against alien viruses.

'There's a fair amount of resources down there, mineral ores and the like,' Greiss continued, taking a seat. 'My understanding is that the orks have some interest there. At least, they've been digging.'

'That sounds unlike them.' Much of the hard work in ork society was done by slaves, either human or smaller greenskins. When it came to anything other than fighting and preparing to fight, the orks were surprisingly lazy.

The general looked into his drink. 'They've captured a lot of the heavy industrial facilities and got to work making something or other. Intelligence suggests that the orks have stripped down most of the heavy mining gear and turned it into weaponry.'

'They do that.' Given enough time, an ork would try to make a primitive tank out of virtually anything with wheels.

'We believe that the ork in charge of their invasion force – he goes by the name of Killzkar – is using Dulma'lin as a staging post. No doubt he intends to gather his troops before heading off elsewhere. Chances are, he'll strip the place, wreck whatever he can't use and then make for somewhere more populated.'

'Do we know where?'

'Inwards. Ryza is the obvious choice, to link up with the one they call Rargut and his troops. From there, who knows? At the end of the day, of course, they all want Terra.'

'And so we cut him off before he can join them?'

'Exactly. And there's another reason to go in fast. They're gathering, and the longer they spend together, the bigger and better equipped they get.' Greiss studied his drink again. 'They feed on war, I'm sure of it.' He sighed. 'When I was out on Balar, the Guard had to drive the local farmers into battle with whips. An ork would have leaped at the chance to run at the enemy guns. I tell you, Straken, every time a gun fires, or a shell goes off, it just makes the orks all the more keen. It's as though they soak the anger up out of the air.' He looked up, almost guiltily, and drank again.

'So I've heard.' Straken took another sip of the fiery liquor. Something about his bionics had taken away his appetite for alcohol. He wondered whether it was some side effect from the symbiosis of metal and flesh, or simply that he had much less blood to soak up the drink than before.

‘But then you don’t need me to tell you that orks thrive on battle,’ General Greiss said. ‘If anything, a big frontal assault would be just what this Killzkar creature wants. It’d toughen up his soldiers, and if he’s lucky, allow him to capture more materiel for his next attack. No – what we need to do is cut his tendons before he can even start to fight.’

Straken nodded.

‘There’s a resistance movement down there, formed out of what remains of the Dulma’lin miners’ guild militia – between you and me, that’s the granddads and old maids too weak to pass muster for the Guard. At any rate, they can’t be all bad – it was them who got out the message to the Navy in the first place. Killzkar’s building war machines. Your people will be going in and destroying them.’ Greiss got up, and pulled a file down from a narrow shelf. He passed it to Straken. His right hand shook a little. ‘Background material on Excelsis City, the capital. That’s where you’ll be operating, where most of the orks are.’

Straken took a dog-eared pict out of the file. It could have been an Imperial manufactorum complex anywhere on ten thousand worlds. No doubt it was in a somewhat different state now that it had fallen into the hands of the orks. Straken couldn’t help noting the entrances and exits, the best points for laying down covering fire and the spots where a timed charge would do the most damage. He put the pict back in the file. Under it was a good cheap map, produced on-world, with a picture of some local saint on the front, a pickaxe over her shoulder and her hand outstretched to bless Excelsis City. Straken wondered how blessed Excelsis was looking right now.

Last of all was a pict, seemingly taken from long range. It showed a particularly large ork. The thing was clearly a high-ranking leader: size determined rank among the greenskins, and this specimen was huge. *It must be more than twice man-height*, Straken thought. The ork’s face was exposed, and although it had the same features as its kin – massive fangs, snub nose and tiny, vicious eyes – this one was even uglier than usual. Two diagonal scars crossed its face like the crossed bones on a pirate flag, giving the impression that its head had been assembled out of four mismatched pieces.

‘And that’s Killzkar,’ Greiss said. ‘Nobody knows where he is – perhaps he’s in Excelsis City, perhaps he’s elsewhere on Dulma’lin. He’s not your target, but if you see him, feel free to stick a las-shot through his head from me.’

‘He’s quite a sight.’ Straken closed the file and made himself finish his drink. ‘So, sir, what exactly is my mission here?’

Greiss said, ‘Your regiment will be taken in by drop-ship, as quietly as

possible. You're to approach through the forest and enter Excelsis City by subterfuge. There are surface vents you can use – they're in the file you've got. Proceed into the main cavern, the Mommothian Vault. Secure the city gates, which are the only way to get anything much bigger than a truck in or out. Once our armour is in the vicinity, open the gates and assist with the attack. The rest of the army will hit the orks like a sledgehammer, while you stab them in the back. Following that, you will be assigned to destroy all major weapons production in Excelsis City. In particular, wipe out all production of heavy armour.' Greiss smiled, showing too many neat little teeth.

'That's a wide objective, if you don't mind me saying so.'

'It is. And I need experts to do it.'

'Well, the Catachan Second are the men for that.'

'And you're the man to lead them.'

'Thanks.' Straken stood and put his glass on the side. 'Mind if I take the file?'

Greiss gestured towards it. 'By all means.' He held out his hand, and Straken shook it. He could have broken the general's bones like eggshells. 'Let me know if you need anything, colonel.'

'I shall.' Straken saluted and left the room. Nork watched him go, suspicion glowing in the ogryn's deep, small eyes.

There was less than a week until they dropped out of the warp and into Dulma'lin's atmosphere. It was time to sharpen the troops up. Straken ordered morning inspection, which he conducted himself, and ordered the sergeants to keep the soldiers busy and sharp: training and drill during the day, and briefings on planetary conditions on their few hours off. Not that they needed to get into shape – Catachan's inhabitants had always been too busy surviving to get fat – but they needed to remember what it was to think and act fast, to work as a quick, cunning unit, and to live on hard rations and little sleep. More than that, Straken knew, men with nothing to do got themselves into trouble, and the closer they came to the warzone, the nastier that trouble was likely to be.

Two men began a fight over nothing that barely got past the preliminary shoving before they were pulled apart. Straken had them race round the holds in full kit until each could barely stand. A rumour did the rounds that Morrell had wanted them lashed. One of the Navy officers, normally the subject of mockery as high-orbit combat-dodgers, deigned to give the regiment a briefing on drop-ship warfare at Straken's request. Straken was pleased to see that his soldiers were as attentive as he was. They would not have dared to be otherwise.

Besides, he knew, when they met the orks even Catachans would need every advantage they could get.

In his room, Straken listened to Guttman's *Ko-Iron Symphony* while he looked over the intelligence file on Dulma'lin. He knew from experience that orks had little in the way of forward planning. Too often they let bloodlust take the place of tactics. A good commander could turn that mad fury to his advantage. They could be drawn into killing-zones, or incited to charge heavily-defended emplacements. Straken remembered how, on Hauseman's World, a pack of them had run straight through a minefield to get at the human lines. The mines hadn't stopped the orks, exactly, but they were much easier to kill when they were crawling towards you instead of running.

He was studying a street plan of Excelsis City when one of the orderlies knocked on his door.

Straken glanced up. 'What is it?'

'Colonel Straken, sir, we've got a problem down in Hold Four. A few of the demo boys have been caught making something. I'm told it's a still, sir, for alcohol.'

'Damn it, don't they get enough in their rations?'

The man's face gave the strong impression that nobody in the Guard got enough.

Straken sighed. 'So?'

'Captain Lavant found it. He sent me to tell you, sir. The thing is, Commissar Morrell's heard about it too.'

Straken flicked the vox-phonograph off with a metal finger as he stood up.

They hurried down the spiral stairs, into the rumbling depths of the *Radix Malorum*. The orderly led Straken through the cavernous guts of the ship, past the armoured feet of a pair of huge carved saints, and into Hold Four.

Bunks ran down the length of the hall, separated by folding partitions and decorated with anything the soldiers could find. The Catachan II, Straken thought as he strode down the huge space, had always been good at finding things. Even in space, you could still source booze and dirty pictures, both of them of very low quality. Sometimes, in his less pious moments, he wondered whether there was a secret parallel organisation to the Departmento Munitorum, devoted to shipping out gut-rotting alcohol and dog-eared copies of *Girls of Cadia* and *Wicked Sisters*.

Morrell stood, hands on hips, looking down at an apparatus that seemed to

have been made from machine parts and a jerry can. Four Guardsmen were before the commissar. Lavant stood beside him, clearly trying to reason with the man. Straken didn't need to hear what Lavant was saying to know that it would do no good.

'Problem, commissar?' he demanded as he approached.

'Infringement of discipline.' Morrell looked up. 'These men were found in possession of what looks very much like some kind of distilling apparatus. As such, this constitutes a blatant breach of the disciplinary code.'

One of the four troopers said, 'Sir, I've been trying to explain–'

'Shut up, Guardsman,' Straken barked. 'If I want your opinion, I'll ask.' Straken glanced at Lavant.

'I believe it's combustible fuel,' the captain said. 'Very useful for laying traps. We've used that sort of thing to burn renegades out of bunkers before.'

Sure it is, Straken thought. He turned to Morrell. 'Can we discuss this?' The commissar started to object, but Straken was already moving away from the men. Scowling, Morrell followed him.

'Commissar, this isn't a large force. My understanding is that we are due to put down on Dulma'lin to support a scratch army made up of whatever the Guard can pull together as quickly as possible. We need every man we can use.'

Morrell frowned. 'Aye, that's right, more or less. Although I prefer to look at it more as–'

'Once we land, we're going to be up against tough odds. I'm going to need every man in the best shape I can get them.'

The commissar nodded. 'So what are you saying, colonel?'

'I don't want any of these men physically harmed. Doing so will impair their combat ability.'

Morrell's eyes, already set deep in his head, seemed to shrink. 'I believe that's my decision, colonel.'

Straken paused. The hall had become quieter. He could hear lowered voices and almost no boot steps. That meant that people had stopped to listen. 'It's our duty to the Imperium to get this job done. Let me deal with this.'

'I'd need to be sure that this was being taken care of properly.' The commissar's voice, seemingly made for bellowing, sounded very hoarse when lowered. Straken wondered how old the man was. It was always hard to tell with commissars: age seemed to desiccate and harden them.

'It will be.'

Morrell raised a hand. He was one of those men whose strength came from his

size, Straken thought. In twenty years' time, much of the commissar's muscle would have turned to fat. Assuming that he lived another twenty years.

Trumpets blared from the roof, sudden and deafening. Men glanced up; one corporal fumbled sharpening his knife and cut himself. His cursing was lost in the voice that boomed out of the ceiling, as if sent by the Emperor Himself: '*Audite, milites!* Warp travel has been successfully completed, by the Emperor's grace. We are now entering close orbit of Dulma'lin and will commence descent in two hours standard time. All soldiers are to make ready for landing. Loading and sanctification procedure is to be commenced immediately. Full blessing will occur immediately prior to drop-ship embarkation. Emperor protect.'

A rumble of talk rose up from the men as the speakers fell silent. Morrell grimaced. 'It appears we'll have to discuss this later, colonel.'

'I'll let you know when I get back from Dulma'lin.'

'You won't have to. I'll be setting down with you and your men.'

'What?' Straken had never been good at hiding his emotions. 'Why?'

'To enforce discipline, of course,' Morrell replied. He rocked on his heels. 'We can't have incidents like this when we're on the ground. It will impair operational efficiency.'

I know damn well what will impair operational efficiency, Straken thought, *and it's not my men*. 'There won't be,' he replied.

'That's good to hear, colonel,' Morrell replied, and, almost smiling, he turned and marched away.

Lavant nodded at the guilty men. 'What shall I do with these soldiers, colonel?'

'They're carrying the extra gear when we land. For now, get them cleaning the latrines. Next time they decide to make themselves a still, they'll know not to get caught.'

3.

In the vast transport hall of the *Radix Malorum*, in front of the row of drop-ships that would carry the Catachan II to the planet's surface, General Greiss addressed his men. Almost nine hundred Guardsmen watched him climb onto the stage at the far end of the hall, striding up the steps two at a time. Commissar Morrell followed, watching the general closely. Greiss's coat was heavy with medals and epaulettes.

Straken was next up, followed by a fussy little Ministorum priest. A tech-priest readied the vox-amp, then stepped away. It was not the same priest who had admired Straken's bionics: this one, perhaps a higher-ranking adept, sported a pair of extra arms from its shoulders, folded down the length of its back like metal wings.

Greiss leaned close to the vox-mic. 'Attention, Catachans,' the general began. 'Gentlemen, it's a great pleasure to be addressing the Catachan Second again, especially after your sterling work on Signis, not so long ago.' *For many of them,* Straken thought*, not long enough*. 'Once again, the Imperium has called upon the Imperial Guard to defend its worlds from the corrupting taint of xenos aggression, and once again I am honoured to call upon my old regiment.

'As you know, it is not tyranids we face now but the old enemy of both the Guard and its Catachan regiments, the orks. Orks have invaded Dulma'lin in force, and have committed sacrileges and atrocities so great that they cry out for justice. The strategos of Holy Terra have heard that cry, and we are their response.

'I have been asked to command a rapid reaction force, largely comprised of armoured elements from a number of different worlds, which will carry out the main assault. It will be the job of the Catachan Second to support that force. Your role will be to destroy the orks' ability to re-equip – to put it another way, as the main force smashes down the gate, the Catachan Second will be torching the enemy armoury.'

Straken looked across the faces of his men, and felt both pride and a sense of deep responsibility. They were fixed on Greiss, listening intently. The Catachans were a rough lot, tough and often insubordinate, but they knew to show respect when it was deserved. And if anyone deserved respect, it was General Greiss.

We'll get the job done, Straken thought. *We'll kill as many orks as we can find, and blast their vehicles into scrap. Sure, we don't have the neatest uniforms, or a bunch of pretty flags, but since when have we needed things like that?* He glanced to his right, at the commissar in his neat red and black, and doubted that Morrell would have the sense to understand it.

'You will work alone,' Greiss continued. His voice, made even more cracked by the vox-amplification, sounded barely human. 'Contact with the other Guard regiments, at least to begin with, will be very limited. That means you'll be relying on your own equipment and abilities. To most men, that would be a hindrance. But I grew up on Catachan, and I know that for you it is an advantage. So be swift, men. Travel light and walk quietly. Leave no ork alive. Destroy their factories and their means of armament, and leave them with nothing. Strip them of their weaponry, root them out of the factories they have stolen and defiled. For, thanks to the Catachan Second, the cleansing of Dulma'lin will begin in Excelsis City.'

Straken looked at Greiss, as did the rest of his men. He wondered what was going on on Dulma'lin now, whether its inhabitants knew that they had not been abandoned. The Imperial Guard was not a cruel organisation – nor were the masters of strategy who controlled it, somewhere on the far side of the Imperium – but it was callous in its slowness to respond. A world like Dulma'lin would be as likely to be left to fall as to be rescued, just because in the grand strategy of the empire of man it mattered so little. The inhabitants, all twenty million of them, might simply be eclipsed by the need to preserve billions more elsewhere.

Standing there beside Greiss, a man he had trusted a hundred times, Straken knew that there was more to this than he had been told – perhaps more than Greiss himself knew. He looked down the line, from Greiss to Morrell to the tech-priest lurking in the shadows like a half-forgotten statue, and wondered who had called for the planet to be liberated.

'Colonel Straken,' Greiss said, and he carefully stepped back.

Straken moved up to the vox-mic. A high-pitched buzzing rose in his head, seeming to come from behind his bionic eye. It must have been damaged when he was knocked out. He ignored it. 'All right, you know how it is. All of you will have fought orks before, and probably in a city as well, so you know the sort

of thing we'll be up against. The greenskins will be down there with not much to do except fight each other, which will make us a godsend for them. That means we'll be busy, and you know they won't back away from a scrap.'

He flexed the fingers of his metal hand. 'All of which suits me fine, and if you're half the men I've trained you to be, ought to suit you pretty well too. We're going to go in, do what needs doing, and get out. I'll be working for you, so Emperor help me if you don't work for *me*. That's all I've got to say, except give 'em hell, Catachan!'

Straken got the cheer he had hoped for. Morrell puffed his chest out and cocked his head back. Greiss nodded, satisfied.

The Ministorum priest stepped forward and his scratchy, amplified voice echoed across the massive hall. Heads lowered, the regiment received the Emperor's blessing.

The priest stepped back and Greiss prepared to leave the platform. It was time to get to work.

The longer Straken served the Guard, the less there seemed to be to leave behind. He locked his few possessions in the metal chest in his room, loaded his pack and headed out. He'd miss the vox-phonograph, but that was the only thing he'd regret having to leave. Other men had families and rooms full of clutter picked up on campaigns, but Straken had always travelled light. It was part of growing up on a death world – when life was dangerous and delicate, you began to treasure sights and memories, not things.

In the hall, spinning warning lights threw strange shadows across the hold. The drop-ships stood in a row, their noses jutting out like bullets in the same magazine. The drone of engines mingled with the amplified chanting of tech-priests: a rising, growing wall of noise. It had not reached its peak yet, for Straken could hear the sergeants yelling at their men as they jogged up the ramp into their transports. Straken looked down the row of ships. The nearest was to carry the command staff. The words *Fist of Drusus* were written in scrolling script on its massive flank.

Twenty soldiers trooped past, one of them hauling a packed-up mortar, and their lieutenant gave Straken a quick salute before leading them into the hold.

Captain Tanner stood at one side, arms folded, watching the men carefully. Straken wondered if he was counting them on – a servitor's job, surely. He stepped to the captain's side.

'Something wrong, Tanner?'

‘No, sir. Nothing at all. They’re looking good, that’s all.’

‘Glad to hear it. After being stuck on this crate, I can see why they want to hit planetside. Now, get ’em packed in and let’s go.’

‘Yes, sir.’

‘And watch for the commissar. Don’t let him trip over his coat.’

Tanner smiled. Straken walked away.

He watched the entire division load up. They moved well, quick and efficient. Even the mounted guns, always a curse on the men who carried them, were stowed as rapidly as he could have wanted. Finally, their heavy support moved up: six Sentinel walkers, one for each drop-ship, stalked by on jointed legs like giant wading birds, their pneumatics wheezing. They passed the colonel, each cockpit two-and-a-half metres off the ground, and stomped up the ramp of their assigned ships. Every Sentinel bore a fresh purity seal; they all had white kill markings painted on their fuselages.

Straken looked to the left and saw figures in the observation bay on the far side of the hall. General Greiss gave him a brisk salute.

Straken returned it and followed Captain Tanner up the ramp of *Fist of Drusus*. At the top, Lavant was talking to one of the drop-ship crew, pointing to something on the man’s roster sheet. ‘All good to go, colonel,’ he called over the engine noise.

The colour sergeant, Halda, sat by the door. He looked as quiet and gloomy as ever, frowning into his beard. Straken knew better. He took his seat and strapped himself in. Commissar Morrell sat opposite, carefully brushing a speck of dirt off his lapel.

The ramp swung up like a drawbridge. The sound of it closing boomed through the drop-ship’s hull, setting the floor quivering. Buckles clattered as the men fastened their harnesses.

‘Here we go,’ Halda said.

Clamps banged open. The drop-ship fell, and Straken’s guts churned. Teeth gritted, Morrell took a gilt-edged copy of the *Infantryman’s Uplifting Primer* out of his jacket and flipped it open. The metal glinted in the dim light.

Far away, at the other end of the hold, someone retched, and someone else gave a mocking cheer. Engine noise roared around the hold, as if a storm battered it, and the ship rushed towards Dulma’lin.

Two turbulent hours into the flight, and the vox-comm called Straken’s name. He unfastened his harness and walked down the length of the hold, keeping his

footing with an effort. He reached the steps, where a notice in Gothic warned that only Naval personnel were allowed. An orderly met him there, and pointed him down to the cockpit. ‘The captain thought you might want to see the city from above, colonel.’

Bundles of wire dangled from the ceiling like creepers. Straken headed to the cockpit. In an alcove, two servitors clattered to one another in binaric. A tall, thin man sat by a vox screen, carefully tuning a dial in the manner of someone trying to crack a safe. The ship shuddered in the turbulence as Straken reached the cockpit.

The doors parted and he found himself looking at a small person in a heavy, silver-visored helmet. It took him a moment to realise it was a woman. She sat in a massive, throne-like chair, the back shaped like the wings of a double-headed eagle. Behind her, banks of dials clicked and flickered. Wires from the chair ran into the back of her helmet.

The command seat turned her to face Straken. The woman gave him a quick, functional salute, but did not rise. Straken wondered if the chair contained a neural interface, linking her mind to the ship itself. He’d heard of such things being used in spacecraft. ‘Colonel. I’m Captain Mortenz. This is Flight-Lieutenant Essler. I thought you might want to get an overhead view.’

‘Appreciated.’

Straken stepped past a row of levers to get to the viewports. There was one other occupant of the cockpit, a young man who seemed to be doing the actual manoeuvring. Presumably Essler. ‘Colonel, sir,’ he said, not looking round, and he pressed his mouthpiece and resumed the clipped, rapid jargon of the Navy: ‘Confirming a five-oh-seven, *decensis facilis*. Emperor protect you too, over.’

‘How long till we touch down?’ Straken asked.

‘Sixteen minutes, estimated,’ the pilot replied. She flicked up her visor. There were scars around her left eye, as if the eyeball had been pulled out by clawed hands. The pupil was discoloured, but did not seem to be blind. Her features were sharp. She reminded Straken of a hawk. ‘There’s no way a ship like this can put down without a few greenskins noticing. You’d be surprised how effective some of their scanning kit can be. Given the area, we’ll probably get some small arms fire, light support weapons and such, but we’ll be away before they have the chance to bring any heavy weapons up.’

‘I hope so. I need a quick dispersal.’

‘Not a problem, colonel. We can lay down suppressing fire easily enough. This crate’s equipped with ordnance that’d make a Baneblade envious. Half a dozen

autocannons – twin linked, of course–'

Flight-Lieutenant Essler looked round. 'Captain. Sorry to interrupt, but we've got a clear visual. Here, colonel.'

'I see it,' Straken replied. He could hardly not. *Fist of Drusus* had pushed through the last layer of cloud, and Excelsis City lay before it. Image enhancers in the onboard pict screens gave the city a pale, ghostly quality. Fifty kilometres to the planetary south, the captive city lay almost completely buried, like a landmine. A grey-brown rash of thick forest surrounded it. To the north, a lattice of fissures glowed in the screen. Lava glowed in the cracks.

It looked exactly the sort of place to find monsters. And with the orks in charge of the place, they would be doing just that. Straken felt a tightening in his gut: not fear, exactly, but the sense of being wary and alert, the knowledge that a fight was not far away.

The city protruded from the ground in the form of domes containing wind-traps, air vents and meteorological stations. No doubt, Straken thought, the orks would have been doing their utmost to turn it into a chaotic hell. He thought of the briefing, and of the civilians driven out and murdered for no apparent purpose other than to insult the Imperium. The wariness was joined by impatience. Soon he would be doing what he did best.

'We're above the landing point,' Captain Mortenz announced. 'There's a clearing in the forest where we'll set down. The info says the ground's solid enough – all the caves make most of this place risky to touch down.'

'Sensorium detects pinging from the ground,' Essler said. 'Looks like light armour. Probably a looting crew with a wagon.'

'We can take that out once we land,' Straken said.

Mortenz shook her head, and a wad of cables flicked out behind her helmet like a wire braid. 'No need, colonel. The *Fist of Drusus* can do that easily. Allow me.'

The chair's hydraulics whined, and it rose up smoothly. It halted a couple of centimetres from the ceiling. In a tiny shrine mounted above the doors, the scrimshawed skull of a former ace looked down on them all. Mortenz kissed her fingertips and pressed them to the skull's forehead. She checked a rotating counter in a plasteel frame, then knocked a row of switches down with the side of her hand. The chair hissed as it lowered her back down.

Straken frowned. No doubt the Navy could clear the path for them, but he would rather have made the kill himself. His men were easily up to the task, and he preferred the certainty of knowing that the orks were wiped out. Some lander

crews had a different definition of securing a perimeter to the unfortunates they left behind.

On a screen to his right, images flickered. A pict-feed in the belly of the ship picked out tiny scurrying things, like insects. As they dropped he made out broad shoulders and thick bodies: ork troopers, seen from the top down. A transport vehicle stood beside them.

A beam of bright light lanced from the *Fist of Drusus* and the front of the ork truck burst in a flower of white fire. Servitor-guided assault cannons opened up, raining shells on the remaining xenos. They scattered and the guns swung to follow them. A few ork guns flickered on the ground, then went dark.

'Orks,' Mortenz said. 'Thick as grox. You're clear.'

'Thanks,' Straken said.

He turned and hurried back down the corridor, past the clattering servitors and the man hunched over his dials, and rejoined his men. He sat down by his command team and pulled his shotgun across his lap.

Opposite, Morrell had crossed his legs. He was wearing a pair of tough combat boots; otherwise, his commissar's dress uniform was parade-ground pristine.

'One minute to landing,' the vox-comm announced. 'Emperor protect you, Guardsmen.'

The man on Straken's right murmured 'You too.' At the far end of the hold, a soldier made the sign of the aquila across his chest.

Straken stood up. 'Listen up,' he called. 'When we touch down, I want full combat dispersal as soon as that door drops open. The Navy's shot up a few orks down there – there may be more left. Vox, get up here. Halda, where's that banner?'

The colour sergeant made his way to join Straken at the door. The regimental standard was rolled up, like a spear in his big hands.

'Get ready!'

The ship hit the ground. A massive clang rang through the dark hold; voices cursed, and suddenly the air was full of the sound of harnesses clicking open. Straken looked round, and saw Morrell beside him, bolt pistol already drawn. The ramp swung down and hit the ground with a sound like thunder.

'Move it,' Straken barked. 'With me!' And he strode into the warm night air, the standard raised behind him.

4.

The Catachans spread out from the landing point like a ripple. Twenty men under Sergeant Carrow secured the landing point and checked that none of the orks around the drop zone had survived. A second team took charge of unloading the ship, portioning out the gear according to Guard doctrine. The others cleared the area as quickly as possible, Straken at the front.

They slipped into the forest like a rising tide between the trees, preceded by a bow wave of scouts. They kept vox chatter to a minimum, deploying like the parts of an unfolding machine.

The forest rose up around them in a series of curling arcs. The trees – the briefing vids had called them Barabo plants – had evolved to survive in storm conditions. They curved over in u-shapes, like the humps of a Catachan water-drake. Their leaves were broad and sharp, and looked heavy. As Straken passed through, he wondered whether they could be used as blades. The soldiers walked quickly and carefully, stepping high through the tangled ground, pushing back branches and slipping past.

Straken looked back. The drop-ships sat in the clearing like a herd of huge beasts. Men jogged down the ramps, laden with gear. The ships had turned off their engines to avoid undue noise, and the thudding of boots and the clatter of equipment filled the air.

'Almost done,' Tanner said, answering Straken's question before he'd even asked it. 'The last two are–'

From behind came a sharp, wet crack, like damp branches being broken. Straken looked round, saw men doing the same, looking for creatures among the trees. Then he realised that the sound hadn't come from the trees, but from below the ground.

It came again, as loud as a lasgun shot, and this time it didn't end. There was a swelling, crumbling noise now, and suddenly two of the drop-ships lurched to one side.

‘The ground’s giving way!’ Halda yelled.

He was right: the ground rumbled around them, the dirt crumbling under their boots. A second crack, and drop-ship eight – *Wings of the Righteous* – fell as if its left legs had disappeared.

Other ships saw it. The seventh ship fired its engines, roaring to pull away. The noise of subsidence was suddenly blotted out by the hard roar of thrusters.

Men sprinted from the ramp of *Wings of the Righteous*. Someone shouted, ‘Get a rope!’

Straken saw people surge forward to help. He grabbed Tanner. ‘No. Nobody go any further!’ he cried. ‘Morrell!’

The commissar took up the cry. A man ignored him and dashed across the shaking, collapsing ground – and disappeared up to his waist. The drop-ships tore upwards, leaving their stricken comrade behind. Troopers stumbled out of the *Wings of the Righteous*, but not fast enough. It fired its engines in a bid to tear free, but they were half submerged in the earth. Blue flames crisped the ground, turning it and several nearby troopers to dust. Ropes slapped onto the dirt. A few fortunate men grabbed hold and were hauled out by their comrades.

And then the drop-ship fell out of view. It just sank, pulling a dozen shouting men in its wake. With a terrible rumble the ship was gone, engines still roaring as the other drop-ships disappeared into the sky.

They stood there for a moment. A rescued man sat at the edge of the hole, shaking. Morrell had unholstered his bolt pistol to maintain discipline; Straken couldn’t tell whether he had fired it. The commissar put the gun away.

‘The whole place may be unstable,’ Morrell said.

Straken nodded. ‘Vox!’

Guardsman Mayne hurried over, the set banging against his back. He checked the comm-link and said, ‘Oh, Emperor. Colonel Straken, sir…’

Straken thought he was horrified by the crater. And then he heard the babble from the comm, almost a hundred voices yelling for help, and over it, still in clipped terms, the Navy officer from the *Wings of the Righteous*. ‘Request immediate assistance – am unable to clear – sinking rapidly – in the Emperor’s name…’

Straken said, ‘Vox off, Mayne.’ He cupped his hand around his mouth. ‘Everybody, clear the area! The Navy’ll come back and fish them out. There’s nothing we can do. I said move it, Guardsmen! Go!’

‘The Navy won’t do anything.’ Straken glanced left, and saw Tanner beside him. The man spoke quietly. He nodded at the men around him. ‘They know that

too.'

'You think it would help if I told them so?' Straken demanded.

Tanner shook his head. 'No.'

'Get your men moving. You know the plan – take your men east. Lavant's people will be checking the north. And *move*. This whole place might give way.'

'Yes, sir,' Tanner said.

The air smelt of cinnamon and was full of fine dust, as though someone had poured ground spice over the trees. Several men pulled their bandanas down and wore them like masks. Straken looked back at Morrell. The commissar was grave and composed, his face the same grim mask all commissars put on.

'We're spread out on a wide front, split into squads,' Straken said, keeping his voice low. 'The scout teams keep in touch with signals. Best not to use much vox just after a drop. The orks might be monitoring it.'

'If you think so,' said the commissar. He glowered into the forest. 'I didn't know they were so adept with communications.'

'Most greenskins wouldn't know one end of a comm-link from the other. But you'd be surprised what some can rig up.'

Morrell unclipped something at his side and slid out an oiled machete.

'Don't cut too much,' Straken said. 'We don't want to leave a clear trail.'

Morrell glared back. 'There are two thousand of us, colonel, not to mention six Sentinels. I doubt a few branches will make much difference.'

'That's why we're in teams, commissar.' Straken stopped and pointed through the gloom, back the way they had come. 'See back there? The last five men are covering our tracks. It won't be perfect with these numbers, but it'll be good.'

'You think the orks will check?'

'Best not take the chance.'

Morrell grunted, clearly annoyed that he couldn't disagree, and they carried on.

Although the trees were low – the forest was no more than three-and-a-half metres high – they were densely packed to stand up to the wind. Two men peeled off to check the map; they would probably have to climb up to take a bearing. *No dangerous native life*, Straken remembered. *We'll see*.

Halda, the colour sergeant, said, 'Colonel.'

'What?' Straken did not slow down.

'Think I saw movement.'

Straken froze. 'Commissar,' he hissed. Then, louder, 'Morrell.'

The commissar stopped and looked back. ‘What is it?’

Halda pointed. ‘There!’

Something moved between the trees. It looked like a ripple in the earth, a metre high at its peak but tapering like a tear. Straken boosted his vision, and felt a slight ache behind his eye. He was not looking at an optical illusion – the thing was real, and alive. It slipped between the dry trunks with almost liquid ease.

Straken raised his hand and gestured for attention. He pointed, and slowly, silently, half a dozen lasguns took aim at the thing. As it drew closer, he saw streamlined armour on its back, the exact colour of the surrounding ground.

‘Do we shoot it?’ Morrell whispered hoarsely.

‘Wait.’

The front end of the creature rose. Straken saw thick hide on its underside, six broad legs and a mouth like a leech’s, full of dozens of rows of teeth. The mouth opened, like an iris-lock – and then dropped down. For a moment he heard it grind against the ground, as if it were trying to eat the rock, and then the creature turned and slipped off to the east, its limbs hidden under its jointed shell.

Morrell blew out. ‘Looks like it’s not hungry.’ He sighed. ‘Let’s keep moving, Straken. Straken?’

The colonel did not move. He raised a hand. ‘Wait…’

‘Wait?’

The ground burst open behind them. They spun round. An armoured head shot into view, its underside an open tunnel of fangs. Straken leaped aside.

‘Throne!’ Morrell snarled. His hand flicked to his side and came up with a bolt pistol. He sighted the beast’s back, and as it dived underground again, fired a shot into its rear armour. Sparks burst from its back as if he’d hit metal.

‘Enemy!’ Straken barked, and in answer to him the ground came to life. Heads burst from the earth like torpedoes. An armoured form shot along the surface, wriggling.

Their lasguns cracked out. A Catachan blazed away at one of the monsters, his legs braced against the recoil. It slammed into him, knocking him down and killing him in the same motion. The ground rippled. ‘Watch it!’ Straken called.

He fired his shotgun into an armoured flank, with no effect. One of the beasts reared up and dropped onto a corporal, his head disappearing into its gaping mouth. He heard its teeth grinding and, the soldier screamed, muffled and mercifully short.

Morrell brandished his pistol. ‘Hold your ground!’

‘Split up!’ Straken bellowed. ‘Don’t bunch together!’

Morrell lined up another shot. In all the chaos, the commissar was weirdly calm. ‘Xenos filth,’ he growled, and he fired one-handed like a duellist. He was lucky; the bolt-shell hit one of the aliens in the underbelly, and it rolled over, thrashing. Catachans raced towards it, lasguns and knives at the ready, and grappled with the beast. Long blades rose and fell.

‘Halda, with me!’ Straken called, and the colour sergeant ran over, the standard in his hands. ‘When I say,’ Straken said.

He pulled his shotgun up and fired into the largest creature he could see. It turned, the bad light catching on its armour, and shot towards Straken.

It was like standing in the path of a train. The thing rushed at Straken like a shark through shallow water, tail thrashing behind it. Fifteen metres away, it quickened, frantic for blood. Straken couldn’t help but think of the land shark on Miral all those years ago, the great maw descending over his left side, jaws shearing his right arm away.

The worm reared up, cobra-like. ‘Now!’ Straken called, and Halda rammed the standard into its flank. The point scored its armour but did not pierce it. The beast twisted, its dripping maw searching for the sergeant, and for a moment the flesh of its underside was exposed. Straken drew his knife and darted in.

He drove his arm out, the fang-knife at the end of it. The force of the blow tore the beast’s underbelly. The worm squealed and shot forward to escape the blade. Straken gritted his teeth and pushed against its weight, and as the thing tore past, his knife ripped a great gouge out of its underside.

Grey blood spattered the ground. The thing screeched, reared up and flopped back, legs thrashing. Men hurried over with knives and bayonets, but it was already dying. A hideous, sickly smell came from the creature, like escaping gas.

Straken looked around. The other worms were in retreat; a few soldiers fired at them as they fled, but the attack was over. Morrell loomed out of the shadows, checking his bolt pistol. Halda prised the standard from the ground.

‘How’d they dig through this?’ he demanded, tearing the banner pole free. ‘The ground’s like rock!’

Heat, maybe, Straken thought. *Or some kind of phase field*. He’d seen tyranids with something like that. But there were more important things to worry about.

Morrell did not look round. As if reciting a mantra, the commissar said, ‘The ways of the xenos are many and foul, Guardsman.’

‘Any wounded?’ Straken asked.

‘Two dead,’ Halda replied. ‘The others are okay.’

‘Then let’s go, before those things get hungry again. Mayne, try to get a

warning through to the others on the vox.' Straken raised his metal arm. 'All right, let's move!'

They walked on.

One of the flanking soldiers gestured to a man between the trees, using quick hard hand movements. The man gave a sequence in reply, then slipped back into the gloom.

'One of the Sentinels' sensorium rigs has picked up an opening, sir. There's a vent shaft for the city three kilometres south-west. It's probably coming from there.'

Straken nodded.

'Mayne, get on the vox and tell them we've found our entry point. Tell them to pivot on my team and hold positions once we're in place. I don't want anyone breaking cover until we have to.'

Guardsman Mayne, only eight months off Catachan, cupped his hand around the vox-mic and relayed the orders. Straken checked his chrono.

'Five hours till sun-up,' he said. 'Let's move.'

They reached the edge of the forest half an hour later. Straken stopped a little way back, where the trees were thin enough to give a good view but could still hide his men. For a moment, Straken thought he was looking at a set of low hills, but suddenly he realised that this was Excelsis City.

The city met the surface in a set of wide, low domes, as though it had just started to push its way into the light from below. The domes were sloped to deal with the wind, and Straken could have walked up the side of most of them. They looked like the caps of mushrooms, he thought. The streamlining had only been partly successful, though – the wind had torn great gouges in the sides of many of the domes, ripping away the paint and armour, as though a huge animal had tried to tear its way inside.

As if to confirm it, a low moan came from the north-west: the gathering wind.

Mayne pressed the vox-link to his ear. 'Colonel, message from Captain Lavant with Eighth Team. There's a storm brewing up sixty-two degrees–'

'North-west, I know. Tell him to stay put. Ask him how far away the storm is.'

Straken waited. He flexed his mechanical fingers, tapped them against his steel side.

'About two hours, maybe less.'

Straken made a quick gesture to the men around him. They whistled softly, motioned to the outrunners and First Team drew close. Straken looked at the two

hundred men around him. He didn't raise his voice.

'Listen up. Over there's Excelsis. What we've got to do is get inside, and fast. I've just heard there's a storm gathering, probably coming our way. I don't know the strength, but I doubt we'll want to be outside when it hits. I'm not sure the forest will give us much cover. Up ahead, there should be a ventilation shaft for the city. We can probably get in there. Once we're inside, I want everyone securing the area to help the teams behind us get in. All right?'

There were nods and murmurs.

'Good. Sergeant Pharranis, your people are coming with me first. Mayne, stay back until I give the order. Keep on the comms. Tell Lavant and Tanner to keep their eyes open for another way in, just in case. Tell them I don't want them going in until I say. Commissar, you're welcome to stay here if you'd rather–'

'I'll go in first,' Morrell said.

Good, Straken thought. The less time Morrell spent around the men without Straken being present to mediate, the better. He glanced back; the soldiers looked ready. 'Let's go,' he called, and they moved on.

They cleared the edge of the forest. Orks were far from experts in fieldcraft – they were easy to track, usually by the wreckage, boot prints and discarded food they left behind them – but there was always the risk of encountering trouble. You could never be sure in unfamiliar terrain, Straken thought, and he heard the voices from the sinking drop-ship in his mind, shouting over the comm. He pushed it aside as best as he could. They had to press on.

Morrell made heavy work of it – he was built for marching down city streets, not creeping through jungle – but the going wasn't anything like some of the terrain Straken had seen on other worlds. By Catachan standards, it was like rolling downhill. They crept forwards, quick and quiet, through the thin trees and the low, looping shrubs at the edge of the forest that curled over like snares. The vegetation thinned around them, and Straken quickened his stride. The forest fell away, and the Catachans hurried through wasteland, towards the low domes of the city.

On the right, a small building cleared the surface. It was the shape of a wide-capped mushroom and had no doors. Words, perhaps a blessing, had been stencilled on the surface. Straken activated the zoom on his bionic eye and saw that the wind had blasted most of the letters away.

Pharranis trudged beside Straken, plasma gun held close across his chest. He was a bald, thuggish man who always looked dirty and resentful, as though he were about to commit mutiny. He was also one of the best sergeants Straken had

ever known.

‘Colonel. Map says the waypoint’s seventy metres up ahead.’

‘Get the team up. We’ll hit it together.’ Straken peered into the dark, tried to guess seventy metres, and saw a low ferrocrete block, its sides slanted against the wind. It could have been anything.

Pharranis gestured to the men around them, beckoning them in. Straken looked back and motioned for Morrell to wait. Half a dozen men jogged over, weapons ready. Straken pointed with his metal arm. ‘Valchek and Larse, watch the flanks. The rest of you, with me. Nice and quiet.’

They reached the building in a quick, scurrying jog. It was no higher than a man. Two Catachans ran up to cover the sides. Three more crouched and aimed at the top of the building in case anything leaped over the top.

Straken glanced at Pharranis. ‘Cover me,’ he said, and he ran up the sloped side, as if to climb onto the roof.

There was a massive hatch on the side of the building, the metal scuffed and scored by generations of storms. A handle was set into the metal.

Pharranis knelt down and tried the handle. ‘Locked,’ he grunted. ‘Want me to get demolitions?’

‘No,’ Straken said. ‘I’ll do it.’

The sergeant moved aside, covering him with his plasma gun, and Straken crouched down and assessed the lock. He recognised it, a standard industrial type, and gritted his teeth.

His hand closed smoothly on the handle, pulling it out of shape. Straken felt a slight pulse through his metal arm, into his flesh: a warning sign. He kept up the pressure, felt the lock bend and snap under his grip. When he released the handle, it was twisted into junk.

The hatch was loose. Straken put his fingers underneath and lifted it. Pharranis called two men over and they helped. Three more shoved their lasguns into the aperture, ready to shoot anything rising from inside.

Straken boosted his vision, and saw no movement. There was just enough light to see a steep concrete slope ending eighteen metres below.

‘Get a rope set up,’ he said. ‘I want twenty men down there to secure the area. Then we’ll move in.’

‘Yes, sir,’ Pharranis said.

Straken turned back. Mayne waited with the vox a little way back, crouched down. Morrell stood nearby, his arms folded and cap pulled down low.

‘We’ve got the entry point,’ Straken told him. ‘Mayne, get Tanner and Lavant

on the vox.'

Mayne passed the link over. Straken lifted it to his ear, heard the hiss of static and the low moan of wind.

'Tanner here.'

A fresh load of static further distorted the connection as Lavant's vox came online. 'This is Lavant.'

'Listen,' Straken said, 'the map's inaccurate. We've got an entry point here, but it's too small and too steep to get the Sentinels through. I'm going to send some people inside and start securing it, but I need you both to look for another way in – a loading bay, something like that. I need you people inside the city as soon as you can. We'll recce the area and set up a rendezvous point. Understand?'

'Right,' Tanner said. 'Understood. Signing off.'

'Good, get to it. Lavant, did you understand that?'

Lavant's voice was a little scratchy. 'Yes, sir, I'm hearing you. One moment – one of the men is saying something…' His voice became distant as he spoke to someone else. 'Right, yes, keep looking.' Straken waited. Lavant came back, louder. 'Sir, one of the men thinks he's seen something. Says there's someone following us.'

Straken grimaced. 'Well, is there?'

There was a pause. Something bumped against the comm-link at Lavant's end. Straken could hear voices, but the words were too muffled to make out.

'No, sir,' Lavant replied. 'Nothing confirmed.'

'Then post sentries and get on with it.'

'Yes, sir, I will.'

Straken passed the vox back to Mayne. He could feel the first stirrings of worry, his body getting itself ready to fight, just in case.

'Problem, colonel?' Morrell asked.

'No,' Straken replied. He wanted to vent his irritation, but he was damned if a commissar would see him annoyed. He pointed to the entrance. 'Get in there. Let's move.'

The slope was so steep that it was easier to slide down the concrete than climb. Pharranis had rigged two ropes to help them get down. Straken heard the hiss and soft thump of ten men going down the slope. A voice called up, 'We're in.'

He looked at Mayne. 'Careful with the gear, Mayne. Don't smash my vox up.' Straken climbed down, pushed himself off and slid down the smooth concrete on his metal side. His boots hit the ground and he came up shotgun-first, saw a

wide, empty room like a grain silo, and noticed the soldiers who had preceded him watching the entrance. Halda landed beside him, the standard held tightly across his chest, then Mayne. The vox-trooper checked the comm immediately, and Straken thought about Lavant's message. For a moment he wondered whether Lavant was up to the job, then he pushed the thought aside. There were more pressing matters.

Morrell came down the slope upright, trying not to run. He stopped at the bottom, bolt pistol in his hand. He glanced around, as if daring anyone to say that he had looked awkward, then holstered his gun.

They stood in a wide chamber, carved of some yellowish stone. It was twice man-height, about nine metres square. A stone aquila hung on the wall. It had been eroded down to a smooth bump.

'It must be some kind of wind-trap,' Halda said.

'Feels like a Throne-damned tomb,' a soldier said from up ahead.

'Shut it,' Pharranis snapped.

Morrell drew his pistol. He clipped something under the barrel – Straken felt himself tense when the commissar played with his gun – and a shaft of blue light jabbed out from the weapon. 'Enough idle chatter, Guardsmen,' Morrell said. 'We carry the light of the Emperor. If anyone should be afraid, it's the xenos scum.'

'I'll take the front,' Straken said. 'Keep 'em moving, sergeant. I don't want any bunching up. The last place we want to be fighting orks is here.'

Two and a half kilometres north of Straken's position, Piter Lavant stared through the gloom and tried not to grimace. Soldiers followed him, the straps on their packs flapping in the rising wind; he had to fight down the urge to start counting his men to make sure that none had been lost along the way.

'All right,' he said, 'let's keep it going.' As one of the sergeants called out for the soldiers to pick up the pace, Lavant checked his map again.

You had to be careful about these things. Moving several hundred men through enemy territory, into an occupied city… Almost anything could happen. He thought about the drop-ship they'd lost – a hundred men gone already, and by the Holy Throne, what a way to die. He hoped that the men couldn't see how that made him feel. To Lavant, there were a billion ways for an operation to go wrong – and only one way for it to go right.

A corporal called Newsen, one of his old demolitions colleagues, held the master map. Lavant had been careful to surround himself with a staff of old

hands – only demo men knew the amount of care you had to take on missions like this. The casual bravery of the Catachans could easily become slapdash. Once you'd handled Munitorum explosives, you knew to take care.

'Second team's up to point four,' said the vox-operator.

'Point four,' Lavant repeated, in case Newsen hadn't heard.

They walked on. Lavant checked the sides, paused to listen to the wind, then ordered his people to keep it tight.

Up ahead, a man turned and made two quick sweeps of the arm. Lavant shielded his eyes as the soldier chopped and prodded the air. By Lavant's side, old 'Squareback' Dhoi shifted his meltagun and said, 'Vehicles, cap, a kilometre up. Civilian, look inactive.'

'I see 'em. Dhoi, take charge until I'm back. Keep the men moving. I want this to go like clockwork.'

Lavant ran forward, past loose groups of troopers and the low domes of the city's edge. A couple of soldiers exchanged a comment he couldn't hear and shook their heads.

Four soldiers waited crouched up ahead. He recognised none of them. On the far left, looming out of the dark like some great hunting bird, a Sentinel strode along with the men, its armour piled with extra gear.

'What is it?' Lavant said.

'Three vehicles, sir.' The nearest man's head was shaven, except for a dark stripe down the centre of his skull. 'Crawlers, big things. They look all smashed up.' The private pointed into the wind and Lavant saw three lumps ahead, almost invisible against the night.

'I'll check it. You two, come with me. The rest of you, move on.'

'Yes, sir.'

If there was danger, it was best to investigate it yourself, Lavant thought. He had learned never to use another man's gun, or to rely on anyone he hadn't tested before. Lavant set off for the crawlers, the two soldiers following.

He reached the nearest vehicle, a red, angular lump of a thing, its paintwork already scratched by the wind. All six tyres were blown. High above him, the driver's cabin was a smashed wreck.

Lavant climbed up the little ladder. The cabin seemed to have been hit by a wrecking ball. The door was too buckled to open, but he knew that he would find nobody alive inside. He jumped down and ran to the rear.

It was some sort of tanker. A massive hole in the back made him think of the times he'd set charges in water pipes. The hole stank of promethium.

He scrambled up, flicked his torch on and glanced inside. Nothing at all. Lavant returned to his two guards. ‘It’s empty. The cabin’s smashed in.’

‘Orks?’ said the shaven-headed man.

‘Yes. They must’ve wanted the fuel.’ Soldiers moved past them, spread out in small groups. It was as though Lavant and the vehicles stood still against a tide. ‘Let’s check the others.’

The two other machines were equally ruined. One was a two-man buggy, its rear left side crushed from above. Two wheels were cut away. Lavant ducked down and looked into the cabin, then moved on. The third vehicle had been torn apart and looked like a skeleton. It seemed to have been some kind of armoured car, but the sides, wheels, engine block and cab were gone, scissored away with massive, shearing cuts. Lavant thought about the severed wheels on the buggy and the flattened cab and huge holes in the tanker. The wind moaned around the wreckage, as if to give voice to his thoughts.

‘They’ve got a walker,’ he said. He stared into the wind, half-expecting an ork dreadnought to come lumbering out of the storm. ‘A big one.’

A soldier in a visored cap said, ‘Want me to trap the wreckage, sir, in case the greenskins come back?’

Lavant shook his head. ‘No. I want nothing left behind. The wind’ll cover our traces – best not leave anything else. These trucks came out of a big entrance, big enough for the Sentinels. Keep going.’

He had left Newsen in charge for too long. Lavant ran back to take control.

Captain Tanner took the eastern group. He moved them up in a rough line, slanted to hit the city at an angle. They reached the city perimeter three hours before dawn was due.

Tanner clambered onto a rockcrete dome and checked his optics. Further to the east, beyond the points where the city broke the surface, he saw the great fissures where the heat-sinks emerged. From here, they didn’t look like much, just cracks in the planet’s armour. But up close they would be chasms, unimaginably deep. Creatures clustered around the edges, long things like armoured snakes. He scrambled down and caught up with his men.

Twenty minutes later, a runner came down from Fourth team. They had located an entrance big enough for the Sentinels.

‘Now that’s what I want to hear!’ Tanner said, and he followed the man through the wind.

Lieutenant Zandro waited for him, crouching down to hide his outline. Forty-

five metres on, a wedge-shape protruded from the ground. The flat end of the wedge was taken up by a massive pair of metal doors.

'Cav,' Tanner said, dropping down beside the lieutenant. 'How goes it?'

'Good thanks, Hal.' The wind ruffled Zandro's fair hair, and the goggles he wore made him look like a pilot just emerged from an open-topped groundcar. He had joined the regiment at the same time as Tanner, and was a month younger. 'We've got an entry point.'

'Nice work. Any movement?'

'Nothing yet.' Zandro turned to a private beside him, watching the doors through a pair of magnoculars. 'Roose?'

'Nobody's home, sir,' the man replied.

Tanner nodded. 'Let's take a close look. Can your people give us some cover?'

Zandro brought up ten troopers, including a sniper and a two-man mortar team. Wordlessly, they locked and screwed the mortar together, and adjusted the legs for range.

'How far do you make it?' Zandro asked.

Tanner laughed. 'You've always been the expert. You know what I'm like – if I can't reach out and hit it, it's too far away.'

'Fifty-two metres,' Zandro said. 'No, fifty-one.' The mortar clacked into position. Zandro suddenly leaned forward, shielding his eyes. 'Did you see that, Hal? There's something moving around in there.'

Tanner frowned. 'I didn't see anything.' He checked his lasgun. 'Let's take a look.'

Straken walked down the long, high corridor, keen to press ahead. They had to go quietly, and not being able to shout the men on bothered him. Sometimes he felt as though his men would stop moving the moment he stopped barking orders at them, driving them forward with his voice. Now, in the cool dark of the venting passages, they were doing well enough. But he still felt the need to push them on, to reach the waypoints faster.

The corridor reminded him of the *Radix Malorum*, waiting up in orbit for the signal to start landing troops. Soon the army would be starting out on the descent, ready to make planetfall. Straken imagined the drop-ships touching down, the tanks rolling in to take Excelsis City back the moment the Catachans opened the city gates. The armour would flatten the orks – that'd teach the damned xenos.

'Colonel,' Mayne said, 'Vox from Captain Tanner.'

Straken took the comm-link. ‘Tanner, what’s your position?’

Tanner’s voice crackled out, loud and indistinct. ‘We’re in a side entrance ’bout ten kilometres down from you. It’s like a little road – maybe the locals use it when they want to take in the sights. We’re moving the men and our three Sentinels inside. I reckon about half my people are inside now. We did think–’ his voice broke into hissing static. ‘–someone moving around down there, but there’s nothing now.’

‘What’s that? You’re breaking up.’ Straken stopped, trying to get a better signal.

‘I said we thought someone was watching us from inside, but we’ve seen nothing yet.’

‘Keep moving. I’ll see you at the rendezvous point.’ Straken signed off and said, ‘Get me Lavant.’

Mayne worked the vox controls. A new voice, faster and harder than Tanner’s, came on the link.

‘This is Captain Lavant, colonel.’

‘Where are you?’

‘We’ve just reached the entry point, eight kilometres north-west of you. I’ve just got inside.’

‘Only just now? What the hell took you so long?’

‘I had to secure the area, sir. There’s a lot of debris. It looks as if the orks passed this way.’

‘Any sign now?’

‘No, sir. The place is empty. It’s some kind of garage – looks like they used it for truck repairs. It’s completely empty now, there’s nothing here bigger than a spanner. They must’ve taken the vehicles away.’

Straken said, ‘Then what’re you waiting for?’ The comm hissed again. ‘Damn it,’ Straken said. He stepped left, heard the static die down, and barked, ‘Listen. The comm’s breaking up. Get to the rendezvous point and meet me there. We’ve got to go quietly, but we’ve got to go *quick*, understand?’

‘Yes, sir.’

Straken switched off the vox and didn’t curse, knowing that Morrell would be watching him. Lavant had a good reputation, but damn it if the man wasn’t taking his time. It was worse than excessive – it was un-Catachan. He quickened his pace, aware of the men still entering the system behind him. They were terribly vulnerable now, trapped in this stone tube. All it would take would be a few drums of promethium poured into the hatches, and an ork with a stick-

grenade…

Cave system four was the rendezvous, something called the Halacrin Fields. How you had fields in a place like this was anyone's guess, he thought, suddenly angry. He didn't know whether to distrust his map or the whole stupid-arsed underground planet. The sooner they got the gates open and flew the hell out of here, the better.

Laden with gear, their leg-joints padded out and engines muffled, the Sentinels still set the garage booming with their tread. The pilots had broadened the walkers' feet, Tallarn-style, but each footstep still sounded like a hammer pounding an anvil wrapped in cloth.

Lavant walked through, flanked by his most trusted men. His eyes took in the open room, the pillars that would bring the ceiling down, the places where the cover was best and the structure weakest. You had to keep watching; almost any shadow could conceal an ork.

He glanced back and saw that the men were moving in. Lavant glimpsed a figure in goggles, one of the regiment's snipers, and his innards twisted. There were some people, even among his own unit, who he did not want to see. The man pulled the goggles off and wiped the lenses on his cloak, and Lavant looked away. It was someone else – not Serradus, stalking him.

Calm down, he thought. *That's just your nerves talking*.

'Captain.'

He turned. A soldier pointed to the wall, two and a half metres off the ground. Gant, one of the demolitions men, shone his torch on a wide circle of broken stone. It looked as if a battering ram had been swung into the wall.

'You think the miners did that, captain?'

Lavant shook his head. He looked down and saw wide black stripes on the ground, curving away into the city. Tyre tracks.

Gant said, 'Could orks drive a human truck?'

Lavant frowned. 'They'd probably have to smash the cab open to get inside, but yes.' He swallowed. 'Looks like they've been looking for a ride,' he said. He smiled grimly. 'You'd have thought they'd bring their own transport.'

Newsen stopped beside them. 'Let's hope the rest of their army's this well organised,' he said. 'If the best they can do is steal a few tru–'

'Movement!' a voice yelled from ahead. 'Movement!'

Lavant whipped round, gun ready. Twenty-five metres ahead, something flitted between the pillars – too thin for an ork, perhaps, but some kind of lesser

greenskin, maybe.

'Flank him!' Lavant snapped. He pointed down the chamber, left and right. 'Five men either side. Gant, bring up that grenade launcher. We'll flush him out.' Men rushed down the hall, sprinting between the columns. Lavant raised his hand, turned it to get the Sentinel's attention, then made a quick flicking gesture with his fingers.

Boom! The Sentinel's floodlights burst into life. A spindly, hooded figure stumbled and clutched its eyes. Two Catachans, huge by comparison, ran in. One swatted a gun from the hooded man's hand and the second grabbed him from behind in a bear-hug, turned and threw him onto the ground. Lavant raised his lasgun and sighted the man's head.

On all fours, the man raised one hand against the light and cried, 'Please, don't shoot! Don't shoot!'

The tunnel widened and soon other passages joined it, like streams running into a river. Forty-five metres further on, thin shafts of light radiated across the corridor. Straken boosted the image enhancement in his bionic eye.

He was looking at a massive, multi-bladed fan. Light streaked through between the blades, but they were too closely packed for a man to pass through. *The wind must come tearing down the tunnels and make the blades spin*, he realised. *This leads into a power station.* The information in General Greiss's database had said that there were reactors and heat-sinks further inside, but the wind clearly provided a useful top-up for Excelsis's mining operations.

Straken checked his chrono. In a few hours the storm would hit the city with full, skin-stripping force. The wind would come down here faster than a rocket, blasting them down the passage. And then the rotor blades would turn…

Morrell ran his torch over the blades. The same thought seemed to have occurred to him. The commissar drew the torch-beam from the centre of the fan to the edge of the blade. 'Rust,' he said sourly.

It could have been rust, Straken thought, that covered the cutting edge of the fan, just as it could have been decay of the blade that had left its edge bumpy and uneven. Morrell swung the torch down to something lying in the shadows by the side of the tunnel, spat back by the fan. It was a human arm. The torch lingered there. Straken kept his face calm, wondering as he did whether Morrell was watching to see whether he would flinch.

Straken nodded to Sergeant Pharranis. 'Keep the men back.'

He walked to the fan. A metre or so behind the blades, there was a bewildering

array of machinery. *We'll be walking into a turbine. Just what we need. Ah, what's that?*

There was a pair of access doors behind the fan, no doubt to allow repairs on the mechanism. Straken took a deep breath and put his metal hand on the rotors. He gritted his teeth and pulled. Motors began to strain in his shoulder, and the soft whine of servos rose from his metal fingers. The rotor barely moved.

There was a sudden blur of sparks to the right and a deafening clang. Straken jumped back as a chunk of the fan fell like a huge steel petal, its cut edge glowing. Morrell stood beside him, a power sword humming and glimmering in his gloved hand. The commissar swung the sword again, and a second fan blade crashed to the ground.

Soldiers murmured further back down the passage. Morrell quietly deactivated his power sword and sheathed it. He smiled and stepped back, then with almost mocking graciousness gestured for Straken to go through the gap he had created. Straken looked at the rotor blade, the metal still glowing where the sword had touched it.

'You go first, commissar. Pharranis, take the men through. Command squad, follow the sergeant – you too, Mayne. Spread the men out in tens and search the power station. If you see any orks, take them out – but do it quietly. Once the area is secured, sit tight. Do not advance beyond the perimeter, and don't start shooting unless you're attacked. Understand?'

Pharranis nodded, the bad light catching on the stubble and scars on his bald head. 'Yes, sir. How about you?'

'I'm going to hurry the men on. The sooner we're all in this city, the sooner we can get out.'

Straken had always felt that the best way to lead was from the front, but there were exceptions. He waited by the fan as his men passed, urging them along, growling out encouragement and threats. 'Move it, Guardsman,' Straken snapped. 'Sorristi, hold your gun like you mean it. You with the bolter ammo! You trying to catch flies? Then shut your mouth and pick up the pace!'

The wind groaned down the tunnels as the storm hit home. The fan might not be in much of a state to spin any more, but soon the passageway would become a wind tunnel. Dust swirled around the soldiers' boots. The wind would soon cover their tracks.

The rearguard approached, still checking the way behind them. 'Is that everyone?' Straken asked, and when the men told him they were the last to

arrive, he hurried back to join Pharranis and the commissar.

The drab stone walls of a power station rose around him. Straken had seen plenty of buildings like this one before: Munitorum standard, a sprawling mass of blessed machinery inside walls that would suit a bunker. Those men not guarding the perimeter stood in the corridors, taking the chance to rest after the march. Pharranis and Morrell waited for Straken in a dark, miserable control room.

'There's no power, the screens are offline and the machines all look busted,' Pharranis said, running a hand over his shaven head. 'Looks like the orks came in, smashed the place up and stopped just long enough to dump in the stairwell.'

'Then we move out. Let's go.'

'The walls are thick, colonel,' said Morrell. 'It could make a useful fortress.'

Straken shook his head. 'Yeah, but we need to keep flexible. Hit the enemy, pull back out of sight, relocate and hit again. That's how we'll be working.'

'Whatever you say,' Morrell replied, and he tugged his cap down.

As they left the room, Pharranis tapped Straken's metal arm. 'Sir. One of the men found the staff for this place. If you're wondering, they're in a heap in the refectorum downstairs. Minus their heads.'

'I expected as much.' Then, raising his voice, 'Guardsmen, look alive!'

Straken left the power plant by the side exit. Two scout-snipers waited by the doors. 'You won't believe this,' one of the scouts said, and Straken stepped out into the fields of Dulma'lin.

He was in a gigantic cave. The roof, hardly visible in the gloom, was at least thirty metres overhead; mist swirled around the top of the cavern like clouds. Great opaque panels were set in the cave roof. Under them, huge mirrors and lenses had been rigged to amplify and diffuse the weak light. Several were cracked and broken, but the belts and chains between them still worked, and Straken could see the mechanism turning, as slow and inexorable as the hour hand of a clock. The air was damp but surprisingly cool and fresh. He wondered whether it was artificially treated.

Something big and ray-shaped flapped out of the mist a long way overhead, banked in the air and disappeared back inside. Straken snapped alert and zoomed his eye in, feeling a slight pain in his head as the magnification boosted. The briefing had said that the native life was harmless. He hoped that was correct.

Straken zoomed out and turned round slowly, taking it in, realising that the caves were large enough to create not just their own atmosphere but their own ecosystem.

The power plant stood in what could only be described as a forest. The trees were white and fungal, planted in rows, their pale trunks splitting into rubbery-looking branches. Yellow fruit hung down. The ground was covered in a tangle of springy, spongy lichen. The vegetation looked as if the colour had been bled from it, like a faded pict.

I can see why they wanted jungle fighters, Straken thought, and, with the wary skill of a man born on one of the most dangerous planets in the galaxy, he stepped into the trees.

5.

Strings of lanterns hung on cables between the branches, unlit. Straken doubted there was power to make them work. Besides, the Guardsmen were used to striking from the dark: on Catachan itself, the heavy foliage blotted out much of the sky.

The trees smelt of earth and damp. The soldiers passed between the trunks like a rising tide, spreading and moving towards the entrance to the cave. Straken saw Halda, on his right, the colour sergeant's bearded face scowling into the dark. He looked ready to fight, almost eager to stumble into the orks. Straken couldn't blame him, but he wasn't surprised that they had met no xenos so far. The orks would be in the city itself, where the opportunities for violence and looting would be so much greater than here.

Mayne moved forward on the left so Straken would see him, and tapped his earpiece twice. Straken closed up and said, 'What is it?'

'I've got the vox signal back, sir.'

'Good. Any news?'

'Both teams are all inside. They're on their way to the rendezvous point. Shall I tell them anything?'

'No.' Straken didn't know whether the orks would bother checking for vox transmissions, but it was best not to risk it. The quieter and lighter you travelled, the greater the chance of getting the drop on the enemy.

They walked on. One of dozens of linked caverns, he thought as he looked up. You'd need to watch the damp on conventional lasguns, although the carbines the Catachans used were designed to cope with humid environments. Tanks would be able to operate fine in a place like this, even if they did need to watch for rust. Flying machines were probably out – not that the orks wouldn't try it – but jump packs were a possibility. Strange, he thought, but with enough guts and faith in the Emperor, humans could live anywhere – even on a jungle death world whose flora was ninety-six per cent poisonous to humans, and whose

fauna was a hundred per cent predatory.

A sudden noise came from above: a low, loud scraping sound, like oiled pneumo-doors sliding apart. Straken flicked his hand up, but the men had frozen even before he made the gesture. Light appeared and grew in the mist overhead, as though a saint were revealing himself before them.

'What in the Eye is that?' Halda whispered. 'The sun?'

'It's dawn,' Morrell said. He had pulled his leather sleeve back and was looking at his chrono. 'At least, it's that time…'

An artificial dawn, Straken realised. There had to be a machine in the roof of the vault, somehow collecting and redistributing sunlight around the city. The light was not strong here – it must have to stay dim to allow the fungal trees to grow.

He stared up, impressed, feeling the slight warmth on his face. *By the Emperor's light,* he thought, *mankind overcomes.*

'Move on,' he said, and he kept walking.

They advanced through five kilometres of trees, navigating by the cave roof and their compasses, before the call came down the line: they'd made contact with one of the other teams.

A corporal ran down to find Straken, weaving between the trees. Straken followed him, Morrell at his heels.

A road ran between the trunks, cleared to allow vehicles to harvest the trees. Five Catachans waited around the broken remains of a flat-bed trailer. Captain Tanner jumped down from the back of the trailer, a broad grin across his round face.

'Good to see you, colonel,' he announced. Tanner checked his chrono and gasped in mock alarm. 'But how can this be? To think someone might reach the rendezvous before Iron Hand Straken!'

'That's enough, captain. You haven't got as much extra gear weighing you down,' Straken added, and Tanner managed not to look at Morrell.

'Have you heard from Lavant's people, sir?'

'Not for a few hours. We've had trouble with vox reception. Mayne? Check Lavant's position. So, Tanner, did you get the Sentinels through?'

'No problem. Listen, the orks've been all over this place. We didn't see any, but we saw plenty of traces. Boot prints, food stores smashed open – I swear, those animals'll use anything as a latrine.'

'Any corpses?'

‘Yes. No big battles, but – well, let’s say the locals didn’t last long.’

Straken looked behind him. In the artificial sunlight, he could make out the towers of the power station rising above the pale forest. ‘We’ll use this place as a gathering point,’ he said, pointing into the trees. ‘Once they’re all here, we move north and hit the orks. Have your men get a roadblock ready, just in case, and get the Sentinels hidden covering the road. I want scouts mapping the area – in particular, I want every way in and out of here covered. Put up sentries and have some wires strung between the trees. You know what to do.’

‘Right. I’ll have them get on it.’

Straken turned to Mayne. ‘Any news?’

‘Captain Lavant’s on his way, sir. He says he’s a kilometre and a half north of here, at the forest edge. He told me to say that he’s got a surprise for you.’

‘I don’t like surprises,’ Straken replied. ‘Not if it’s me on the receiving end, that is.’ Looking at Tanner, he said, ‘You coming to meet him, or am I going on my own?’

Lavant was waiting in a wayside chapel at the point where the track from the power station met a wider road. A big statue of Saint Helena the Illuminator loomed over him. The saint carried a pickaxe over one shoulder. Her right arm was thrust out, brandishing a lantern, like the picture on Straken’s map. There was a rope around her wrist. A priest dangled from it, hanged.

‘Emperor protect,’ Tanner said quietly.

Light glinted on lenses and a gun barrel up in the belfry. Zooming in with his bionic eye, Straken saw a sniper and a missile team hiding up there, covering him. A figure in the doorway briefly waved.

Now there’s a man who takes no chances, he thought, as Lavant came out to greet him.

Straken had forgotten how neat the man looked: his hair combed, his tidy little moustache, and his bandana tied around his neck. ‘Colonel,’ he said. ‘Captain Tanner, Commissar Morrell. I’m sorry we couldn’t meet somewhere more cheerful.’

The commissar looked at the dead priest. ‘That’s no way for a priest to die,’ he said.

Looking at Straken, Lavant said, ‘Looks like the orks thought it was fun to put him up there. Either that or…’

Straken knew what Lavant meant, and reckoned that the others did as well. It would be a poor guardian of the Emperor’s flock who chose to hang himself

instead of leading his congregation to either safety or a glorious death.

'Cut him down,' Morrell said.

'The thing is,' Lavant continued, 'the greenskins may be using him as a marker. Much as I'd like to–'

'Do it,' Straken said. 'Put him in the crypt. And rig up a couple of traps around him, just in case the orks decide to come back. I hope this isn't the surprise you promised me.'

'Emperor, no. We've met up with the local resistance – such as it is. Come on in.'

The inside of the chapel was almost empty. Benches lay piled against the windows. Scraps of polished wood littered the floor. Chips of stone crackled under Straken's boots. On the far wall, over a painting of the Emperor's palace on Holy Terra, a symbol had been sprayed in red paint: a skull, its eye sockets slanted in anger and its lower half greatly elongated, tapering into fangs.

'Here, colonel,' Lavant said, pointing. 'Meet Cordell Sark.'

A young man sat on one of the pews, his hands clasped and head lowered, seemingly in prayer. He wore a hooded cowl over his jacket, giving him a monkish look. The lad turned at the sound of his name. His face was filthy but pale, the eyes wary and red-rimmed. Straken put him at about seventeen, but it was hard to tell.

Sark stood up cautiously. He raised a white, scabby hand and pulled his hood back. His hair was short and badly cut, as if he had started to moult. The youth's clothes were practical – *Miner's clothes,* Straken thought – padded at the joints and so grimy as to look as if they had all been cut out of the same piece of brown-grey cloth. There was a pistol on his right hip, the grip wrapped with a rosary.

'Are you Colonel Straken?' he asked.

'That's me,' Straken said, stepping forward.

Cordell Sark stared at Straken's bionic arm. 'Thank the Emperor you're here,' said the boy. 'Sir.'

'I keep things informal,' Straken replied. 'Call me "colonel".'

'Are the Guard coming, colonel?'

Straken nodded. The lad was a little stooped, as if braced to run away. 'Yes. But not just any old Guard. We're the Second Catachan Regiment, serving under General Greiss with the Third Ryza Warzone Fleet.'

Sark sniffed and seemed to think it over. 'And you're here to rescue us?'

'We're here to kill a lot of orks,' Straken said. 'It comes down to much the

same thing.'

Lavant fished a crumpled pack of lho-sticks out of his pocket. 'We had a talk on the way up,' he explained. 'There's about fifty people hiding out west of here, in the mining district. Guild people, apparently.'

'We're the Greater Excelsis Sanctified Mining Guild,' Sark said. 'Biggest guild on Dulma'lin,' he added proudly. Then he seemed to remember where he was. 'Well, we used to be.'

You probably still are, Straken thought. *All the others will be dead by now*.

'He thought we were slavers,' Lavant said. 'Thought we were working for the orks, somehow.'

'Cheeky,' Tanner said.

The grunt that Morrell made gave the impression that this would not have surprised the commissar at all.

'Orks don't work with anyone, son,' Straken said. 'They hardly work with their own kind.'

He stepped back and raised his voice. 'All right, soldiers, here's the plan. Lavant – you, me and the good commissar here are heading off to meet these survivors and find out what they know about the main gates. Take two sections along to cover our back. Tanner, head back with the rest of the men. Stay in the forest. Make sure it's guarded but don't dig in too deep – we're here for a raid, not a siege. You,' he added, pointing a metal finger at Cordell Sark, 'are going to be our guide. I want everybody geared up and ready to go in three minutes, understand? Good, now move like you've woken up! Lavant, would you mind briefing Commissar Morrell on what you've seen on the way in? I think it's important he gets the whole picture.'

'Yes, sir.' Lavant saluted and stepped over to Morrell. 'Now, commissar, we moved in on a north-east bearing…'

Straken leaned over to Tanner. 'Outside,' he said quietly, and they left the room.

The hanged priest made a grim backdrop to their conversation. The sentries around the door did a good job of ignoring the corpse that dangled above their heads.

'How's it going?' Straken said.

'Now that the commissar can't hear?' Tanner smiled. 'Fine. How's it been with the leash?'

'He's been quiet,' Straken replied. 'Maybe our new commissar will get the hang of things. Shame he's got no stealth drill. The man blunders about like a

stuck grox.'

'Commissars – all the damn same. I hate 'em all.' Tanner's hand came up and adjusted the dagger attached point-up to his combat vest. 'Ah, you'll break him in soon enough, same as the other ones.'

'Anything bothering you?'

'Not yet. That Sark kid seems all right, but if the rest of his people are like him they'll be as much use as a penknife against a Catachan devil.'

'I don't want them to fight. They might have gear we can use, that's all. What do you reckon to Lavant?'

'He's all right. Bit cautious, but all right.'

'That's what I thought.' Straken looked back into the chapel. 'What's keeping you? Let's move, gentlemen!'

Straken took the lead, with Sark beside him. Morell was a little way back, with Mayne and Lavant beside him. They walked at a brisk pace that Sark obviously found tiring, but Lavant never stopped watching, checking not just the area around them but the soldiers moving through it. He might be overly wary, Straken thought, but the man clearly knew how to spot trouble.

They followed the road past fields of a thick crop that looked like pallid, broad-headed wheat, tall enough to hide in. The soldiers formed a rough circle around Lavant, spread out wide enough to see any danger before it could properly notice them.

They passed a few storehouses for the farms, most of them collapsed. Straken sent men out in pairs to check them. There were a few bodies: they had been shot with large-calibre bullets or killed by machete blows, by the look of it. *Ork work*, Straken thought. They left the bodies where they found them and moved on.

The road turned right, and the team passed under a huge arch. The archway was carved and reinforced to be the opening to a huge road tunnel, big enough to take four Baneblade tanks side by side. Straken boosted his bionic eye to its highest setting, and saw that the overhead lights had been carefully shot out.

That didn't seem like the sort of thing an ork would do. The darkened tunnel would have been a good place to launch an ambush. Maybe the remaining humans knew something about close-range fighting. Or perhaps they had just got good at hiding.

An ork lay by the arch, next to a pile of black wreckage that had been a huge motorbike. A stripe of burned rubber led across the road towards it; the creature

had obviously taken the corner too quickly and smashed straight into the wall. Lavant gave a couple of quick gestures, and two men split off and crossed to the ugly lump of a body. One covered the corpse with his lasgun, while the other crouched down and pushed the tip of his knife through the back of the ork's neck. There was no point in taking risks.

They passed a few vehicles in the tunnel, most of them industrial. They were quarry trucks, Straken saw: ugly, practical things with high cabs reinforced with metal cages. Most were burned out. Straken whistled softly and gestured, and a trooper climbed up to check each machine's cab and hopper.

'We saw ones like this on the way in,' Lavant said. 'The orks had smashed them open. It looked like they used a walker.'

Sark pointed to a symbol stencilled on the side of one of the trucks, just visible through the soot. It showed a crossed hammer and pickaxe against a laurel wreath. 'These are guild trucks,' he said. He looked miserable.

Straken looked at the symbol, and then at the burned wreckage of the cab, and wondered whether someone Cordell Sark had known still sat inside. The cab looked like a desecrated coffin.

A low grunt came from the darkness ahead. In a moment Straken was alert, his shotgun raised and ready to fire. The men came alive around him. Sark shrank back and fumbled for his pistol. Morrell drew a bolt pistol and pointed down the tunnel, one arm behind his back like a duellist.

A second grunt, then a low, constant grumble. *Not an animal*, Straken realised. *A motor.* 'Split three!' he hissed.

Lavant made a clicking sound and flicked his arm left, then right, and the Catachans broke. They ran apart, towards the side of the tunnel, taking cover behind the wreckage, taking up positions. Straken's heart, augmented as it was, sped up.

Two lights appeared before them, beams jutting into the dark. The grumble echoed around the tunnel, rising into the snarl of engines. And with the engines came voices: brutish, bass voices roaring and yelling to each other over the sound of their owners' bikes.

'Xenos filth.' Morrell cocked his pistol.

Straken whispered, 'Don't fire, commissar.'

'What?'

'*Do not fire*.'

One of the orks laughed. At least, it sounded like laughter, of a sort.

And then the bikers rushed out of the dark in a wave of sound and stinking

fumes, their howls and roars mingling with the noise of their machines. They weaved between the wrecked trucks one after another, like carriages on the same maglev train. Straken caught a glimpse of a steel helmet and a mantrap of a face behind it, all long, dirty teeth, and then they were gone, roaring away down the tunnel.

The engines echoed around them. Straken looked at the men beside him. Morrell had clenched his teeth. Sark's eyes were closed in a grimace, as if he were in pain. He shuddered as the sound faded, and Straken wondered what the young man had witnessed amidst the sound of ork bikes; it was said that ork outriders were some of the most crazed of the xenos.

'Let's move,' Straken said. 'Mayne, get on the vox and tell Tanner to look out for greenskins coming his way. Tell him to stay out of sight. Now let's go, Catachans! We've not got all day. You, Guardsman – found something good on the ground there? No? Then get up and get moving!'

Morrell stared back the way they had come, the way the orks had gone. Straken could see what the commissar was thinking from the snarl still on his face.

'We could have taken them,' Morrell said.

'Don't worry, commissar,' Straken replied, as the group got moving again, 'there'll be plenty of orks for all of us.'

Two hundred and seventy-five metres on, a side route branched off the main tunnel. Sark led them into a maintenance passage – still big enough to fit a Chimera troop carrier – and past a barricade of junk. Lavant caught Straken's eye and nodded to a string across the floor. It ran to a bell mounted on a heap of broken metal: not a sophisticated warning system, Straken thought, but functional.

Shapes loomed in Straken's vision, lumps of machinery and rubble. A wrecked bus lay side-on to them. Below its empty windows, the paint had peeled away. A litany against malfunction was crumbling off in flakes.

The side of the bus moved, very slightly. Something scurried past the windows, almost invisible in the gloom. It was the back of a man bent-over double.

Straken gestured to Sark. 'Hey.'

The lad looked round quickly, as though caught doing something bad.

'Tell your friend there to stand up. It'd be a shame if we mistook him for an ork.'

‘Oh.’ The boy looked embarrassed. ‘Right.’

Sark approached the bus, and a dark form rose up inside. The man came out sheepishly, an aged laslock rifle in his mittened hands. He wore a black blanket like a cloak, and heavy night-vision gear, presumably miner’s kit; but for all that, Straken realised, the fellow could have been caught by a Catachan child playing hide-and-seek. *Locals*, he thought, and he remembered General Greiss saying that most of the non-essential personnel had been recruited for the Ryza campaign. That would include all the best local soldiery.

The sentry had a beer gut and the oldest gun Straken had seen for some time. It took several minutes to explain to him that, firstly, the Catachans were actual Guardsmen and not mercenaries, and, secondly, that the rest of the army had not yet arrived.

‘They always think it’ll be the damned Cadians,’ Sergeant Dhoi muttered. ‘Little toy soldiers with shiny uniforms. When we show up, looking like we can get the job done, locals always think we’re after their women and beer. Of course, if they want to give us their women and beer, that’s fine with me…’

They moved on, deeper into the compound. Figures appeared at the edges of the dark, grubby people in old overalls and hard hats painted black, the warning stripes chipping through. Some wore flak jackets, like those the more staid Guard units used when setting detonation charges. All carried autopistols, and a few had autoguns and laslocks. One optimistic young man held a powered stone-cutter with a circular blade.

Flanked by their strange new guards, Straken and his team walked into what could well have been the largest human settlement on Dulma’lin.

The place looked like what it was, Straken thought: a mining camp. Leaving aside the rough barricades, the bad attempts at covering fire-points and the dangerous-looking vox-comm system that someone had recently improvised, it looked like a transitory work camp for non-indentured employees, the sort of thing seen on a thousand peaceful worlds of the Imperium. A few large plant machines stood around the edges. Several mounted heavy stubbers. Surprisingly, someone had scratched kill marks onto the side of a truck. It was more likely they had been racked up by driving over orks than by shooting them.

All in all, a shabby, brave, amateurish mess.

Lavant shook his head. ‘What a tip,’ he whispered. ‘I could take the whole thing out with one standard charge.’

‘At least they’re trying,’ Straken replied.

‘Trying what? These people couldn’t fortify a ration pack.’

Straken turned to Sark. ‘Go and tell your commander that we’re here.’

A long cabin stood towards the rear. It too looked temporary, the sort of standard template building put up by settlers for tens of thousands of years, and probably unloaded from a truck. There were a hell of a lot of vehicles in the mining trade, Straken thought. That meant a lot of combustible fuel. The orks would have loved that.

They walked up the cabin steps. Straken rapped his metal knuckles on the doorframe and strode in without waiting for an answer.

Sark stood beside an old desk. A small, middle-aged man sat behind it. The little man stood up as Straken entered, and Sark said, ‘This is them, boss.’

The little man scurried round the desk, smiling. ‘Emperor above, it’s good to see you!’ He ran a hand through his thinning hair. ‘Should I shake hands or salute?’

‘Can’t say I much mind,’ Straken replied, and the little man tentatively put out a hand.

‘Larn Tarricus. I’m the mining guild burgher for this canton, master-miner second class,’ he said. ‘I’m in charge here. At least, I have been up to now, I suppose.’

Straken glanced at the wall behind him. Letters and prayers were pinned to a noticeboard. Beside it, a creased poster showed an Imperial Guardsman gazing bravely into the distance. ‘Your Labour Keeps Him Strong!’ the picture said.

Straken could see what Tarricus had expected, and wondered whether his soldiers looked like a disappointment or a threat to him.

‘So, um, Colonel Straken,’ said the guildmaster. ‘Have you got an army with you? Is that how it works?’

‘No, but I’ve got one following. We’re the advance guard – a whole regiment of us. We’re up in the fields around the power station. From the intelligence I’ve been given, Excelsis City is like a fortress. With the doors closed, it’s a hell of a job to get inside. We’re here to get the doors open so the rest of the Guard can get in and drive the orks out. How’s that sound?’

Tarricus grinned. ‘Emperor, that sounds good! What can we do?’

‘I’m going to need maps,’ Straken said. ‘All the plans and maps of the gatehouse you can get. I intend to brief my men in one hour, so you’ll need to work fast. And I believe the captain here may be interested in some of your demolitions equipment.’

‘That’s right,’ Lavant said.

Tarricus nodded. ‘We’ve got plenty of maps, and as for blasting gear – well,

we’re miners. How much do you want?’

Straken shrugged. ‘Everything you’ve got.’

6.

‘Listen up and gather round!’ Straken pointed to the map, two and a half metres square, pinned to the wall in front of him. ‘Much as I’d like to, I can’t do this mission alone, and so some of you sleepy-eyed wasters are going to have to back me up.’

He stood in the assembly room of the power station, under the half a dozen flickering lamps that they had managed to get back online. Around the room sat and stood thirty of the regiment’s best: not just the officers, but lower ranks as well, people who would be leading teams and carrying out special roles. Some smoked, one or two chewed ration bars, but all watched the colonel as he pointed to the map.

‘This here’s Excelsis City, the delightful hole in the Emperor’s own ground that the orks have been using as a latrine for the past few months. As you can see, the city’s made up of a set of interlinked caves arranged around a central vault. This power station stands in one of the smaller caves, to the south-east. The big cave in the middle is called the Mommothian Vault. It’s about eight kilometres long and contains administration, enforcer buildings, central government and comms gear. My guess is that it’s also where the ork command will be bunked up.

‘Radiating out from that are what they call the Greater Cantons, caves given over to living areas, which in turn means hab-blocks and related stuff. Owing to the recent draft, a lot of the residential districts are empty anyway – by now, the orks will have stripped them for food. Further out from the centre, you’ve got the Lesser Cantons, which are industry, farming and so on. Assuming you’ve opened your eyes since we arrived, you’ll be aware that most of the so-called Lesser Cantons are still bigger than the warship that brought us here.’ He pointed to various smaller tunnels, reaching out from the city like the roots of a tree. ‘These are under construction. There may be more survivors hiding out there. It’s hard to tell, and from the looks of it the orks have figured out that the locals won’t do

much except hide in the dark and hope it all goes away.'

Someone snorted with contempt. Straken recognised the man as Lieutenant Zandro, a friend of Tanner's and a fellow veteran of the Miral operation. Straken waited for a moment as the usual derisory comments were made: the inevitable muttering that happened whenever local defence forces, High Command or the Departmento Munitorum were mentioned.

'Quiet down,' Morrell barked. A bulb flickered above his head.

Straken pointed to the map. 'The main gate is at the north end of the Mommothian Vault. We will be attacking the gatehouse – *here*.' His metal finger tapped the map. 'Tanner?'

The captain pushed a display unit over on a high trolley. Once it had dispensed inspiring information about the Imperium and thoughts for the day; now a more detailed map was taped across the broken screen.

'The gate's at the end of a main street,' he said. 'It's wide enough to get a whole load of armour in at once – enough to knock out whatever defences the orks have got. There's a fortified gatehouse that we'll need to take to get at the controls. You can bet the greenskins will be hiding inside it. Chances are, we can get through the city and close to the gatehouse without much trouble – they're not expecting us, and they're probably too busy getting drunk and smashing things to see us coming. But once they know we're there, then…' He grinned. 'It gets nasty.'

The soldiers glanced at each other and nodded. They reminded Straken of hungry men who have heard that food is about to be served up.

'We need to take the gate and hold it long enough for our forces to get inside,' Straken said. 'The main force is going to get up close, rush the gatehouse and kill every ork inside. Distractions will be caused shortly before the attack by Captain Lavant's demolitions team. I hope you've got some fireworks for us, Lavant.'

'Don't worry about that,' Lavant replied. 'I've made plans.'

'Meanwhile, a forward attack squad, under Captain Tanner, will seek to knock out any ork vehicles parked around the gatehouse. That'll take out a lot of their heavy weapons, and stop them sending out for help.

'While that's going on, a support force, headed by Lieutenant Zandro, will be covering the road. Once they've realised that we've taken the gatehouse, it's likely that the orks will try to bring up vehicles to get it back. Zandro's force will set up roadblocks and mines to destroy or at least slow any reinforcements until we can get General Greiss's tanks into the city. Commissar Morrell will be with

that force.'

A rumble of disgust ran through the men. Corporal Newsen, Lavant's assistant, turned and spat on the floor. Someone said, 'Damned leash.' Zandro scowled.

'Anyone got any problems with that?' Straken asked. 'Because if you do, I'm listening.'

'So am I,' Morrell said. The commissar pulled his cap down. 'We're all in this together, troopers. We *will* carry out the Emperor's will. I'll make sure of it.'

'That's very reassuring, commissar,' Zandro said. 'I can't tell you how reassured I am.'

He glanced at Tanner, who chuckled and quickly disguised it as a cough.

Morrell looked as if he was sucking on something sour.

'That's enough,' Straken said. 'In case anyone happens to have forgotten, you're doing what the hell I say. Lavant, once the distraction's gone up, and once you've hit the vehicles, Tanner, I want both of your forces converging on the gatehouse to back us up. Then we open the gates.' He looked across the row of faces, meeting eyes, daring them to disagree. They looked like a hard, mean crew, he thought, fighters by habit and by preference.

'Get your teams briefed up and ready. We move out in three hours,' Straken said. 'We open the gates in six.'

Morrell lit a candle, said a short prayer to the Emperor, and took the notebook out of his coat pocket. He sat on a metal chair, in a drab backroom of the power station. It smelt of dust and rats. He checked his chrono and opened the book. Morrell wrote in cipher, his handwriting big and neat.

> *Two hours before we head off. Straken intends to split the force: two distraction parties, one attacking force and one to support it. I shall be overseeing the support unit. It makes good enough sense – no doubt the Catachans will be eager in the assault, but they lack discipline. They will need a strong hand to make them stay put if things become difficult. I shall be on the alert for shirking.*
>
> *Everything I have been told about them and Straken is true. He leads from the front, and his men follow without question, the way a pack of hounds follows the biggest dog. He has a little more cunning than I expected, but by and large his men are as I thought: coarse, impious, vulgar and tough, more like savages than soldiers. I know they hate*

my presence, probably because I remind them of the duty to the Imperium they would rather ignore. By my faith, the only time I have heard the Emperor's name mentioned is as a curse. I have watched for infringements, but there has been nothing definite as yet. Straken lets them get away with too much. But I will watch, and if there is anything–

Boots scraped on concrete. Morrell snapped the book shut and glanced round. A tall man stood in the doorway; light glinted on metal. Straken walked in, a can in each hand.

He put one on the table. 'Courtesy of the Dulma'lin Mining Guild. They brew it themselves.'

Morrell closed his notebook and looked at the tin. There was a little aquila stamped on the top; it displeased him to see the holy sign associated with alcohol. 'You're drinking before battle?'

'The miners figured we all might want to drink to our success.'

'I see.'

Straken didn't go away. 'Ready to move out, commissar?'

'Yes, once I've made my peace with the Emperor, I'll be all set. I take it there isn't a priest around?'

'Sorry, no. Right now, the Light of the Emperor is coming out the barrel of a lasgun.'

Morrell leaned back. The little chamber, with its battered furniture, reminded him of interrogation rooms he'd used in the Commissariat. 'Your men don't seem the most pious people I've ever met,' he observed.

Straken shrugged. 'I wouldn't say that. "Set thy hand to the sword, for the Emperor loves not words without deeds". Isn't that how it goes?'

Morrell made the corner of his mouth smile. 'I didn't realise you were so well acquainted with holy writ, colonel.'

'I'm full of surprises.' Straken stepped towards the door. 'I'll see you in two hours,' he said, and he raised his own can. 'To victory, commissar,' he added, and without waiting for Morrell to return the toast, Straken left the room.

Eighty kilometres above Dulma'lin, General Greiss sat in the officers' cabin of the huge assault craft that would ferry his army to Excelsis City. His hard fingers drummed on his knee. Behind his chair, Nork Deddog waited, a silent, bad-smelling lump of muscle waiting for trouble to start.

Everyone says the waiting is the worst part of battle, Greiss thought. *Until the shooting starts, that is*. It was the sense of helplessness that bothered him, the feeling that, now the order to deploy had been given, he had to trust the tech-adepts to deliver his men to the battleground.

The assault craft began to shake. 'All soldiers to their stations!' the comm-link barked. 'All vehicle crew to embark immediately!'

General Greiss rose and strode down the steel corridor, the great bulk of Nork Deddog behind him. By Greiss's side a tech-priest swept along, its face a glinting mass of lenses under its hood.

The ship rocked as if swatted by a giant hand. Greiss almost lost his footing but stayed upright, waving aside the ogryn's offers of help.

'This way, general,' the tech-priest rasped. 'No need to tarry.'

The airlock doors hissed and rumbled apart. Greiss followed the tech-priest into the docking bay.

They stood at the edge of a colossal chamber, filled with row upon row of armoured vehicles. Great Leman Russ battle tanks formed the vanguard, closest to the huge doors that would drop like a drawbridge on planetfall. Several carried punisher gatling cannons, designed to chop through the masses of ork infantry that would inevitably come running for them. A few were Catachan vehicles, Greiss noted with pride, but the majority came from the Selvian Dragoons. They were bone-coloured and scrupulously clean. Pennants drooped from their comms antennae. Each tank wore its commander's heraldry on a shield attached to the turret. They looked like forts.

Then there were the vast Baneblades, their cannon barrels big enough for a man to crawl down, the top predators of the pack of tanks. Around them stood rows of Chimera armoured transports, packed in five deep, their soldiers already embarked. Once the armour had broken open the ork defences, the troopers would pour in and finish the job, rooting the greenskins out of their lairs with lasguns and bayonets.

And this is just one of our ships, Greiss thought. *We will crash through these xenos like a hammer through glass.*

The assault craft rocked. Greiss put a hand on the nearest Chimera's flank to steady himself. The tanks did not move. *A good omen,* the general thought, patting the Chimera as if it were a loyal beast. *We stand firm.*

The tech-priest emitted a chittering burst of binaric, and its vox-comm gabbled back. 'Your command vehicle is this way,' it said. 'You should strap yourself in, lest you fall and sustain injury. Your structural integrity is, after all,

comparatively weak.'

Impertinent, Greiss thought. *Typical Mechanicus*.

The ship shuddered. 'Commencing final descent,' the comm announced. 'Ordnance firing. All vehicles to readiness station secundus. All–'

The whole craft shook. A scout car broke free from its stowage and slid across the bay. Straps trailed from it, and docking-bolts scraped along the floor. The car banged into the wall. Greiss looked for his personal Chimera.

And thus the battle begins, he thought, and even after a hundred wars for the Guard, he felt nervous.

In half an hour it would be time to leave. Morrell walked out of the power station to join the regiment. Lieutenant Zandro gave him a grudging nod. The commissar turned to Colonel Straken. 'Emperor protect, colonel.'

'You too,' Straken said, and Morrell trudged off to join Zandro's men.

Straken checked the strings holding the skull of the Miral land shark to his belt. He flexed his mechanical arm, whirled it to test the servos, and, satisfied, zoomed his bionic eye in and out.

A little way off, Tanner's team of saboteurs were studying a map, running through their objectives one last time. Equipped with a wide variety of knives and short swords, their faces and arms striped with dirt, they looked wild and deadly even for Catachans. Tanner nodded to Straken, smiling briefly, and for a moment he looked almost friendly. Then he turned back to his men. They looked like killers.

Lavant strode over. 'Colonel, my team is ready.'

The demolitions men had a smart, organised look. Where some of the Catachans could have passed for mercenaries, Lavant's men looked like members of an elite military team. They carried satchel charges and a few anti-tank mines; two soldiers had a stripped-down heavy bolter. They looked precise rather than furious, a scalpel instead of a battleaxe. Strange, Straken thought, how a unit could take after its officer.

'You're not taking any long-range support?'

'We won't need it,' Lavant said. 'We'll go in close and set charges. The orks won't know what hit them – literally.'

'If you say so. I could get one of the missile launchers, maybe a sniper–'

'*No,*' Lavant said, and the firmness of his voice surprised Straken. 'No, no snipers.'

'Whatever you say. Just keep it quick and deadly. Give the orks something to

look at.'

Straken turned back to the tough, competent men of his command squad. They were all set. 'Mayne, put the order through the vox.' Straken raised his voice as loud as he could. 'Catachan Second – move out!'

7.

The regiment marched out of the station with Straken at their head. Halda, the colour sergeant, walked beside him, his standard still rolled up on its pole. They moved by squad, splitting when the terrain required it, flowing round obstacles to regroup. Men covered each other. Scouts watched the edges of the regiment, sending messages back to the centre through hand signals. Nobody spoke.

The muffled, heavy tread of the Sentinels rang through the pale trees. Two would accompany Straken's group, to assault the gatehouse. Four were with Zandro and Morrell, fitted with krak missiles to make wreckage out of any heavy armour the orks might bring up. One of the machines strode along just behind Straken's command group. He glanced back, and the pilot threw him a quick salute. Straken nodded to the man and motioned him to fall back a little. The walkers might be rigged for stealth, but they were hardly subtle.

They reached the little chapel, the hanging priest now cut down, and moved straight past. Scouts ran ahead to check the road.

It was Dulma'lin's artificial equivalent of night. Straken boosted his vision to sixty per cent optimum, but did not give the order for torches. They had all hunted in near darkness back on Catachan.

They passed through farmland: crops modified thousands of years ago to produce high yields in near darkness. The jungle fighters slipped through close-packed fields of altered wheat, spindly fungal plants the shape of palms and pallid vines on massive wire racks.

The cave walls closed in from the side, like the frame of a gigantic doorway. For forty-five metres the cavern narrowed into a sort of connecting passage. They moved quickly down the road, aware that there was not enough cover here. The forward teams, Straken among them, watched for enemy bikers. On Straken's orders, two Sentinels moved up on either side of the road. They met nobody.

The cavern opened before them, and they stood at the south end of the

Mommothian Vault. Straken stopped to give himself a moment to take it all in, and become adjusted to the sheer size of the place; even the great holds of the *Radix Malorum* were nothing compared to this.

The city was magnificent rather than beautiful, the great buildings covered in a rash of statues and bas-reliefs, depicting saints, soldiers and symbols of power. Buttresses protruded from high stone walls like insects' limbs. Great bridges arced over the streets, carved in the shape of the Imperial aquila, or the crossed swords of duelling heroes.

But even more impressive than the buildings were the immense columns supporting the cavern roof. Over half a kilometre high, their upper regions swathed in mist, they stretched over the tallest buildings. The columns themselves were carved; several were riddled with windows. *The miners must have honeycombed them*, Straken realised.

The greatest pair of columns were entirely carved, trimmed and shaped into enormous figures, like giants wading through the streets. On the left stood Lord Solar Macharius, who had brought Dulma'lin into the Imperium during his crusade to unite the worlds of man, and on the right, Saint Helena the Illuminator, the patron of miners, lantern in one hand, pick in the other.

They advanced, and buildings appeared around them. The Catachans split into squads and crept forwards, around large houses and Administratum office blocks. They were entering the commercial part of Excelsis City, where the labour of the miners was turned into bullion and jewellery to be shipped off-world.

Suddenly, gunfire crackled out to the west. Men ducked and pulled up their lasguns. The Sentinels turned, hydraulics whining. The Catachans waited.

A scream came from behind the buildings that lined the road, no more than ninety metres away. It rose up like the cry of an exotic bird, then died away into a choked gurgle. There was no more gunfire. Straken glanced from window to window. It could have been a human, or one of the gretchin, the small race that served the orks. Perhaps it was even an ork, tortured by its comrades. He gave the signal to carry on.

They began to see the first evidence of the invasion. Few buildings were ruined: most of them would have been stripped of workers by the Guard call-up long before Killzkar's horde arrived. But there were las-burns and bullet holes on stone walls, windows smashed on food shops and weapon stores. At one point, they passed rows of vehicles, pulled up before a crude roadblock, their doors still open. There were gaps in the queue, where larger vehicles had been

taken away.

A slew of corpses lay near the vehicles, spread roughly to the east as if a great hand had scattered them. Those nearest the roadblock had been cut down with blades; further out, gunfire had killed them. The bodies were almost skeletal. Several seemed to have been disintegrated, hit by some alien beam weapon. Others had simply been blown apart.

'Wonder where they were going,' Tanner said.

Halda shrugged. 'Anywhere away from the orks.' He spat on the ground. '*Xenos*,' he added, in a tone that made it sound like a curse.

'Quiet,' Straken replied.

Lavant voxed in: his team were moving out. Straken wished them luck. He signed off and continued. As he passed a groundcar riddled with bullet holes, the door wrenched off by something stronger than a man, he checked the back seats out of habit. There was no need to be careless. Iron Hand Straken might be hungry for battle, but he wasn't a fool.

The avenue was six lanes wide, flanked by a large public garden, now overgrown. It ran all the way to the gate, the grand entrance to Excelsis City and the probable headquarters of the orks. The xenos would be concentrated up there, where the buildings were grandest and the loot easy to acquire, squabbling and carousing. No doubt planning some new atrocity, Straken thought. Orks never stopped fighting: the best you could hope for was that they turned on one another.

He checked the map, then called Mayne over. 'Zandro, this is where your team stays. Get the road fortified – the Sentinels can push some vehicles into a barricade. Put snipers and rockets on the roofs, flanking the approach. Morrell, you're with him. Emperor protect.'

He left half his force gearing up. *This is it, then*, he thought, as his team began to advance on the gatehouse. The road branched and began to rise, onto the vast ramp that led to the surface.

He could see the Great Gate: twenty metres of tarnished brass, covered in a mural showing the introduction of Dulma'lin to the Imperium. Heroes six times Straken's height bowed before the Golden Throne, the folds of their robes blue with verdigris.

'Where're all the orks?' Tanner said. He whispered, but his voice seemed to fill the air. 'Awful quiet, isn't it?'

Straken looked at him. 'You want me to say that it's too quiet?'

'You don't need to,' Tanner replied.

The gatehouse stood by the side of the gate itself. It was a broad, four-storey building, fronted by columns, the windows large and elegantly curved. Formerly, it had been a hotel and a staging-point for visiting dignitaries before they ventured overground. But the lower floors were boarded up, the higher ones smashed and now bulked out with sandbags. The dirty barrels of ork stubbers stuck out like broken drainpipes.

Worse, it stood behind thirty metres of lawn. Without cover, it would make an admirable killing-ground.

Straken flicked his hand for the men to stop. He gestured to the sides of the street, and the troops began to split, taking up positions by the houses. Two marksmen levered a door open and slipped inside, to find a vantage point. It was almost dawn.

He turned to Tanner. 'Go around the side. Take out any vehicles they've got.'

The captain nodded. 'Once I hear you going in, I'll converge.'

'Good. But quietly, all right?'

They would not get much closer without alerting the orks. Straken stopped beside a billboard as Tanner and his men crept away, waiting for Lavant's distraction. *Make it quick*, he thought, and he clenched his metal fingers into a fist.

The orks hadn't bothered posting sentries around their vehicle pool; they had just strung up a few corpses and expected that to keep anyone else away. It would have worked on the survivors, but Captain Tanner had seen a fair share of dead bodies – and had made quite a few as well.

He crept forwards, ducking from doorway to doorway. Each few metres in the open were like crossing an empty plain, and it was a relief to slip back into cover. Behind him, Tanner heard the soft, scurrying tread of his men moving up with him.

The vehicles were parked inside a fenced enclosure, once reserved for enforcer use. The orks had bolstered the fence with barricades of sheet metal and heaped stone, but several enforcer wagons were still visible within: all scratched and dented, one lying on its side. Tanner could hear the whine of an electric saw inside, and the sudden grating sound as it cut metal. A pole rose out of the enclosure, sprouting conical sirens like some weird flower.

He drew his long knife. Tanner licked his lips: tension had made him thirsty. For a second his mind wandered, and he imagined himself back in the *Radix Malorum* with Zandro and the lads, washing another mission away in beer.

Something moved in the compound. An ork strolled into view, holding a tin can. It raised the can and pushed its clawed finger inside, rooting about for something. Satisfied, the alien licked its fingertip and tossed the can onto the ground, then turned away.

As Tanner started to advance, a skinny green hand shot out and grabbed the can. He dropped back into the shadow, knife raised.

A scrawny humanoid crept out, a pallid greenish thing just over a metre tall, the limbs long in proportion to the body. The face was bestial, but crafty instead of brutish. The nose was so large as to form a sort of snout, the eyes tiny and red. It opened a mouth full of needle-sharp teeth and chattered.

Gretchin. A sub-species of orkoid, both slaves and parasites of their larger kin. Vicious little animals and, Tanner recalled, surprisingly good shots. It looked away, following its comrade, picking at something inside the tin.

The aliens moved out of view, lost behind the compound wall. Tanner rushed across the road, keeping low, and dropped down beside the entrance to the enclosure. The scraping sound was loud now. The orks must be hacking up metal in there.

Slowly, Tanner leaned around the entrance. All sorts of vehicles were parked inside: half-tracks and armoured trucks, mainly, but also rickety buggies and a single, high-sided tank painted a weirdly jolly shade of red. Several buggies had rocket launchers rigged to their backs. They looked as if they would either overturn or tear themselves apart when they fired, but Tanner had seen such things in action before. He scurried into the maze of vehicles, slipping between the bolted iron flanks, steering towards the siren.

An enforcer wagon was on his left, a half-wrecked bus on the other. Tanner advanced down the corridor they made. He could see the siren clearly, bolted to the wall of the building. He looked right, trying to peek through the bus windows – and looked straight at a corpse. It sat on a rear seat, head lolling back, turned as if to stare right at him.

Tanner caught his breath. Behind the bus there was an open yard. Half a dozen orks stood around one of their buggies, welding sheets of metal to its side. To Tanner's surprise, one was smoking a roll of lho-sticks, tied together to make a crude cigar. Another, carrying a stripped-down welding torch, flicked its visor up and admired its handiwork. The air reeked of hot metal and spilt oil.

Tanner reached the end of the bus and looked round. He could run to the wall, where the siren was, and if he went quickly, the orks probably wouldn't notice him before he had cut the wires. It wasn't ideal, but–

Something lurched out of the shadows before him. Tanner ducked back, but the glimpse he got was enough: a red monster, scaled like a grox. It was a weird, unfinished looking beast with a stubby tail and a head that was all fangs and tiny, malicious eyes. It was a fighting-squig, the ork equivalent of a guard dog.

A small pile of empty cans lay at the end of the bus. From the looks of it, the gretchin had been living in there. Tanner picked up one of the cans and tossed it underarm, hearing it rattle across the ground. A moment later, the squig jumped on the can, scooped it into its maw and lumbered into the shadows to devour it.

Tanner ran out, ducked left and rolled into cover. He crouched down behind a rusty generator, hearing the squig start to growl like an engine coming to life.

It didn't matter; he was near enough to the siren. He reached out and slid the knife through the cabling and the plastic sleeve protecting it. Tanner grabbed the loose end and yanked it out of the wall for good measure. With no alarm, and his team covering the exits, the orks would never leave the enclosure, and would never be able to call for help.

Shadow flickered across Tanner's hands. He glanced up and saw a skinny green form squatting above him. The gretchin screeched a warning as Tanner lunged for it. He grabbed the beast, stabbed it, but it screamed before he could cover its mouth. He tossed the corpse down as noise broke out: hard ork speech, and the squig snarling through a mouthful of spit.

Tanner leaped out of cover. A voice cried out – a hulking shape pointed and bellowed – and he darted between the vehicles. The orks shouted, and a chain clinked on stone. Then Tanner sprinted for the exit, as the slavering racket behind him rose and rose. The squig's claws clattered; there was no way he was fighting that head-on, knife or not. The exit came into sight. Tanner pushed himself on and shouted, 'Go, go!'

A man stepped into view, gun raised. The lasgun cracked out and the squig yelped. Tanner whipped round and leaped on it, stabbing and carving. His squad ran past him into the compound. Tanner clung on to the squig as if to throttle it, twisting the knife, and it squealed. Hot purple gore ran onto his hands. The red, stinking body shuddered in his arms, and he let it drop. He stood up, ready to keep on fighting, but his men were done.

'Compound's cleared,' a trooper called.

'Nothing left for me?' Tanner demanded. 'Come on. Let's find Iron Hand.'

Lavant looked across the row of buildings ahead of him, and saw nobody. He did not expect to, but the urge to check was impossible to resist. *Someday,* he

thought, *he will be there, and I will be in his sights. And if he wants to take his revenge on me, well…*

'Sir?' Someone tapped his shoulder. He whipped around, half expecting a looming, reaper-like figure to be there, sniper rifle held up in place of a scythe. Instead, Corporal Cardrik looked back, a little surprised by the captain's response.

'Cardrik,' Lavant said. 'You startled me.'

'Sorry, sir. The bombs are all ready. I thought you might like to check them over.'

'Thanks.' It had become a ritual, over the last year or so, that Lavant would check everything himself. To begin with, the men had found it pernickety and strange, but nobody said anything now, especially since Lavant had been promoted to captain.

He crept back through the building and into the kitchen at the rear, where the rest of his team awaited him. A prayer-scroll had been pinned over the table in the centre; half a dozen packs of explosives now sat where food had once been prepared. Lavant went over each one, turning it over in his hands. He saw one of the men glance at his chrono and tried to hurry up, aware that they needed to get to work. But he couldn't rush himself, couldn't take the risk. Eventually he took a bulky satchel charge and a smaller bomb, both triggered by remote control. He slipped the controllers into his thigh pocket and buttoned it closed.

'Right,' he said. 'Let's go.'

There were only a dozen men in his team, with a stripped-down heavy bolter for support. It was old jungle-fighting dogma: go in fast and quiet, hit the target spot-on, and get away as light and quickly as possible. They advanced through looted shops, past shelves of spoiled, luxury food and racks of coats in guild colours, towards the broad street. Lavant carefully opened a door marked 'Private: staff and servitors only' and looked through wide, smashed windows across the road.

'Set the bolter up here,' he said.

The shop had once sold local tea made from Barabo plants and overpriced food, probably brought in from off-planet. It was long-since looted, but its chief advantage remained: it overlooked Millennial Square.

A dozen ork bikes were parked in the square, in the shadow of what had been a public pulpit. Next to them stood a scout tank, its wheels as high as a man, the flanks covered in rivets the size of coins. The bikes had that tough, ramshackle look of all ork vehicles, as if cobbled together by an ingenious barbarian from

whatever was at hand. The metalwork glinted with grease and oil. Lavant hoped it was flammable.

One of his men approached and handed over a demo charge. Lavant tested the circuitry, tested it again, and crept towards the door. Behind the bikes, at the far end of the square, the orks had set up a cook-house in an old civic building. Lavant could see figures lumbering about inside: ork bikers, looking for food. Emperor only knew what they were cooking in there, but it stank. *Probably rotting meat,* Lavant thought. The aliens would eat anything.

He crept out of the shop and scurried across the road, using the scout tank as cover. The street felt incredibly exposed. Across the city, a long way off, gunfire crackled. Up ahead, voices grunted and laughed. Lavant sped up, running now, and reached the bikes. He dropped behind a row of red-painted machines and got to work.

It was easy to attach the bomb to the nearest bike. Despite the oil, the tape stuck fast to the bulbous promethium tank. The bikes, he saw, were built for xenos proportions, for bodies broader than those of men.

An ork snarled above him.

He froze. Two and a half metres away, a brute in a steel helmet spat into its hand and rubbed the gloved palm on the goggles it wore. Lavant held his breath. His hand crept to the knife at his side.

The biker gargled, coughed and spat a wad of phlegm onto the seat of a black bike decorated with a chequerboard pattern, presumably belonging to a rival. Then it turned and walked away. Lavant breathed again. He crept forwards, to the edge of the cook-house. Carefully, he slid the satchel charge into his hands and laid it against one of the support joists. He flicked the switch to activate it and crept back.

He stopped behind the scout tank. Newsen was wiring a krak grenade to the front axle. Sergeant Dhoi discreetly pushed a wad of soft explosive against the engine vents, where it would heat up once the tank started to move. They nodded to him, and the three hurried back to the looted shop.

The rest of the team had taken up positions facing the cook-house. Lavant checked that they were all set. He took out the remote for the explosive he'd attached to the bike, spoke a quick grace to the Emperor and to the Machine-God, and pressed the button.

The bike exploded. It broke at the handlebars and blew three metres into the air as its fuel tank ignited, thrown up on a billowing cloud of fire. Other machines were knocked aside, toppling onto one another. Suddenly they looked

like a heap of scrap.

'Ride that,' one of the demo team muttered at Lavant's side.

Orks spilled out of the cook-house, grunting and bellowing. The owner of the ruined bike – the chipped paint on its armour matched that of its ride – went into a fit of bellowing. It kicked and stamped the wreckage as if it were a prisoner, and Lavant allowed himself a small smile. Another ork, yellow flames painted over its helmet, pointed and roared with laughter.

The cook-house was almost empty now. Lavant watched as the orks argued, laughed and shoved each other, in preparation for the inevitable squabbling. One or two, more shrewd than the rest, hauled their bikes out and looked around, suspicious.

Best not let them get away, Lavant thought. He slipped the detonator out for the satchel charge, and hit the switch.

The second explosion was much bigger. The front of the building burst, showering the orks in shards of rock. It took out three bikers in a booming ripple of fire, throwing chunks of machine and rider across the square.

'Fire!' Lavant shouted. The crack of lasguns and the roar of the heavy bolter rose around him. The surviving orks were mown down as they tried to get away. Two clambered onto the tank – one was shot to pieces, but the other managed to throw itself inside. Moments later, the tank's front wheel burst in a cascade of scrap.

Lavant glanced at Dhoi. 'Nice work,' he said.

A hand-cranked siren rose up and wailed over the rooftops. Gunfire rang out to the east. Orks bellowed in the surrounding streets.

Lavant gave the sign to slip away. With a bit of luck, he thought, he and his team had just started a tribal war.

Straken heard the explosions, and a moment later saw filthy black smoke rise above the city, swirling towards the cave roof. Ork gunfire crackled out in the distance like snapping twigs.

Mayne turned from the vox-comm. 'Colonel, Captain Lavant says it's all go. He's blown up barracks and a load of bikes. Now he's moving up towards an ammo dump. Says they've not seen him.'

'Let's move.' Straken raised his metal arm, knowing that the snipers and missile teams would be watching him. He brought it down, as if to throw fire onto the gatehouse.

Rockets hissed and roared out of cover. One went wide, three tore straight into

the gatehouse doors with a boom that rippled out across the avenue. The doors gaped open, wreathed in smoke. Straken heard orks bellowing in surprise.

He turned to the men around him. ‘Guardsmen, follow me!’

They yelled behind him, their voices rising in a wave of noise, and several hundred men rushed the gatehouse.

Figures moved in the upstairs windows, lumbering to man the guns, and the Catachan snipers got to work. Orks fell back, clutching their heads and chests. Few were killed outright, but it didn’t matter – what counted was that they were pinned in place until Straken could get his troops inside.

His boots pounded on the cracked stone. Straken raced between two trees, hearing ork weapons bark out overhead, and a frag missile shot into the third floor window and blew the offices apart. Smashed furniture and pieces of ork fell into the street. Straken levelled his shotgun as he reached the gatehouse.

He rushed up the front steps, saw something move in the doorway and blasted it. The figure dropped away, but despite the missiles, the doors had not opened wide enough: they were chained from behind. Straken threw himself against a statue beside the doors, pumped his gun and saw the horde of men behind him. They hit the building and tore at the boarded windows with bayonets and lasgun butts. A chainsword howled as it struck metal, throwing up an arc of sparks.

He heard grunts and snarls from inside the gatehouse. Something heavy hit the doors from behind, almost slamming them closed. The Guardsmen had only seconds before the orks reinforced their position.

‘Sentinel!’ Straken yelled, beckoning. All around him men shouted and battered the ork defences in. Someone tossed a grenade into an upstairs window. An ork fell from the second floor and disappeared amidst a flurry of Catachan fists and knives.

The Sentinel came striding through the men like a great predatory bird, hydraulics whining. A jointed arm folded down under the canopy, and at the end of it an immense chainsaw whirred into action. Men leaped aside and it waded through. At the last ten metres it suddenly accelerated, and it bounded up the steps and smashed into the doors. The whirling blade screamed against the plasteel doors, metal creaked, and suddenly the doors burst apart and Straken saw into the hallway beyond.

Light sparked at the front of the Sentinel and its heavy flamer blew a great jet of fire into the entrance hall. Liquid promethium turned three orks into staggering, spinning torches, and they fell, thrashed and lay still. Flames lapped at paintings and furniture, and the stone hall was clear.

The Sentinel stepped backwards carefully. Sergeant Pharranis waited on the far side of the doorway, plasma gun raised. He nodded to Straken.

'With me!' Straken cried, and he ran into the hall.

It was empty. An ork struggled on the floor, rolling in flames; Straken shot it immediately. The hall had been lavishly decorated, an ideal point to welcome overground dignitaries to Excelsis City, but there was no indication of where the gate controls might be. A grand wooden staircase stretched up towards some kind of lounge. Doors led off to the left and right.

'Throne,' Straken spat. 'Pharranis, split up and spread out. I want teams in every room. Don't let any of the xenos get away, understand?'

'Right,' the sergeant growled, and as he started to shout orders at the men, orks ran onto the staircase from above.

The brutes crowded down the stairs, leaping over the banisters. Straken rushed straight at them, shotgun raised. He met them head on. A thick green arm swung down, and Straken ducked past the ork's cleaver, shoved the shotgun under its jaw and blew out its brains. A second monster hacked at him with an axe, and Straken blocked the axe-shaft with his gun. The ork paused, surprised by Straken's speed, and he punched it in the chest with his metal fist. Straken felt the ork's ribs give way and it staggered back, coughing. His men rushed in beside him, knocking down the injured ork and two more. He turned, and saw a scar-faced beast toss one of the Guardsmen off the staircase. Straken ran over, kicked its leg out and sank his mechanical fingers into its throat. He ripped his hand away in a spray of ork blood, and around him his men slaughtered the rest of the aliens.

Halfway up the stairs, Straken passed a Guardsman, lying on the landing. The man rolled onto his side and groaned. 'You all right?' Straken asked.

The man sat up, wincing. 'It's nothing, sir.'

'Then stop lying down on the job and help me clear this place out. Mayne, get that vox up here. The rest of you – we'll take the upstairs. Let's go!'

Morrell heard the chaos at the gates, and knew that the city was about to come alive. Seconds later, orks rushed out of the buildings to join their comrades at the gatehouse, and Zandro's team opened fire. The aliens had not expected a rearguard, and at once they were cut to pieces. The Catachans fired from the barricades, from windows and rooftops, and turned the avenue leading to the gates into a killing-ground. The orks had no plan, just the knowledge that there was fighting to be done elsewhere, and as they raced in to join the battle, the

support team shot the xenos apart.

Morrell did his own share of the killing. A mortar bomb landed by the side of an ork truck, flipping it over. The vehicle slid into the front of an administratum office and stopped. As a dozen alien brutes dragged themselves free, Morrell took careful aim with his bolt pistol and finished them with an executioner's skill, placing a single shell into each green head.

Straken strode into the control room. A massive ork turned from the gate controls. Its left arm was wholly mechanical, ending in a mass of blades and tools.

The alien grinned and lunged at Straken. He sidestepped and fired in the same motion, and his shotgun threw the ork against the far wall. It hauled itself up, bloody and snarling, but Straken was too quick. The last thing it saw was his metal fist, crashing into its thick skull. The brute fell half-through the window, and Straken's second blow sent it tumbling headfirst into the stone below. Outside, soldiers cheered.

The Catachan Second swept through the gatehouse. Although the xenos fought like wild beasts, there was no organised defence – the attack on the gatehouse had taken them by surprise. Half a dozen orks had even been ambushed whilst playing some sort of gambling game, surrounded by little piles of canine teeth. Now it was just a matter of clearing the place. Lasguns cracked and men shouted as they moved from room to room. At the far end of the building, an injured ork roared and grunted like an angry bull, and then fell silent.

Tanner and Lavant waited in the lobby. Both men looked keen and angry, and Tanner's chest was striped with dark xenos blood. Straken checked his chrono and turned to his captains. 'Lavant, I want the gate doors checked for booby traps – maybe the orks got smart around here.'

'I wouldn't put money on it,' Tanner said. 'Not that lot.' Someone chuckled.

'Tanner, pipe down and get the street cleared. Pull the barricades away. We're on time for the rendezvous, but it's tight. I want our tanks to have a nice clear road in. Get some men in the buildings flanking the main street and check the windows in case there're any orks left. Lavant, get your men scanning the doors, just in case the orks have rigged them. And somebody tell Halda to come up here. I want the colours ready to fly.'

He watched them go. Straken looked out the smashed window, the frame still edged with shards of glass like fangs in a monster's mouth, and reloaded his shotgun as his men got to work in the street below. On top of a civic building

one of the scouts signalled across the road with a piece of mirror. A moment later, another flash came back. Straken knew the signs. The orks were fighting the rearguard.

It wouldn't be long, though, until the xenos mustered for a counter-attack. They'd never let the Catachans hold the gates; none of the green savages would be able to resist the chance for a fight. The sooner there were some tanks in place, some artillery heavier than the Sentinels could carry, the better.

Halda came bounding up the stairs, the banner pole held in both hands like a spear. His vest was sticky with ork blood and some of the stuff had splashed into his beard. 'It's not mine,' he said as Straken looked him over.

'Get up to the gates and have that banner unfurled. I want our army knowing it was the Second that did this.' He glanced back at the watchers on the rooftops. One of them hefted a long sniper rifle. Straken wondered what it was that bothered Lavant about the snipers – did he have a rival in their ranks? – and turned away. There were more important things to worry about.

The demolitions team were finishing their work on the gates when he arrived, running a complex, ancient auspex over the hinges. The device was covered in sacred text and trailed a purity seal like a tail. It chimed and the soldier wielding it stepped back. 'All clear, sir.'

Halda unfurled the standard, flicked out the pole, and the colours of the Second Catachan Regiment hung above their heads. Lavant slung his lasgun over his shoulder, tossed his lho-stick down and ground it out under his boot. Tanner ran up, slightly out of breath. 'We've cleared a path through the main barricades,' he announced. 'The tanks'll just roll over what remains.'

'What about the commissar?' Lavant asked.

'What about him?' Tanner said, smiling. 'This is a Catachan operation, right?'

The gate controls were mounted on a gold frieze the height of a man. It took two soldiers to work the levers; Straken's map had said that the opening of the gates had been a ritual in itself. The troopers pulled a huge brass lever down, and the ground rumbled as the gates unlocked.

Slowly, with a low groan like some vast animal coming to life, the gates to the city swung apart. Light flooded in from above. Straken winced and the contrast on his bionic eye compensated for the glare. He strode up the slope, flanked by his captains, the standard hanging above them. Behind them came the rest of the raiding party, eager to see their comrades arrive.

Two hundred metres away, tanks rolled out of the whirling dust. They were silhouetted against the sun, but Straken made them out by their shape: the broad

fronts of Chimera personnel carriers, flanked by slow, rumbling Leman Russ battle tanks, then Hellhounds, their stubby turrets dripping liquid flame. Pennants fluttered gaily over the vehicles, as if they were on parade. In the centre of the group rolled a huge Baneblade, over twice as wide as a normal tank and only just small enough to pass through the city gates.

'Just in time,' Tanner said.

Someone cheered behind them. 'Catachan Second, delivering the goods!' a voice called out. Straken said nothing as he stared at the column, uneasy for a reason that he could not name. The tanks were on schedule, but somehow…

At his side, Lavant lowered a pair of magnoculars. The captain's face was blank, as if the expression had fallen off it, his eyes suddenly wide. 'Emperor, no,' he whispered, and as if waking he shoved the magnoculars at Straken. 'Colonel, look!'

Straken grabbed them, telling his bionic eye to zoom in. Fear rising in his chest, he raised the magnoculars as the men around him began to fall silent, one by one.

Bodies dangled from the Baneblade's gun. They swung as it rumbled towards them, like fruit on a shaken branch. They wore tank crew uniforms.

Straken flicked the magnoculars to the right. A soldier had been strapped to the front of one of the Chimeras, upside-down, head lolling. Straken hoped he was dead. The next tank was missing its tread-guards, the one after it holed by a shell and daubed in red.

Rocket buggies zipped out of the dust, running around the tanks like jackals following lions. A hatch opened in the Baneblade and a hulking figure scrambled onto the roof. It could not have been less than two and a half metres tall. The ork raised armoured fists and bellowed at the sky.

Straken lowered the magnoculars. *That's our people,* he thought, the words spinning through his mind. *Those are our tanks.* For a second he was dumbstruck, a simple Catachan soldier a billion miles from home, faced by a metal tide of orks – and then he was Colonel Straken again, old Iron Hand, and he knew what they had to do.

'Fall back!' he yelled. 'Everyone, into the city! Tanner, pull your people back to the rendezvous point. Lavant, get those gates shut, now! Mayne, get on the vox and tell Zandro to pull the rearguard back. Everyone, there is an ork armoured column advancing on our position. We are under heavy attack. Fall back!'

Morrell waited with the rearguard, a mile from the gates, quietly furious. No word had come through to confirm their success – at least, none that they'd bothered telling him – but the shooting had died to almost nothing now. He stood behind the cover of a ruined truck, bolt pistol still in his hand as he watched the road behind them for ork reinforcements, and tried to look as if he didn't care.

They'd played him for a fool. That was why they'd put him with the rearguard: not to keep order, but to make sure that he wouldn't be there to greet the incoming troops. He had been sidelined. The gates would be open by now, and there would be no glory for Octavius Morrell.

Morrell glared at the soldiers around him. They looked a quarter ork as it was, big men in customised, non-regulation gear. What more could you expect from a bunch of jungle savages? He cursed under his breath.

They'd warned him about this, of course. He had known from the beginning that the Catachans were trouble: rowdy and impious, dismissive of anyone not from their miserable home world. He'd thought he was the man to instil some discipline. Morrell wondered how visible his rage must be. 'Where's the commissar?' General Greiss would ask, and they'd reply, 'Oh, he had to have a rest. It was all too hard for him.'

Fifteen metres away, an ork groaned and rolled over onto its front. Its chest was a ploughed mess of exit wounds. The damned things seemed to be able to shrug off huge amounts of damage.

Morrell aimed his bolt pistol without getting up, squinted down the sights and blasted the ork between the eyes. It flopped down into the dirt.

It wasn't as if Morrell were soft or stupid. Stupid commissars were either picked off by the enemy or their own men, and soft ones weeded out by their peers. Morrell had executed plenty of men when he'd been attached to the Field Police of the Krommenweld Ironhelm Dragoons. Admittedly, the dragoons had at least been pious, disciplined men. It was said that they smiled less often than their commissars – try saying that about the Catachans.

There was a grim tension in the air. Soldiers watched the way behind them, hands ready on their lasguns. Ten metres away, a scar-headed trooper sawed a massive canine out of a dead ork's maw. *Savages,* Morrell thought.

'Fall back!'

Morrell glanced round, squinting under his cap. A Guardsman raced into view, almost falling over as though he were running downhill. 'Everyone, back!' he cried.

Morrell gritted his teeth and stood up.

‘Everyone back, now!’ the soldier cried, waving his arm as if throwing a ball. ‘Fall back!’

Morrell advanced on him, disgusted. As he drew closer, he saw that the man was an officer – not just any officer, in fact, but that imbecile Zandro, the one who had kept him away from the gates, and suddenly rage swelled in him to rival his contempt.

‘Lieutenant Zandro,’ Morrell boomed, pulling his coat back as he approached the man, ‘you will return at once to your post. Your orders were to hold this position until relieved. In the name of the Immortal Emperor, you will obey those orders or face summary justice!’

‘Everyone back! The orks are coming!’

Men were moving now, Morrell saw, preparing to fall back. *One bad apple,* he thought, remembering the doctrine of the Commissariat. *One bad leader, and a whole army can be ruined.*

‘You have one chance, Zandro,’ he called.

The lieutenant glanced at him, as if he’d only just realised that Morrell was there. ‘No, listen, commissar. It’s on the vox. We’ve got to fall back. The orks’re coming.’

‘That’s enough! A few orks can’t–’

‘Listen to me! We’ve got to move! If you’ve got any brains you’ll come with us.’ Zandro turned to his troops. ‘Gear up, men, we’re falling back no matter what the leash says. Parnek, fetch that–’

Morrell shot him in the back. The bolt-shell detonated, blowing a hole in Zandro’s chest thirty centimetres wide. He dropped onto the pavement as if he’d fallen from the cave roof.

‘Cancel that order,’ Morrell said.

Everyone was silent for a moment. The men stood before their commissar like figures in a tableau, frozen in place. Morrell did not move either: his pistol raised, he stood ready to fire again.

‘Son of a bitch,’ someone said quietly.

Then there was sudden noise behind them. Morrell heard voices by the dozen and glanced round. Soldiers came streaming down the road, from the gatehouse. Guardsmen jogged back, gun teams carrying their weapons between them. They were followed by sergeants bellowing orders, dictating a rapid, measured retreat. A Sentinel lumbered behind them, almost at full speed.

Morrell stood in their way as if he had walked straight into a procession. Some of them hurried past him, and it took several seconds for them to notice the body

on the pavement, and several more to see the smoke coiling from the barrel of Morrell's gun.

'He shot him,' voices said. 'The leash shot Zandro. The commissar did it!'

Morrell recognised faces among the men, the officers overseeing the retreat. He saw Lavant, his face etched with worry, and Straken, shouting commands, pointing. *Good,* Morrell thought. At least proper order would be restored. And then he spotted another face, and its eyes locked with his own. He looked at Captain Tanner, and saw horror and fury in equal part. Tanner's eyes flared up with rage. He lunged forward.

Straken's metal hand dropped onto the captain's shoulder. He barked something into Tanner's ear – Morrell couldn't tell what – and Tanner twisted away. He stormed aside and disappeared behind his men.

'Move, commissar,' Straken yelled. 'Unless you want to fight the orks on your own.'

'The army–' Morrell began.

'Dead,' Straken replied. 'All gone. Now *move*!'

8.

‘Keep it going! You at the back – yes, you – pick up the pace or you’ll be on a charge. Macellan – put that lho-stick out. You’re a Guardsman, not a hab-worker on a Throne-damned break! Move it!’

Straken hurried the men back towards the power station. They turned off the road and into the mushroom forest. He stopped at the edge of the trees, beckoning and shouting them on. The Catachans jogged between the white trunks, bulky with gear, their faces smeared with dirt. *Keep them on the move,* Straken thought. *We can think how to fight back once we’re out of danger*.

Lavant stopped beside him. ‘What now, sir?’

‘Get the men back into cover,’ Straken replied. ‘Run wires between the trees. Get guns up on the power station roof with mutually supporting fields of fire. I want this cavern secured.’

‘It already is, colonel.’

‘Not to my standards, it isn’t. I want the men busy, you understand? No standing about, no whining. Working not shirking. Am I clear?’

To Straken’s surprise, Lavant straightened up and saluted. There was something strange about the man, Straken thought, but there was no denying that he was a good soldier. ‘Very clear, sir. But, colonel–’

‘What is it?’ Guardsmen trooped past, lascarbines held across their chests. ‘Pick it up, people!’ Straken barked. He lowered his voice. ‘Make it quick.’

‘We’re on our own, aren’t we? The invasion’s over, right?’

‘No,’ Straken said. ‘The invasion isn’t finished until we are. Now get going and look like you mean business. And send that damned commissar down here.’

Lavant disappeared into the dark. The men trooped past. An autocannon team carried their huge gun in pieces.

Morrell strode out of the shadows as if they had created him. He seemed even more like a commissar than usual: his cap pulled down lower over his eyes than before, his shoulders more set, his arms folded as though he were about to

dismiss a feeble excuse. ‘Colonel Straken.’

‘You killed one of my lieutenants back there,’ Straken said. ‘His name was Zandro, in case you didn’t know.’

‘I did. He was in dereliction of duty. He ordered a retreat without providing proof of its necessity. I was forced to carry out a field execution to prevent a rout. Regrettable, but–’

‘My men don’t rout, commissar.’

‘Anyone can rout, colonel. It’s my job to stop them. I was obeying Guard protocol.’

Straken glanced at the men hastening past. Some glanced at him; despite the retreat from the city gates, they looked at him with no malice or resentment, not even any doubt. *For now,* he reflected. For many of them, it had not sunk in. They hadn’t seen the captured tanks rolling into Dulma’lin, the sure sign that the Imperium’s army had been crushed.

One trooper, a tanned young man with dark, close-cropped hair, looked straight at Straken for a moment – and then his gaze flicked to the left, onto Morrell, and something more than disgust flashed in his eyes. The next moment he moved on, one man in a dozen platoons falling back to base.

‘Listen, commissar,’ Straken said. ‘Keep your head down and do what I say. I make the tactical decisions here.’

‘Of course. I wouldn’t want to intrude.’

You already have, Straken thought. *And ‘intrude’ is a pretty light term for it.*
‘Good. You won’t be too popular, that’s for sure.’

The commissar shrugged. ‘War isn’t a popularity contest, colonel. I didn’t come here to make friends.’

‘You don’t want to make enemies, either,’ Straken said, and he walked away.

Twenty-three hours had passed since the planned rendezvous with General Greiss’s invasion force. Almost an entire day of defeat. First, the loss of one of the drop-ships, and with it a tenth of the force – the old priest back on the *Radix Malorum* would have called that an omen. And now this: the failure of the invasion. Standing in the shadowy corridor that led into the main hall of the power station, Straken squared his shoulders and tried to make his face show only calm determination. Then he strode out to meet the troops.

The men waited in the main hall, packing it out. They stood against the walls six deep, the ones at the front sitting on the bare concrete. Their faces were tired and hard; they wanted good news but expected none.

More soldiers filled the viewing gallery. Morrell stood up there in a space of his own. None of the men would go near him. He looked like a roosting vulture, Straken thought as he stopped beside his captains at the far end of the room.

Civilians entered the hall, flanked by guards as though they were prisoners. First came Larn Tarricus, his bald head glistening. Behind him walked a woman in her mid-sixties, thin-faced and shrewd-looking. Her hair was long and white, and it gave her a feral quality. Straken couldn't decide whether she seemed more crazy than she did tough. Then there was a little spectacled priest with a startled mass of thick black hair, and a solid woman in a local defence force cap, the aquila dirty and tarnished. She looked as if she had gained most of her combat experience while drinking in bars. The rest of the civilians – Tarricus's allies and most trusted aides – were a ragtag bunch. One or two looked like born survivors, people skilled at hiding and making do. The others were like a random selection of the citizenry of any safe, civilised, hard-working world, if they had been rolled in dirt and badly fed for a few weeks.

'Hardly a pack of killers,' Lavant said. Along with Tanner, he stood at Straken's side.

The Dulma'lin contingent took up a space near the door. Straken gave them a moment to settle down, then banged his steel knuckles on the metal tabletop.

'Quiet!' Straken barked. 'Pipe down and listen up.'

He glanced around the room. Tanner's eyes flicked to the gallery, to Morrell. He looked back down again.

'Listen up,' Straken called again. The mass of people made the bad acoustics worse, and he had to raise his voice to just under a shout. 'For the benefit of the civilians, my name is Colonel Straken, and until I'm replaced or killed, I'm in charge of all military operations against the orks in Excelsis City – and that includes you.'

He looked around the room, at his own troops as well the civilians, meeting eyes until people glanced away.

'First, let me tell you a bit about ourselves. We are the Catachan Second. We may not look like the toy soldiers you see on the Administratum vids, but get this clear – we're about the hardest, toughest Guardsmen you are likely to see in your whole lives. If you're wondering what Catachan is like, let me tell you that it kills half its population before they're old enough to walk, let alone shave.

'I've been fighting traitors and xenos for nigh-on thirty years now, and I've taken some knocks, as you can see. But I've handed them out as well. I fight fierce, and I expect you to do the same, no matter the situation. Let me be

absolutely clear about this – I will not ask anyone under my command to do anything that I wouldn't do myself. Understand?'

He didn't give them the chance to complain. They watched him now, some more wary than others, but all attentive.

'I would expect any of you to tell me the truth, and I will extend you the same courtesy. So make no mistake, right now, we are knee-deep in ork-dung.

'The army that came to liberate Excelsis City, and probably Dulma'lin, is either broken or in retreat. All contact with the army group has been severed. The best we can hope for is that it is regrouping somewhere on the surface and will return, at times unknown. I am going to proceed on the basis that it has been completely destroyed.'

A noise came out of the civilians, somewhere between a sigh and a groan. Men exchanged glances. Someone cursed in the gallery. Straken heard the loud *ptoo* of a soldier spitting on the floor.

'Our orders were to capture and hold the Great Gate. We did that, and now the orks will know that there is a sizeable force of people able to fight them in the city. They know that if they find us, they'll get a fight out of it, and that means that they'll come looking. Make no mistake, waiting this out is not an option.

'You – all of you – and I are going to take the fight to the orks before they bring it to us. The orks have too many troops and too much armour to fight head-on. Instead, we will carry out guerrilla operations to weaken their hold on the city. We will cripple their morale, destroy their equipment and turn Excelsis into a killing ground. The orks have had things their own way for too long. You and I are going to take this city back for the Imperium, cave by cave, until there's nothing left to fight.'

An arm went up in the audience. Straken had not expected this. It was the white-haired woman. 'Question,' Straken said, pointing with his metal hand.

'Jocasta Ferrens, head of the Western miners' group and former deputy to the Dulma'lin senate,' she said. Her voice was scratchy but loud, like an old vox-phonograph. 'You talk a good talk, colonel. But how do you plan to do it? Where're the men, the guns, the gear to take the orks on? And say we do hit the orks hard – or rather you decide to. What then? It'll only draw their attention. And then we'll have every one of them on us. What're we supposed to do about that?'

Several survivors around her nodded and murmured agreement. Tarricus took out a rag and wiped sweat from his forehead. Among the soldiers, someone made a loud, muffled comment, and there were a few laughs. Straken couldn't

make out the words, but he knew what the Guardsmen would be thinking: typical stay-at-home civilians, cowering while the Guard did the hard work.

'Fair comment,' Straken replied, making his voice a little louder. He looked straight at Jocasta Ferrens. She did not look away. Whatever her faults might be, she didn't scare easily. 'Here's the first thing – we are taking this war to the orks together, all of us.'

'And if we don't?' she demanded. 'What'll you do then?'

'Why then,' he replied, 'I'll do it myself. But seeing how the orks have murdered and looted your city, smashed the hell out of your beloved miners' guild, shat in your temples and probably killed your friends in the senate into the bargain, I thought maybe you'd like to help.'

To his surprise, she grinned wolfishly and said something to Tarricus. The guildsman nodded, still sweating as if waiting for a sentence of death.

'And now you ought to get to know my people.' Straken pointed to his comrades. 'This is Captain Tanner. If you want to know anything about jungle fighting, long knives and drinking beer, he's your man.'

'Damn right,' Tanner said, and there were laughs from the men he knew best.

'And this is Captain Lavant. Traps, bombs and sniping are his thing. I'm guessing you miners know how to set a fuse – you'll have lots to talk about. These two gentlemen are going to educate you in the ways of killing orks. In return, you will be giving them and their people a tour of the city. The first thing is to find out what we're up against. Then we'll figure out the tools we've got to do it. And after that, we'll get it done. Cavern by cavern, starting with the fields and hab-blocks, we will put the fear of the Emperor into the xenos. And then we'll take the city back.

'Catachans, this won't be easy, but compared to some of the stuff I've seen fighting tyranids and renegades, this is nothing. I will be continuing with my mission to liberate the city, and I expect the same from you. I want this base and the guild HQ secured. I need scouting teams to check the entire lower area of the city, concentrating on the residential areas. I will be giving tasks to all officers to be carried out immediately. Any man found sitting on his arse or not pitching in enough will answer to *me*.

'Civilians – first, I want you people to get me every map you have of this city, in the caves and on the surface. Second, you're miners. That means that you've got explosives. I want to know the amount and location of all the equipment and people under your command.

'We regroup here in one standard day. I want scouting teams ready to head off

by then. Civilians will provide maps and rosters as good as you can make them in that time. Any questions? Good. Now, we've got a lot of work to do and a lot of orks to kill – so move!'

Straken watched them leave the room. The sound of bootsteps and low voices filled the hall. In the gallery, Morrell's trench coat merged with the shadows as he moved away.

Straken caught Lavant's eye. 'Get some men together – a dozen should do it – and go back with the miners. Tell them you're there to help get things in order. Make sure they don't just muck around.'

'Right.'

Lavant gave a low whistle, and several men turned to him at once – demolitions men from the looks of them, Straken thought. Lavant moved forward to talk to them, and suddenly stopped. He froze, staring into the gallery.

Straken followed Lavant's gaze. Three men stood up there, talking. They looked like snipers: two wore cloaks, the other had on a set of image-enhancement goggles. The two cloaked men were talking enthusiastically about something, but the third did not speak. Below the goggles, the sniper's face had a strange, frozen quality, as if it were not quite real. Then the trio turned and walked towards the stairs leading out of the hall.

Lavant was sickly pale. He stood there for a second, then seemed to wake and turned to his men. At once the captain was back to normal. The whole incident had taken less than three seconds.

As the last of the soldiers began to file out, Straken looked at Tanner and said, 'A word, captain.'

Tanner nodded and stepped back. From the look on his face, he knew what was going to be said.

'I gather Zandro was a friend of yours.'

'You gather right.' Tanner glanced around the room, as though he were already bored. Straken wondered whether anything he said would have any effect on him.

'I spoke to the commissar. He thought Zandro was retreating without orders, apparently.'

'I heard,' Tanner said. His voice was flat and dead.

'I don't want any trouble among the men, Tanner. Not while we're stuck in this hole. We've got enough orks to worry about without turning on our own people.'

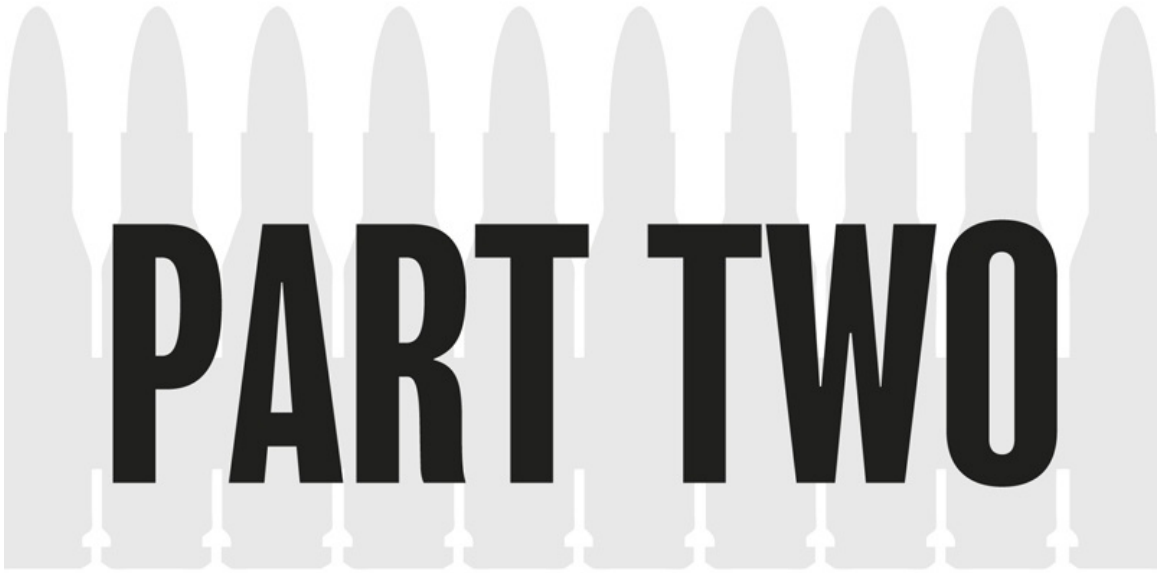
‘Since when was a commissar one of our people?’ Tanner’s voice was low and surly. Hopefully, Straken thought, he was resigned to the situation. Some hope.

‘The way I see it, this is between you and him. I don’t want people thinking that my officers are at each other’s throats.’ He paused. ‘Emperor knows this place is dangerous enough as it is. With so many orks around, a man could just disappear. Understand?’

Tanner nodded. ‘Yes, I understand.’

‘Good. Now go and help the others.’

The captain walked towards the doors. He stopped just before the exit. ‘It won’t be a problem,’ he said, and he walked out.



PART TWO

9.

Straken's first instinct was to fight back, and he knew that the men felt the same. But against an enemy with the numbers and equipment of the orks, you had to work out where to attack. He had hunted enough feral grox on Catachan to know that it was death to simply run back in – and he had seen enough other regiments making 'glorious' last stands to know how much good it tended to do.

Lavant came back from the mining guild camp with good news: the miners had a large cache of high-quality explosives. The orks had swept through the caves, looking only for vehicles and people to kill, and the miners had hidden deep in the dark, where the xenos feared to go. Guildmaster Tarricus thought that they hadn't known what the crates of 'Hi.ex. administratum' were.

Twenty-eight hours after the meeting in the power station, Tarricus gave Lavant a full estimate of the people and equipment under his control. His men numbered just over a hundred and their weapons were feeble, but there was more to it than that. Straken knew the survivors were starting to organise themselves and to think of themselves in terms of fighting men. If that could continue, they might become something more than a liability.

Straken himself checked the defences and sent out teams to prowl the local area. The forest around the power station was Catachan territory, and it was time to consider expanding. The trick was not to hold ground, at least not in the obvious, static way Morrell would have wanted, but to make a large area too dangerous for the orks.

Tanner set out on the first scouting mission. With ten men, the captain headed west to check the lower hab-caverns and look for survivors. Straken ordered him to leave for four days, assessing the enemy in the nearest two caverns and trying to weigh up their next move. With a bit of luck, Straken reflected, a few days away would cool his rage a little.

For his part, the commissar kept as low a profile as a man of his rank and temperament could. He still did the rounds, glowering and arrogant, his

shoulders permanently squared as if waiting for a fight, but the attack did not come. Men moved away from him, kept their mouths closed around him and cursed him behind his back. When not actually checking the defences, he took long stretches on watch, one hand on his bolt pistol, waiting for attack. Straken saw him standing like a gargoyle at the edge of the power station, as if daring an enemy to snipe at him, and wondered if the commissar was more mad than brave.

On the afternoon of the sixth day, leaning over a table lit by a flickering lumen-strip, Straken consulted his maps. He drew a red line around the forest. Soon, he promised himself, he'd widen that line until it covered the entire city, like a red cord around the orks. Then he'd tighten the cord, and choke the invading greenskins to death. Soon, somehow.

A soot-blackened shuttle slid into the docking bay of the *Radix Malorum* and its aquila-shaped wings folded into the landing position. As the ground crew ran forward, the side hatch opened and the great bulk of Nork Deddog squeezed out.

The ogryn looked around the hold, sniffed the smoke-filled air and glowered at an approaching tech-priest. 'Safe,' he grunted, and he lowered his ripper gun.

General Greiss followed him out, his dust-covered boots clanging on the ramp. Three tech-priests ignored him and hurried to the shuttle, eager to check its efficiency.

The hold, six hundred metres square, was in disorder. Half a dozen landing-craft lay in various states of repair on the plasteel floor. Most had been riddled by the heavy cannon fire the orks used; several had taken hits from energy weapons. The landers had been on the edge of the deployment zone, for the most part, and had escaped the worst of it. A modified Sentinel stood beside a wrecked troop ship, holding up a piece of twisted fuselage to allow soldiers to emerge: plasma had sealed the hatches shut. Three growling tractors dragged a massive engine away. Metal squealed, and under it, men called out and screamed.

An officer of the Selvian Dragoons ran over and saluted. Greiss found their uniforms hard to tell apart. He had never got to know them much – he realised that he never would now. 'General. Lieutenant-Colonel Frayling reporting, sir. Colonel Richello's up in medicae, sir. Head wound – it doesn't look good.' He glanced round the hold. A Chimera helped pull a battered Leman Russ out of its drop-ship. The ship looked like a cathedral after a bombing raid. 'We've pulled as much materiel as we can off-world. The Navy's given the order to fall back

out of orbit as soon as you've arrived.'

'Good. You're doing a good job, Frayling. I'm glad you made it out.' There was dust on the colonel's uniform, Greiss saw. The feather in the man's cap had broken, and dangled down at a foolish angle. Greiss walked away from the shuttle, Nork by his side. 'What're our losses?'

Lieutenant-Colonel Frayling licked his lips. 'It's… it's hard to tell at the moment, general. But I've been counting my tanks back in – and it's heavy, heavy.' He glanced away, and for a moment Greiss thought the man was going to curse. 'The orks got the jump on us, sir. There was nothing we could do.'

'So I saw.' It had been so damned simple. The orks had used the storms on Dulma'lin to hide their approach. At their height the xenos had raised a purpose-built vehicle from the planet's surface, a misshapen mix of spaceship and aircraft parts, built so that its underside covered as wide an area as possible. They had flown it through the storm, over the Guard tanks as they started to disperse – and cut the engines. The ork craft had been destroyed, but it had done its work: entire battalions had been flattened by the impact. Greiss could see them clearly in his mind, the numberless ork soldiers swarming from the wreckage to finish the job.

Greiss felt a twinge of pain in his knee, and quickly transferred his weight to the other foot. *Why in the Emperor's name did I go down there at all?* he wondered. Some vainglorious idea of leading from the front, no doubt. Too much hanging around men like Straken. Catachan habits died hard.

A medicae team ran in and got to work, trying to drag men out of one of the transport ships. A high-ranking Mechanicus priest put out its metal arm to bar their way. An argument began.

It was time to ask the question Greiss had been dreading. He felt his stomach twitch at the thought, his heart seemed to rise in his meagre chest. 'What about the Catachan Second? Did they make it back?'

Frayling said, 'No, sir. They didn't.' He paused a moment. 'General, the Navy wants to pull out of orbit. There's artillery on the planet that could breach orbit, sir, not to mention ork ships.'

Greiss kept on walking. The lift to the command deck seemed miles away. Somewhere to the left, the vox-comm reminded anyone listening that standard penalties for cowardice and weapon loss still applied.

He stared across the hold. The argument between the medicae team and the Mechanicus priest had intensified. The lead medic was shouting and pointing. The tech-priest had simply raised the volume of its artificial voice.

'Look at this,' Greiss said. 'Get that metal-faced priest out of the way. I want

the medics to have a clear path, Frayling.'

'The Mechanicus won't like it, sir.'

The old man stopped and whirled around so quickly that Nork lunged in to steady him. 'I don't care!' Greiss snapped. 'I sent them down there, and I'd like some of them back! And tell the commissars that I want to speak to them. Maybe they'll listen to me before trying to shoot half their own side. Do you understand?'

Astonished, Frayling said, 'Yes, general.'

'Good. If anyone is bothered by that, they can come and discuss it with me personally.'

'Yeah,' said Nork. 'And me.'

'Emperor, what a mess. Let's just hope the leashes don't make it any worse.' Greiss looked away and resumed his walk towards the lifts. 'I blame myself for this,' he muttered.

'No!' Nork Deddog cried. 'It was the orks what did it. Hate orks,' he added. 'Gonna smash 'em.'

'General,' Frayling said, 'I need to know about that order. The Navy will want–'

'I know.' Greiss seemed to shrink. Suddenly, he felt nothing like the leader of an invading army, even a defeated one. He was just a weary old man, about to betray a friend. 'Pull back.'

Tanner's team returned to base with five civilians. 'These four we found hiding out in the ruins,' he explained, pointing to a grimy family. 'They used to run a repair station, mending the machines for the mushroom farms.'

Straken nodded. 'Useful. Send them up to the others. See if we can get some of these mining trucks moving again. What about the orks?'

'The main vault's full of 'em. Packed full. There's a few orks in the hab-caverns out west of here, but if you've got a load of armour and a big mouth, it looks like the centre is the place to be. I reckon the city must've emptied out when we went to the gates, otherwise we'd have been fighting all the way there.'

'That makes sense. Killzkar would have wanted them all out ready to fight when our army arrived.'

'Yeah. That's the other thing – they're bringing in tanks. Our tanks, hundreds of 'em. Some I saw were just scrap, but others were almost undamaged. I didn't stay long but I saw Chimeras, Leman Russes, a couple of things I didn't even recognise – and not one of them driven by the Guard.' He sighed. 'The army

took a bad kicking out there. Hell, I'd be surprised if there're any Guardsmen left on the planet except us. They must've got the drop on our people in a bad way. I suppose there's one good thing about it.'

'What?'

'Well, they're too busy to come looking for us. Right now, they're pretty distracted with the stuff they captured. The main vault's like a riot. They're driving tanks round, getting drunk, fighting each other, smashing the place up… for now.'

'All the more reason to go looking for them before they decide to come looking for us. You find anything else?'

Tanner nodded at the civilians he'd brought in. 'The girl here's the strange one,' he said, pointing. The child wasn't much more than ten, Straken thought, although it was hard to tell. She had cut her hair short, and wore dark overalls and a laspistol on her belt, as if someone had dressed her up as a soldier for a joke. 'We found her further in, near some kind of vox-station. Says she was with the "father". He got angry so she ran away.'

'Her father?'

'No. Sounds like a priest, somewhere out in the ruins with a bunch of followers. A Ministorum preacher might be a good thing to have. He'd put a bit of fire into the civvies. Might be useful when the time comes.'

'I'll bear it in mind.'

Tanner glanced over Straken's shoulder, searching for something. His eyes scanned the dark behind the colonel, and then looked back. Straken had a good idea who he was looking for.

Straken said, 'I'm going to take a trip out. I want to see the main vaults and find out what's going on there. You're coming too.'

'Fine. I'll need to get some gear together.'

Good, Straken thought. *The sooner both of us are hunting orks, the better.* Besides, if Tanner was going to try to take revenge on the commissar, the last place he would want to do it was the middle of camp. No, if Morrell died it would be somewhere quiet, on some patrol. He would be snatched away, apparently by orks, or killed in a freak cave-in, or would simply disappear.

'I want a good guide,' Straken said. 'That means you. And bring some good soldiers. Fresh people, good at going quietly.'

Tanner grinned. 'Now I see. Hunting party, is it?'

'Something like that. Get some sleep and put a team together. We'll head off at oh-seven-hundred.'

‘All right. It’s time we got some killing in.’

‘Damned right. Believe me, the orks are going to hurt before I’m through.’

‘Before *we’re* through.’

Straken headed back into the power station, past the network of traps and tripwires strung between the white trunks of the fungal trees.

Lavant had taken one of the old offices for his demolitions teams. He had salvaged rolls of paper from a wrecked servitor-scribe, and now the walls and tables were covered in lists and maps.

As Straken entered the room, he saw the captain bent over a pile of papers. He seemed to be cross-referencing two hand-drawn charts, making lists in his neat handwriting.

Lavant certainly looked like a Catachan, but sometimes Straken wondered whether he thought like one at all.

He coughed and the captain looked up. ‘Colonel Straken.’

‘How’s it going, Lavant?’

‘Very well, thank you.’ He turned the chart around. ‘This shows the materiel I’ve been able to source from the civilians. Dulma’lin might not have had many soldiers, but it’s got a hell of a lot of explosives. Larn Tarricus’s people have their guild supplies further down the road, and that senator who attended the meeting – Jocasta Ferrens, she’s called – has a second stash, over to the west. With that amount of gear, we could do some real damage.’

Straken looked at the map. ‘That’s a lot of dead orks.’

‘Absolutely.’ Lavant smiled and pointed to a box on the floor. ‘That’s a sample I brought up to test. You run an electric current through it and boom.’

‘This stuff?’ Straken prodded the box with his boot.

Lavant stood up. ‘Don’t touch it, please,’ he said, his voice a little tight.

‘I thought you said it needed a current to explode.’

‘Well, yes, but let’s just be careful, all right? It’s been in storage for a fair while.’

‘I’m heading off with Tanner to check the main vaults. You’re in charge while I’m gone.’

‘Right.’

Straken tapped the chart. ‘I want this put into action while I’m gone. I want Tarricus’s guild outpost turned into a second main base, so if we lose the power station we’ve got somewhere to fall back to. That means fortifying it and dividing the gear. Put the Sentinels wherever there’s a workshop, in case we

need repairs.’

Lavant nodded.

‘Get the civilians moving. Have them do bayonet drill, morning prayers, whatever works. Just don’t let them stand around and mope. Make sure they know that we’re not hiding from the orks, we’re creeping up on them. And you know that tunnel between here and the guild buildings?’

‘The one that kid showed us?’

‘Yes. Get it cleared and under our control. We’ll use it to bring up supplies.’

Lavant pulled a lho-stick out of his combat vest. ‘I’ve had my demo teams working on getting the mining trucks working. Some of their machine-spirits are in a bad way, but there’s a couple still running. We can use them to move the explosives down to the power station.’

‘Good thinking. Keep them busy, Lavant. Busy and keen.’

Lavant flicked him a neat salute. ‘Yes, sir.’

‘And ease down a little. Don’t get wound up, just get the job done.’

10.

The ork looked like brutality made flesh. It wore a chipped steel helmet like a deformed pot, and between the metal visor and its protruding mantrap of a lower jaw, two bloodshot eyes glared at the ruined buildings around it. Its big hands clutched a crude, blocky gun, the greasy barrel wrapped with rags.

Straken grabbed it from behind. His metal arm slipped around its throat and he stepped back, tugging it off balance, as his other hand drove his fang-knife into the side of the alien's neck. He hauled it into the shadows, the ork thrashing in his grip, but he knew that the thing was as good as finished. Its death throes subsided, and Straken let the brute drop.

Tanner had caught the ork's gun to stop it clattering on the ground; now he looked at the weapon as if it were some unwholesome insect. 'More than a beast, less than a man,' he said.

'What?' Straken wiped his blade on the ork's coarse fatigues.

'Something I once heard a preacher say.' He put the gun down a little way from its former owner. 'A dead ork is a good ork – that's my sermon for today.'

'Then let's see if he brought his friends,' Straken replied.

They moved on, quiet and quick, keeping to the shadows. The ten Catachans advanced between rows of empty hab-blocks, six storeys high. The ground level shops had been looted, but not thoroughly. That was one of the few advantages with fighting orks, Straken thought as he crept through what had once been a clothing store: they were deadly, but disorganised. Rage made them chaotic. Perhaps that was why they had to fight other races – to stop them turning on each other. Even when they were winning, they would fight among themselves. Combat was just in their veins.

Broken glass crunched softly under heavy boots. Tanner paused to take a bearing, and Straken watched the way for him. 'This'll take us north-west,' Tanner explained.

They crept through a dingy arcade and into a large shop selling candles,

folding triptych shrines and cheap devotional tat. The remains of an Ecclesiarchy vending permit hung like a torn flag from the wall. The orks had smashed the place up with unexpected vigour. Perhaps they had been driven into a fit of hatred by the pictures of the saints and the Emperor – or maybe they had been angered by the lack of anything good to eat.

'Nothing,' Tanner said as they entered the rear of the shop. 'The Guard took most of the population with them on their last recruiting drive. Orks must've done for the rest.'

Straken heard a metallic clatter behind him and whipped around. One of the Catachans, a young man with bleached white hair, froze in the act of pocketing a gold-edged pocket-viewer showing the Tribulations of Sebastian Thor.

'The saints won't like it if you don't pay,' Straken said. 'Nor will I.'

The lad nodded and put the viewer back.

There might have been no sign of the enemy, but it was best not to use the roads. Cutting through shops and houses was the easiest and most direct way. They went carefully, as they would have done through jungle, wary of traps.

The squad spent the evening on the second floor of a hab-block, opposite a burned-out Adeptus Mechanicus station. They rested in shifts, in the empty apartment of a family long since recruited for the Ryza warzone. Straken checked his arm, using the little tool kit in his combat vest, and poured drips of sanctified oil into the hinges. He slept in a battered armchair, shotgun across his lap.

Thirty minutes into his shift, Straken heard sounds from the window. He stood up, walked to the side of the window and listened.

An engine grunted and rumbled a street away. Straken waited, and heard ork speech. They growled and spat as if imitating the noise of their vehicle. He looked around the windowsill, bionic eye zooming in.

A gang of orks were ransacking the Mechanicus workshop. An officer lumbered in the middle of them, a great hunched thing in an apron and bulky goggles. A gretchin scuttled around its legs like an excited child, pointing and chittering.

Straken stood there, watching them and wondering if the Imperium would ever be free of the orks. There was a story, whispered between superstitious Guardsmen when the priests and commissars were nowhere near, that the orks were a twisted reflection of mankind, an opposite version spewed out of the warp. Straken didn't believe it, but at times they were like a cruel parody of men.

Men without any of the virtues, he thought, driven by anger and evil glee.

The big ork hunted through the broken machinery. It seemed to be some kind of mechanic. It barked orders to its guards, and between them they began to carry objects out of the workshop. Straken saw two of them haul out a stiff figure like a half-finished mannequin, and realised that they were taking out the remains of servitors. With the organic parts burned away, the servitors looked like scaffolding in the shape of men.

Straken felt a rush of energy, the need to run and fight. It was not fear, but a sense of readiness, as though some combat drug had begun to seep into his veins. He flexed the fingers of his metal hand. Then he turned and crossed the room.

Tanner lay on a wooden couch, boots up on the armrest. Straken prodded him, and the captain snapped awake. Together they crept back to the window.

'Put three men with lasguns up here, giving covering fire,' Straken whispered. 'The rest of us go across.'

Tanner nodded, his eyes gleaming in the dim light, and stepped back.

The men woke quietly. Straken stayed by the window, hearing them move behind him: the soft sound of boots, the clicking of power packs into guns. Three bulky men approached.

'On my shot you fire,' Straken said. 'Keep the orks busy till we hit them.'

The others waited for him at the top of the stairs. Now the need to fight had arisen, they looked ready and dangerous. Keeping low, Straken crept downstairs into the hab-block's lobby.

He peered through the ornate handrail, through the lobby windows and across the road. The ork mech was still growling orders to its assistants. As Straken watched, one of the ork soldiers brought it a metal drum, from which a length of bent tubing protruded. It looked like an exhaust. The creature snatched the object, turned it over in its hands and hurled it away with what sounded like a curse.

Straken amplified his night-vision. What the hell were the orks looking for?

With a low growl, an ork vehicle rolled up to the front of the workshop. It was an ugly, stripped-down six-wheeler, open at the back. The driver emerged and lumbered over to his comrades, and a grunting conversation ensued.

'With me,' Straken whispered, and he crept across the lobby to the front door. He glanced over his shoulder. Several of the raiding party had slung their lasguns and wielded machetes and knives. The rest had fixed their bayonets. There was no need to ask if they were ready to attack.

Straken put his hand on the door. 'Don't let any of them escape,' he said.

He yanked the door open and ran out.

A shape moved at the back of the truck. ‘Hey!’ Straken called, and as the ork turned he blasted it full in the chest. The shot tossed it against the side of the truck and it flopped onto the ground.

Two orks dropped the broken servitor they carried and went for their pistols. Straken shot one, throwing it aside, and Sergeant Pharranis leaped onto the second ork, pinning its arms while a Guardsman drove his blade into its chest.

Straken’s men fired from the window behind him, lasguns cracking and hissing. A shot punched through an ork’s shoulder and, instead of flinching, it bellowed at the windows like an ape issuing a challenge. A second later a las-beam caught it straight between the eyes.

Blue light flared from the back of the workshop, illuminating it like a metal cave. A man cried out and fell. Straken ran into the workshop – and something jumped at him from the shadows, scratching and jabbering, a scrawny, monkey-like creature scrabbling for his eyes. Cursing, he fended an arm off with his shotgun, reached out and crushed the gretchin’s head in his metal fist. His men charged past, Tanner at their head, and in a flurry of blades the ork mech was knocked down and hacked to death.

Gunfire ripped out of a neighbouring building. Straken ducked behind the truck and peered round the side. A fat, bare-chested alien waddled out of the doorway to a hab-block, carrying a bipod stubber. The weapon bucked and spat, flames roaring out of ventilation holes down the length of the barrel. Straken’s men in the window threw themselves down, and the ork gurgled with laughter.

Straken glanced left, and saw Tanner and one of his team finishing off a downed ork with their knives. He pulled a grenade from his belt, tugged out the pin and rolled it under the truck.

The fat ork was enjoying the sound of its gun much too much to notice the grenade hitting the side of its boot. The blast threw it off its feet and knocked the stubber out of its hands, but didn’t kill it. A moment later, as the alien sat up, Straken ran in and finished it with a single shotgun blast.

The last greenskin made a run for the truck. It got halfway into the cab before las-fire from the hab-block hit its back. It fell, thrashing and snarling, and one of Tanner’s men stepped in and killed it with a blow that almost split its head in half.

And then the street was silent. Straken wiped his metal hand on a rag and cursed the damned gretchin for getting its filthy blood on him. Then he saw a man lying beside the wall, and remembered the blast of blue fire.

The shot had been plasma, from the look of it: a mercifully swift kill straight through the chest. Two soldiers took point while the team dragged the ork bodies into the workshop. They placed the dead man carefully to one side; the orks they dumped in a heap at the back. Tanner took off his bandana while one of the soldiers recited the Emperor's Grace. Straken collected the dead man's dog tags and prepared to move on.

Tanner stood over the dead mech, both disgusted and intrigued. 'What is all that stuff on its face?' he said as Straken approached.

Straken shook his head. 'Tech stuff. Some kind of mechanic, maybe.'

Tanner made a low whistle. 'An ork enginseer. What was he doing here?'

'Looking for something. I don't know what.' Straken bent down. The ork's apron was covered in pockets. A folded scrap of paper protruded from the largest one.

'What's that?' Tanner asked as Straken unfolded it. It was a map, hand-drawn, and covered in scrawl as if a centipede had dipped itself in ink and marched over the paper.

'Looks like a list of places to loot. We'll check it later.' Straken tossed the paper back down. He turned to the men. 'Let's go.'

They left the area quickly and headed north. If any of the soldiers were tired from having their rest interrupted by the orks, they did not show it.

The city around them was not so much ruined as left to decay. Many of the shops meant nothing to the orks and had been left alone. Others seemed to have been damaged purely out of spite. Passing through a civic hall decorated with banners and iron cherubim, they found a stash of canned food that some citizen had been unable to retrieve. 'Grox meat,' Tanner said, peering at the labels. 'No wonder no one's touched it.'

By half seven in the morning, local time, the artificial sunlight lit up the city, and the empty homes looked sad as well as menacing. Straken found his eyes flicking to the windows and doorways, sure that the orks would lack the skill to lie in wait but uneasy nonetheless. He thought of Miral, where he had lost his arm: the cities cut into its ever-encroaching jungle, and the fierce, cold eldar that he had hunted there, creatures that killed relentlessly according to their hard code of honour, regarding men as less than apes.

They reached a courtyard. In the centre, a statue of Lord Solar Macharius raised a staff to the heavens. As they walked around the edge of the yard, keeping to the shadows, a great trumpet-blast rose up from the west.

Guns flicked up. Men braced themselves to fire. They glanced around for incoming enemies, checking for cover. As they stood there, ready to repel an assault, the trumpets sounded once again, and marching music blared across the habs.

Straken was astonished to realise that he recognised the tune. It was 'The Emperor Gathers His Own', a popular battle-hymn. He listened as the sound swelled around them.

'It's the Guard,' one of Tanner's men breathed. 'They've come back for us!'

Sergeant Pharranis spat onto the pavement and tightened the strap of his plasma gun. 'Stow it. I'll believe that when I damn well see 'em.'

Straken leaned across to Tanner. 'Did you hear this when you were out here?'

'No. Not at all.'

The trumpets stopped abruptly, mid-blast, as a recording was cut off. The sudden silence was unnerving. 'That kid you brought back mentioned a father,' Straken said. 'Maybe it's a church. Let's get to higher ground. We must be near the cavern entrance – we ought to be able to see into the next vault soon.'

Tanner pointed to the north-west. 'There's a vox tower over there. We didn't go any further than it, though. When we reached it, I took my people back to hunt orks in the lower hab-zone.'

'Fair enough. We'll use it as a vantage point.'

The walls of the cavern, usually kilometres apart, began to close in on them. That meant that they were approaching the entrance to another vast cave. Straken felt wary, not just because of the orks. The sheer unexpectedness of the hymn blasting across the rooftops had put him on edge.

They heard nothing more until they reached the vox tower. A sign across the entrance read *Statio Vox Minutori*: the broadcast station for the mining guilds. The tower itself was seven storeys high, rising to a point from the cavern floor like a plasteel stalagmite. A wad of communications gear protruded from the top of the building, like a copse of dead trees. The windows in the control room at the top of the tower were dark.

'Looks like the power's down,' a trooper said. He was missing one eye, the pupil white. He pointed to the control room. 'Long way up.'

'You've got legs, Orlow,' Straken replied. 'We'll take the stairs. I'll go first. The rest of you keep up and be glad you're not hauling a load of bionics around.'

Straken ripped the lock out of the side door with his metal hand and immediately began to climb the access stairs. There were no signs of violence. From the looks of it, most of the personnel had been taken in the Guard's

recruitment drive. Straken climbed quickly and didn't stop to let the others rest. After all, anything that Iron Hand Straken might put himself through, he was entitled to ask of his men.

At the top of the staircase, seven floors above the street, Straken finally stopped. The team shared a ration stick and swigged from their canteens.

Tanner pointed to the door leading out of the stairwell. 'Look at that lock. It's been picked.'

Pharranis lowered his flask. 'By orks?'

Tanner was right. There were scratches on the metal. They looked recent.

Straken clicked his fingers. Heads turned; the men straightened up and came to life. Pharranis slipped his flask back in his thigh pocket and stepped to one side of the door. Tanner took up his knife, ready to run in.

Straken turned the handle and pushed the door open.

Three bodies hung from the ceiling by their heels: two men and a woman. They all

wore uniforms, the black and purple of the Dulma'lin local defence force. Their arms hung down, as though they were about to dive into a pool. Straken tapped Tanner's arm and gestured for him to stay put.

Straken crept out – not towards the corpses, but around the edge of the room, keeping to the shadows as best as he could. Banks of controls filled the walls. A couple of diodes winked and glimmered, still running.

Straken gestured and Tanner's men crept forwards to join him, splitting into three groups to cover the room.

The colonel stepped into the centre of the room. Behind him, Tanner whispered, 'Careful…'

The nearest dead man had been killed by a single cut across the throat. It was a hideous wound, but it was neat work for an ork: they would often hack their victims apart in a fit of bloodlust. Straken paused, not able to place what was missing from the scene. He remembered the body of the soldier killed in the fight with the ork mech, and realised what had been taken from the dangling bodies.

Their collars had been torn open. They had no dog tags. With their shirts ripped like that, the tags ought to be dangling past their faces.

Straken looked around the room, at the consoles and the floor. Without touching the bodies, he squatted down and looked into the dead, empty faces.

They had all been scalped, just behind the hairline. It looked like a gory version of a monk's tonsure. It was easy to miss when they hung upside-down.

Orks often took trophies, but whole heads and hands were their usual choice. Straken stepped away, shaking his head. ‘Xenos savages,’ he said. ‘Let’s get these people down. Tanner, mark this place on your map. I want an observation point up here.’

Two men cut the bodies down and laid them out neatly on the floor. A third Guardsman checked the room. A desk of switches and dials controlled the broadcast apparatus.

Pharranis ran a hand over his bald, dented scalp as he rooted through a rack of vox-phonograph tubes. ‘“Mass for the Golden Throne”,’ he read, slowly and carefully. ‘“Symphony of the Thousand Acolytes”. Who the hell listens to this kind of stuff?’

‘Just get on with it, sergeant,’ Straken replied, and he turned to the window.

He boosted his vision and looked out across the roofs outside. From their vantage point, he could see over the hab-blocks of the entire cavern. Most had small mushroom-gardens on their flat roofs. A few halls and workshops broke up the endless rows of apartment buildings. Nothing looked inhabited. Wondering where the music had come from, he turned to the north.

In a broad street, half hidden by the surrounding buildings, a river of vehicles was travelling north-west. Straken increased the amplification, feeling a twinge of pain behind his eye, and his stomach tensed. He was looking at a column of tanks.

There could be no doubt about it. They were the tanks from the Selvian Dragoons. Sheet metal had been welded to them, trophies fixed to the gun barrels and the turrets, but they were Guard vehicles. He was looking at the looted remnants of the army that had come to free Dulma’lin.

Seeing them, he realised that he had hoped that he was wrong, that he had made some mistake and that General Greiss’s armoured formations would roll in and smash the orks, just as they had been promised. There was no chance of that now.

Just you and me now, Killzkar. Not even a full regiment of us and who knows how many thousands of you.

Men had been tied to the front of a Chimera, strung between the guns. As Straken watched, one of them struggled to free himself. It was a feeble effort; the man’s uniform was filthy, his weary face streaked with muck. He lowered his magnoculars and tried to push the Guardsman out of his mind. The chances were that the orks would simply butcher their prisoners, or perhaps put them to work; had Straken had a sniper rifle, he would have killed the man to stop him falling

into ork hands.

Tanner stood beside him. His round face was calm and hard, as if at a funeral.

Straken said, 'You see that?'

Down in the city, the tiny tanks rolled past as if they were on a conveyor belt. Tanner said, 'How could I miss it?'

'They're headed north,' Straken said. He turned away from the window with an effort. Part of him felt guilty for doing that; it felt like he was sealing the fate of the man tied to the Chimera. *Of course I'm not,* he told himself. That had been decided a long while ago. 'Get the map out.'

The soldiers pulled a table over and laid the map out. Straken tapped their location with a metal finger. 'Gather round. We're here. I want this tower permanently manned. We'll set up a supply route between here and the guild outpost, rig it with traps and make sure none of the orks get down here. Our next task is going to be to spread our influence from the power station and the guild hideout up here, to make the whole cavern south of here a no-go area for the orks.'

'Not a problem. Unless the orks bring those tanks back down here, that is.'

'I don't think they will.' Straken swept his hand up the map. 'Ever go up against an ork tank?'

'Course,' Tanner said, and there was a murmur of agreement from the men.

'They can't field anything without cutting it about first. So, I reckon they've got a workshop somewhere to the north. And,' he added, tapping the map with his steel finger, 'that's where the big manufactoria are.'

Tanner peered at the map. 'Specus Aedificata. Looks like that's the name of the whole factory cavern.'

Straken said, 'I'd bet that map we found on the ork enginseer was of places to loot. They'll have taken the tanks they captured to the manufactoria, and they're looking for other gear to use. That means that the manufactoria's our main target. But first, I want this whole area scouted and purged of orks. We don't need to go in as a horde – in fact, the quieter we do it, the better. Ten twenty-man teams ought to do it, with the Sentinels as backup. They'll start to leave it alone when their patrols stop coming back.'

'Yeah,' Guardsman Orlow said, 'the greenskins are too lazy to do a good patrol.'

Tanner nodded. 'I like it. Take 'em out nice and quiet. They'll never know what's hit 'em.'

Straken nodded. 'From what I've seen, there's not much in the hab-zones that

the orks'll want to steal. That means we can take them without too much trouble – quietly.' He swept his hand across the cavern. 'Then we set up food and ammo caches, say, here and here. There're shops and defence force stores, probably a couple of enforcer buildings we could fortify.' He moved his hand north, the metal fingers spreading over the industrial caverns as if to grab them. 'And once the hab-zones are ours, we'll launch an attack on the Specus Aedificata. Because if we're going to conquer this place, it'll be a hell of a lot easier without the orks having armour on their side. If we smash up their armouries, we'll only have the foot soldiers to contend with.'

No tanks, but foot soldiers by the tens of thousands, Straken thought. Once again he felt the urge to step out of cover, to lead his men in one great charge against the aliens – and suppressed it. *Not yet,* he thought, *not here*. There would be a time to burst from cover and give the ork leaders the surprise they so greatly deserved – but later.

He suspected that the men around him were thinking the same, but none of them showed it. He felt pleased, oddly comfortable in the knowledge that he had a plan and the men to put it into action.

'Five of you are staying here,' he added. 'Get the vox-comm working and keep in contact. Let us know what's going on with the orks. We'll bring more people up.' He turned towards the door. For a moment Straken recalled the man strapped to the Chimera, and thought that if he could not save the soldier, he would at least have the satisfaction of punishing the orks for their crimes. There might not be mercy for the Guardsmen of General Greiss's army, but there would at least be justice.

11.

I have been on – or more precisely under – Dulma'lin for three months and six days, local time. We have been busy since the destruction of the invasion fleet, but the days have gone slowly – painfully slowly – for me.

I had anticipated that Straken would want to attack the orks, and I was not wrong. His reputation for ferocity seems deserved. But he has more self-control than I had expected. I had thought that, since we are clearly outnumbered and almost certainly going to die in this place, he would have wanted to end it with a final charge against the enemy, taking as many of them with us as possible in the Emperor's name.

Instead, his plan is to take the city by stealth. Units have infiltrated several of the caverns, hunting out and killing orks whenever they venture in to loot. By now, about a third of Excelsis City is 'ours', in that the orks do not go there, either out of fear or the knowledge that there is nothing worth looting there.

But our numbers are low. We lost a tenth of our force to an accident even before we reached the city. Seventy-three more were put out of action in the fight for the gates. Although we have the advantage of surprise, the orks still take their toll on us. And it seems that they are getting harder to kill. Over the last month, men have disappeared from patrols; several have stumbled into traps or simply vanished. I find it hard to credit the orks with such skill, but do they have soldiers able to go as quietly as us?

We move almost constantly. The civilian militia train in the rear

bases; the Catachans move gear between safe-houses in the forward areas. Straken believes that if one stash is captured, the loss will not be too great. His aim is to slip between the orks' fingers when they reach for us, and then to stab them when their backs are turned. And I cannot deny that so far it has worked. Twice, whole groups of orks have come into the hab-caverns, perhaps looking for us. Once they simply gave up after a day and left; the second time Captain Piter Lavant, a more disciplined Catachan than most, set a careful ambush and wiped sixty of them out.

For now, it works. But the orks must surely know of the existence of an organised resistance by now. They must have some inkling that there are trained soldiers fighting them. Even creatures that stupid cannot miss the fact that sizeable numbers of their comrades have gone missing. Perhaps the local chieftains fear to inform their superiors of their losses. Straken may be skilled at evasion, but he prolongs the inevitable. Well, if I must die here, as I suspect will be the case, so be it. My soul is clean.

Which is more than can be said for the Catachans. They are a coarse, vulgar band, prone to irreverent conduct and dangerous levels of individualism. That said, there is no denying that these barbarians know how to kill orks. No doubt the jungle-fighting skills acquired on their wretched home world have helped them in this mess of deserted buildings and fungal forests. Nevertheless, I would advise any other commissar dealing with them to keep as stern a line as possible, as I have striven to do. It is well-said that the mind free to wander will inevitably stray from the path of righteousness.

I know that I am being watched, and not just by the xenos. During the destruction of the invading army, Catachan units retreated from the city gates without an apparent order from a senior officer. I attempted to restore order by executing a certain Lieutenant Zandro, who was calling for his men to fall back. Although I acted in accordance with Commissariat protocols, my actions inevitably created resentment among the men. I gather this Zandro was a friend of Captain Hal-Do Tanner, one of Straken's chief subordinates. From what I know of the

Catachan temperament, I expect this Tanner to seek revenge, and I fully expect Straken to turn a blind eye to any plot against me. Should I not return, I formally request an investigation into Captain Tanner and Colonel Straken, for murder and collusion respectively.

In the meantime I will continue with my duty in the name of the Emperor and the Imperial Guard. If, despite my endeavours, I do not return, I commend my soul to the Master of Mankind and this report to the Commissariat.

In faith and purity, Commissar Octavius Morrell.

Colonel Straken turned to the charts pinned to the wall, the spools of paper taken from servitor-scribes and now covered in the names of his men and the places they patrolled, the little desk with its neat piles of records noted down by Lavant. He reached up and ran his flesh-and-blood hand over his scalp, felt the prickles where he needed to shave his head.

He said, 'Twenty-eight men don't just disappear.'

'I know,' Tanner replied.

There were six of them in the room: Straken, his two captains, Commissar Morrell and the two civilian representatives, Larn Tarricus of the miners' guild and Jocasta Ferrens, former senator of Dulma'lin. It had been Lavant's idea to call meetings in the power station to check their progress. Red lines and circles marked their successes on the chart. Widening concentric rings showed the buildings falling quietly – but often bloodily – under Catachan control.

'That's a lot of people,' Straken said. 'First, an entire patrol, and then the men sent to look for them. And nothing left behind.'

'Not a trace,' Tanner said.

Lavant stood beside the charts, arms folded. It seemed like his natural habitat, Straken thought. The captain's finger followed one of the red outlines on the map. 'And all in this sector. Hmm.'

Tarricus leaned forward. His balding head gleamed in the harsh lumen-strips. 'That's a hab-zone.'

'Then it should be ours,' Straken replied. 'It's close to the edge of the industrial district, which means ork territory, but still… It's us the orks ought to be fearing, not the other way around.'

Morrell sat bolt upright in his chair, like a grim-faced doll. There was a

chipped cup of Barabo tea on the table before him. The Dulmalians took it cold, which seemed to suit the commissar. ‘I find it hard to believe that greenskins could do something like this. At least, not so quietly. It’s well known that the orks can barely move without bellowing at each other.’ He frowned. ‘Could there have been some kind of accident? A cave-in, perhaps?’

Straken glanced at Tarricus. ‘Guildmaster?’

The little man shook his head. ‘In that cavern? Not the way they’re excavated. The odds against it would be enormous.’

‘It’s round there that we heard that hymn,’ Tanner said. He looked at Straken. ‘You remember?’

It took Straken a moment to realise what he meant. ‘The one played over loudspeakers, up near the vox tower?’

‘That’s it.’

Lavant turned from the maps. ‘There are sewers in the hab-zones. Maybe the orks’ve been hiding in them.’

‘Maybe,’ said Tarricus. ‘But I don’t think the orks could fit in them. Maybe those gretchin things…’ He shuddered.

Jocasta Ferrens had spent the meeting sitting slightly back from the table, a lho-stick burning slowly between her thin fingers. She leaned forwards. ‘Might not be orks killing them,’ she said.

‘Then who?’ Morrell demanded.

The ex-senator smiled at him, without humour. It made her look feral and hungry. ‘Men, of course.’

Tanner said, ‘You think the orks have allies?’

Straken had expected the commissar to interrupt, to say that no man would lower himself to working with an ork. But perhaps Morrell had heard the same rumours as Straken, of mercenaries who would sell their own species out for money, or men who would rather prolong their lives under ork rule than accept a death that would commend them to the Emperor.

‘If they do,’ Straken said, ‘Emperor have mercy on them. Because I won’t.’

‘Well said,’ Morrell added. Tanner glanced at the commissar, then looked quickly away.

Lavant rubbed his smooth chin. Unlike most of the others, he shaved every day. His neatness was peculiar, Straken thought: unnatural, somehow. ‘There was a child you brought back a while ago,’ he said, looking at Tanner. ‘A girl, I think. She said something about a father, I believe.’

Tanner nodded. ‘That’s right. In the north-west. They took her back to the

civilians down at the mining camp.'

Tarricus said, 'I can have my people find out her name. I'll ask.'

'Do that,' Straken said. 'Lavant, you're good at pathfinding. Get some of your demolitions people together – ten good men should do it. We'll head out to the vox tower tomorrow. Commissar, I'd like you to come along too.'

'I was going to suggest it,' Morrell replied. He paused a second and added, 'Colonel, I'm sure you won't want to hear this, but I do have to consider the possibility that these men may have decided not to come back. I'll need to make sure.'

Straken said, 'What? First, they're Catachans, and *my* regiment. That doesn't happen. And supposing it did – where would they go?'

Tanner snorted. 'You think he cares?' he said. 'Our good commissar just wants to shoot someone, just in case.'

Morrell lurched forward in his chair. He suddenly looked huge, as wide as a bull. 'Colonel Straken, I will not tolerate that sort of talk. Captain Tanner has hidden behind you for long enough. I am sworn to do my duty.'

'And a little bit more, eh?' Tanner said.

Morrell jerked upright. His chair clattered onto the floor behind him. 'I will not tolerate this! Straken, you will keep your dogs in line, or my superiors will hear of it. And you,' he added, turning to Tanner, 'are treading close to the line. Be careful, captain. Very careful.'

Tanner's eyes were hard and clear. 'Why don't we do it now?' he said. His voice was flat. 'Well? You want to hand out a beating, commissar. Here I am. Or do you have to shoot from behind, like you did Zandro?' He unzipped his combat vest. The scars on his bare chest were like white ridges on the flesh. There was a dagger tattooed over his heart, point upwards.

Tarricus looked as if he were going to run. Ferrens's face was frozen in a look of utter surprise. Lavant licked his lips, his hands raised to grapple.

In the centre of the room, Morrell stood huffing with rage. The insignia on his coat pumped up and down with each breath. His hands curled into fists, stretched out, flexed, and became fists again.

Tanner stepped forward. 'Well?'

'That's enough!' Straken yelled. He hit the table. Wood splintered. The map tore. Straken raised his hand slowly, still in a fist. 'I said that's enough,' he said, quieter now. 'You want to fight in the street like a bunch of children? Go ahead. Maybe the orks'll hold your jackets for you. But if you – any of you – dare try it anywhere near me, or while Warboss Killzkar is still alive, you'll be answering

to this.' He opened his hand – the whine of the servos, usually almost silent, seemed as loud as a cloud of mosquitoes. 'Right now, and until I say otherwise, you people will be doing one thing, and one only – fighting orks. Am I clear?'

'Absolutely,' Morrell said loudly. 'I entirely agree. But the discipline of this unit–'

'I've got all the discipline I need right now,' Straken replied. 'Tanner. Are you going to muck around like a little kid, or are you going to act like a soldier of the Imperial Guard?'

Tanner took a slow, deep breath. He looked around the room, at the walls instead of the occupants, and ran his hand over his face. When he took his hand away, his features were grim and set. 'Yes, sir.'

'Good. Now, to business. Lavant, I want your team ready to march out in three hours. Whatever duties you've got here, I want them assigned elsewhere. Commissar, you'll be coming with us. We may need a… ah… more official-looking representative of the Guard. Tanner, you'll be helping train the civilians at the guild base. Understand?'

Tanner nodded.

Morrell saluted and stood up in a soft swish of leather. 'I have reports to write. I'll be about my work, colonel,' he said. 'Unless you have any further business for me.'

'None, commissar,' Straken said.

They watched Morrell stride out of the room. As he disappeared, Tarricus exhaled.

'Meeting's over,' Straken said.

Ferrens tossed her lho-stick down and ground it under her boot. She got up, took her laslock rifle from the side table and slung it across her back. She looked eager and slightly crazy, the exact opposite of Tarricus. The two civilians departed.

'We need to deal with that leash,' Tanner said. 'He murdered Zandro.'

'You heard me,' Straken said. 'When we're done here, you can take it up with General Greiss. Until then, we're killing orks.'

'You know that's not going to happen. Remember when those glory boys shelled us by mistake, back on Signis Eight? By the time we see Greiss again, no one'll remember who Zandro even was.' Tanner scowled. '*If* we see him again.'

'Get planning the route, Lavant,' Straken said. 'And Tanner, I want those civvies sharp and ready, all right? We need back-up personnel and scouts. I want them razor sharp. If you want to hit something, go down to the punchbags and

show the locals how to box. Now, step to it, Guardsmen.'

He strode out, boots loud on the plascrete floor. Lavant waited until Straken had gone, and turned back to his maps.

Tanner strolled over and leaned against the wall. After a little while, Lavant realised that Tanner was not going to go away. 'Need something?' he asked.

Tanner folded his arms. 'You and I,' he began, 'have to talk.'

'Next group, move up!' shouted Sergeant Halda. His full beard and angry eyes made him look like a preacher, Straken thought, the sort of half-mad devotee the Ecclesiarchy would sent to some backward planet to keep the colonists in line. 'Get on that firing line!'

A dozen civilians of both sexes, ranging between ten and seventy, pulled up their salvaged laslocks and aimed at the outline drawn on the rocks behind them. Shots cracked out, and three hit the target.

'Now run to the post and back!' Halda shouted, pointing across the training range. 'Move, son, or I'll help you with my boot! Pick those feet up, granddad – do you need a stick to lean on?'

Straken glanced at Halda. The civilian auxiliaries ran on, kit flapping, panting loudly. 'How're they doing, sergeant?'

'They'll never be front line quality,' Halda replied. 'But as support staff, maybe as scouts, they'll be good.'

'Don't work them to death just yet. Listen, Tanner'll be helping you for a couple of days. Let me know if anything unusual comes up, will you?'

'Yes, sir.'

'Good. Keep an eye out, Halda. I want to know about anything untoward, whether it's from this lot or our people. If anything comes up, bring it straight back to me – nobody else.'

'Is something wrong?'

'Just being careful, that's all. Now get back to your shouting.'

Halda smiled. 'I learned it from an expert, sir,' he said. 'Get down to the range again and ready your guns!'

An engine growled behind them. Straken turned and saw an open-topped mining truck come rolling out of the dark. The cab had been reinforced with sheet plasteel, and an ancient-looking heavy stubber had been mounted on the back. Lavant leaned out of the passenger side of the cab. 'Coming along, sir? We can fit one more.'

Straken swung himself up. As the truck rumbled towards the cave entrance, it

occurred to him that this was the first time that he'd been in a vehicle since they had arrived in Dulma'lin. Straken glanced into the back of the cab. Morrell sat on the far side, next to an ammo box. He gave Straken a brief nod.

The driver was silent. Lavant talked almost continuously, but his eyes never left the road.

'We've got guards posted down the main tunnel,' he explained. 'We cleared out the wreckage and set up fire points. You remember those ork bikers that came racing down here, when we first made contact with the civilians? We've not seen them since.'

'Keep looking. If they come back, kill them.'

'Will do, sir. Now, just past the tunnel we go left, along the edge of the mushroom forest.'

The truck turned slowly. Straken saw grey tarpaulins stretched between the trees, covering stashes of bombs made from mining explosives. This was Catachan territory, no doubt about it. Were the orks to enter in any number, it would become an excellent killing-ground. The only problem, he reflected, was that the orks had no use for this place.

Lavant kept talking, explaining the preparations he had made and the traps his men had set. He sounded keen to impress. Straken wondered if the captain realised that Straken found him odd.

'You've been busy,' Straken said, 'but it's time we took the fight to the orks.'

'Of course, sir. That's why I've been moving our gear into the forward positions in the hab-zones. See there?' He pointed to a long, low building on the right. 'That's one of ours. Well hidden, good communications, excellent defensive capabilities–'

'Have you ever been to Cadia?'

Lavant frowned. 'Cadia? No, colonel. Why?'

'You sure sound like a Cadian sometimes.'

Out of the corner of his eye, Straken saw the driver suppress a smile.

'I'm Catachan born and bred,' Lavant snapped back. 'Obviously.'

There was a moment's silence. 'Course you are,' Straken said.

They pulled up forty-five metres from the vox tower. In a fourth-floor window of a nearby hab-block, light glinted on magnoculars. A soldier gave them the all-clear hand signal. Up in the vox tower itself, men watched the surrounding blocks.

Lavant ordered their supplies to be unloaded from the back of the truck. Straken pitched in, his bionics making light work of the lifting. Lavant helped

too, careful as ever. Even Morrell assisted, a case of grenades wedged under his left arm, the right hand free. Straken wondered if he expected to have to draw his bolt pistol.

Unloading was easy compared to the task of hauling the boxes up seven flights of stairs. Most of the gear was food – local stuff, since their rations were long gone – together with ammunition for snipers and rockets for the missile launcher the Guardsmen had mounted in the vox tower.

Strange, Straken thought as they struggled upwards. Lavant clearly was Catachan: the heavy build and natural strength marked him out as having grown up on a high-gravity world. But the old joke about Cadians being prissy had cut him deeply. You heard it almost every day among the men – whether it was Vostroyans, Mordian Iron Guard or some other smartly dressed unit, there was always some regiment that the Catachans joked about as being toy soldiers in pressed uniforms. Everyone knew that the jokes were just that – for one thing, a fair few Cadians were as hard as nails – but something about it had genuinely offended Lavant.

As he stepped onto the top floor landing, the door opened before Straken and a man said, 'Yalsky, get your lazy– Oh, sorry, sir.' The soldier stood to attention and saluted, and Straken shoved the box of supplies at him.

In the cramped control room, three Guardsmen watched the different windows. Music blared from the room's speakers: a rough-sounding band were shouting and hacking their way through a song about a deep-mining woman. Seeing their guest, they stood up and the music died.

'I thought this was a five-man post,' Straken said. Behind him, the rest of Lavant's team huffed and cursed as they unloaded their supplies on the landing.

'It is, sir,' said the man who had shouted. 'One of us just stepped out to use the, y'know, facilities. The other's on watch up on the roof. He keeps to himself.'

Straken stepped to the window. The roofs of hab-blocks stretched away. Even here, deep underground, the apartments had been made to Administratum standard. Thirty metres above them, the cavern roof was wreathed in thin cloud. So, Straken thought, this was the edge of his domain, the point where Catachan control faded into a no-man's-land. Beyond this point, the area was not of any value to the orks, but not under Straken's control.

He looked out the way he had done two months ago, remembering the convoy of captured vehicles rolling past. For a moment Straken recalled the soldier roped to the front of the Chimera, struggling vainly to get free. *Long dead.*

And somewhere out there, he thought, looking at the hab-buildings, *is an enemy who has made twenty-eight soldiers disappear.*

The fourth man came in. He had one eye. Straken recognised him as Orlow, who had been on the first expedition to this area. Lavant completed the group.

Straken set out the situation.

'I've heard music a couple of times,' Orlow replied, 'but no more than that. It comes from over there,' he added, pointing. 'It sounds like marching-hymns.' He stared out of the window. 'One of the fellows with me last month said that he heard a voice with it, calling to him. But then, he was the kind of man who believes that sort of stuff, if you see what I mean.'

Straken nodded. He could imagine the soldiers, sitting up here at night, watching the city and wondering what lurked among the empty homes.

'It sounds like superstitious nonsense,' Morrell said.

'What was this man's name?' Straken asked.

'Hass,' Orlow said. 'Rogen Hass. But you won't be able to talk to him. He was with the patrol that disappeared.'

A trooper with a neat strip of white hair shaved down the centre of his head said, 'I've heard the music, once or twice. It doesn't come often. Me and Loke heard it about a week ago. It was loud as hell, but it just played a couple of verses and cut out. We thought it was something going wrong – a trap, or some machine's spirit breaking.' He shrugged. 'I didn't think it was for us, somehow.'

The third soldier, evidently Loke, nodded.

Lavant said, 'Hey.' The soldiers had pinned a street plan to the wall, patched together out of pages from a guidebook. The captain pointed. 'You say the music you've heard is hymns. There're three churches north-west of here. They'd have the comms and power supply to broadcast sound loud enough to hear from a block away – and the music collection.'

'One of 'em's a burnt-out shell,' said Loke. 'Saint Lucador's. We take bearings off the steeple on patrol.'

'Which leaves us the Chapel of St Lua Immolata, and the Temple of Our Protector of the Healing Word,' Lavant said.

Straken looked out the window, into no-man's-land. 'Can we see them from up here?' he asked, scanning the hab-blocks.

'Not from up here,' said the white-haired man, the one they had called Yalsky. 'Maybe from the roof. There's a man up there on watch – but watch out, he's not the sociable type.'

'Let's go,' Straken said to Lavant. 'Lead the way.'

They opened a trapdoor and climbed onto the roof. Without bird-life or any real weather, it seemed oddly calm. It reminded Straken of moments on Miral, standing in the hot still air, waiting for a storm to break. Far above, near the cavern roof, something large and dark flapped through the mist. It looked like a mixture of bat and ray.

Lavant pointed. 'The locals say they bring you luck.'

'Not if one does its business on you,' Yalsky said.

A man sat on an upturned crate at the far side of the roof. A monocular lay beside him. He was big even for a Catachan. He leaned forward, hands close together as if praying. As Straken came closer, he saw that the man was pouring liquid over the cutting edge of a broad-bladed knife. The little bottle looked tiny in the soldier's wide, scarred hands.

'Guardsman,' Lavant said. 'Is it possible to see either the Temple of the Healing Word or the Chapel of Lua Immolata from here?'

The soldier did not look up. He continued his careful work, pouring venom along his knife-blade as if anointing it. 'You've got eyes,' he said. 'Use 'em.'

Yalsky said, 'Hey, Marbo. You're talking to an officer.'

The soldier looked up. His face was sulky and sad in equal measure. 'Sorry,' he said. 'You've got eyes, *sir*.'

'Watch it, boy,' Morrell said, stepping forward. The commissar flexed his gloved fingers; leather creaked.

Straken looked at the pair of them, and wondered what would happen if it came to blows. 'I want to know where the nearest churches are, or anywhere else that has a vox-caster system. And if you address an officer like that again, I won't leave any of you intact for Commissar Morrell to put on a charge. Understood?'

Five minutes later, they returned to the vox-room. 'We're heading out,' Straken said. 'Recce job. Commissar, you're staying here. I need someone to take control of this area if we fail to return.' Morrell nodded. Straken gestured to the Guard team. 'You people monitor the comms. If you don't hear back from us in two days, two of you are to go back with Commissar Morrell and tell Captain Tanner that he's in command. And don't send a search party after us. No point in wasting more people.'

They gathered at the base of the tower: Straken, Lavant and his team, Marbo and Yalsky, the white-haired trooper from the vox tower.

'Listen up,' Straken said. 'We'll leave the truck here and head out towards the

two churches on the map. We're going to sweep through and search for any clue of what happened to the men who've disappeared out here. I heard church music playing over a vox-caster somewhere to the north-west a while ago. I understand that the sentries hear it every so often too. I've no idea what the source of it is – Ecclesiarchy holed up somewhere, orks using the hymns to lure our people into the open, maybe – but we're going to find out.' Straken pointed down the road. 'I don't need to tell you that anywhere north of here is enemy territory. Stay sharp and report anything suspicious. We may meet with serious resistance.'

'Good thing I brought this thing,' one of Lavant's team said, patting the chipped plasma gun slung across his body on its shoulder strap.

'Should we split into groups?' Lavant asked.

Straken shook his head. 'We'll go as one. It'll be quicker, and we may need the firepower. Any questions, people? Marbo and Yalsky, you're leading the way. Gear up, men. Let's go.'

They travelled quickly and quietly, keeping to the sides of streets, in the shadow of the hab-blocks. Several times they moved through the buildings, taking some short cut best known to the two scouts. At one point they walked through a warehouse that had housed luxury goods and frozen meat.

'We cleaned out the freezers and took the food back to the guild base,' Yalsky explained. 'Lucky we did, because the power went down soon after. Since then, we've been using them for other stuff.'

He opened a door as heavy as a bank vault's, pushing it open with his shoulder. Inside the cold room, almost a dozen ork corpses lay on the floor. They looked bad enough in life: the cold had given them a damp, rubbery look.

'Tidy work,' Lavant said.

'Thanks,' Yalsky replied. 'A couple of months ago they'd come down here in little groups, looking for stuff to loot. Not just food, though, machines as well. They must make something out of it, I suppose.' Straken thought of the ork mech and its minions, ransacking that servitor workshop. 'They've given up now,' Yalsky said, shutting the massive door. 'They must have realised that there's death here.'

Straken thought, *I wonder how many men we'd have to lose before we came to the same conclusion?* He remembered his order to the watchers in the vox tower: if this party goes missing, send no more. He then wondered what would happen to the whole mission if he fell.

'Good work,' he said. 'Lavant, let's keep moving. Yalsky, lock that door up.'

He strode forward to take the lead. ‘Pick it up, people – we’ve not got all day!’

Yalsky sealed the freezer door and hurried along.

They slipped through the warehouse and onto the streets. Straken looked into the hab-blocks as they passed, into the empty rooms. Most of the windows were intact. There had been nothing for the orks to take; from the looks of it, they had hardly bothered to search. Without weapons to steal or prisoners to torment, there was little in the hab-blocks that the orks might want except canned food. Straken imagined the hab-zones being given to some low-ranking ork chieftain as a booby prize.

He gave a soft whistle and flicked his hand out, and the soldiers spread across the road. Beside him, Lavant swung his lasgun up to cover the windows, the weapon already pulled tight against his shoulder to take the recoil.

Neat little living rooms appeared through the windows, all built to the same design. *It must be strange,* Straken thought, *to live like that – getting up and putting your overalls on each day for forty years, knowing as you did that your neighbours to the side and above were doing the same, praying at your household shrine and your workplace at fixed hours of the day.* As he passed window after window, house after house, Straken thought of the stages of life in Dulma’lin. Get born, get your own cube to live in, have children, send them away to find their own cubes… Infinitely safer than life on Catachan – but somehow, far worse.

‘Looks like they just upped and left,’ Lavant said quietly. ‘Like they were coming back the next day.’

‘The recruiters probably told them that they were,’ Straken replied.

‘Commissars,’ Lavant said, and a little way to the right, Marbo looked at the pavement and spat.

A trooper suddenly dropped down, held up his hand in a fist. The whole group froze. Lavant sidestepped to the wall in one movement. Straken pulled his shotgun up, ready to fire one-handed down the road.

The soldier pointed into a doorway.

‘I’m going to see,’ Straken said. ‘Cover me.’

Lavant nodded. He slipped into the shadow of the opposite block and dropped down behind an abandoned groundcar, resting his lasgun on the bonnet.

Straken ran down the side of the hab-block, to the two men covering the door. The nearest man – Straken recognised him as a corporal called Stess – merely nodded into the doorway of the block.

Three human corpses lay in the foyer. A fourth hung by its heels in the

stairwell, arms dangling down. The three on the ground were older men, fifty or more, and wore the black and purple flak armour of the local defence force. The fourth man was much younger, heavily built and muscular. A red bandana was tied around his forehead.

'Emperor,' Stess cursed. 'That's one of our people!'

Straken went in first, shotgun ready. Lavant was second, breathing hard between clenched teeth. Straken checked the edges of the room, the corners, and angled his shotgun up the stairwell.

Corporal Stess squatted down and looked at the dangling body of the Catachan. 'Scalped,' he said. 'Someone's scalped him. Ork scum.'

Under his breath, Lavant said, 'If it was orks.'

Stess shook his head. 'Struck up like that. We ought to get him down.'

'I wouldn't do that,' said a voice. He looked round. Marbo stood in the doorway. He walked in, a glum, hulking presence.

Stess glared at him. 'What? You want to leave him up there?'

'If I wanted to kill some of you,' Marbo said, 'I'd wire up the corpse of someone you were going to search. Someone you'd want to cut down.'

'He's right,' Lavant said. 'The renegades used to do it on Tasibi.' He shrugged. 'Hell, I've done it a couple of times. It's not nice, but when you're dealing with Khorne cultists…'

'Wait here,' Straken said. He bounded up the stairs, boots almost silent on the stone. Two flights up, he took a small torch from his vest, the sort of thing designed to fit under the barrel of a lasgun. He ran the beam over the ceiling. The rope holding the dead body had been tied around a light at the top of the stairwell. Like evil fruit, a bundle of grenades hung next to it, ready to be shaken loose.

Straken's mouth was dry. He knew the trick – as Lavant said, it was popular with the vicious followers of the Ruinous Powers, as well as some of the more hate-filled Guard regiments – but to see orks using such tactics surprised him. He thought about the corpses he had found when they had first entered the vox tower, mutilated and hung on display in the same way. Uneasy, he returned to the others.

'Touch nothing,' Straken said. 'There're grenades rigged to go off if we cut him down.'

If Marbo got any pleasure from being vindicated, he didn't show it. He leaned against the wall, looking awkward and surly in equal measure.

Lavant pointed to the older men lying dead by his feet. 'They were stabbed

from behind. That doesn't surprise me. But it looks as if the Catachan fellow went the same way.'

Straken shone his torch on the dead Catachan. The face looked empty, somehow unfinished, as if it had never had a mind behind it at all. The priests would say that by now the man would be sitting with the Emperor. Straken found it easier to believe that sort of thing when he wasn't standing next to a corpse. Very carefully, he pushed the man's combat vest open at the neck.

'What're you doing?' Lavant asked.

'Looking for his dog tags. Then I'll get him down.'

'I'll do that. I'm the demolitions expert here.'

Straken stepped back. 'If you want. But be careful.'

'I always am,' Lavant replied.

'Good. Everyone, out!'

They waited on the steps of the hab-block. Four minutes later, there was a loud thump from within. Straken looked in, saw the dead man lying on the ground beside the others. Lavant came down the stairs, a pair of grenades in his gloved hands.

'His dog tags are gone,' he announced.

12.

The Temple of Our Protector of the Healing Word stood in its own grounds, surrounded by wide roads and ornamental gardens that were either overgrown or dead. A servitor stood broken in the gardens like a metal statue. The main building was almost the size of a cathedral, made of a blue-grey stone that Straken had not seen elsewhere on Dulma'lin. Veins of metallic impurities ran through the stone like lightning, twinkling in the artificial sunlight.

The spires were as delicate as antennae, ornate and brittle looking. Further down, the church became more functional. Its base was like a bunker, a hard stone cuboid with slits for windows. At ground level, only the doors were ornamented, and they were thick plasteel.

A perfect fortress, Straken thought. *Too bad we didn't take it first*.

They stopped in the ruins of a row of shops, facing towards the church. The orks had definitely been here: not just the windows but several of the support columns were shattered, as if some great vehicle had rammed the shop fronts. The Catachans crouched down in the rubble and waited for signs of life.

'It looks deserted,' Straken said. 'Let's see if anybody's home. You people stay back. Cover me, but don't make any sudden moves. Some of these locals are so jumpy they'll shoot at anything.'

'The one thing worse than a civilian,' said Corporal Stess, 'is a civilian with a gun.' It was an old joke, but there were a couple of smiles.

'Wait for me,' Straken said.

He stepped out of cover and started across the road. The church looked as dead as a cliff-face. The impurities in the stone glinted, long glittering streaks of blue and green.

There was a sudden loud bang and an invisible fist crashed into the side of Straken's head. He was knocked sideways, stumbling, the road yawing in his vision like the deck of a sinking ship. He staggered upright and ran forward, into the shadow of the church wall, out of the angle of attack.

His vision blurred and contracted, became narrow and wide like a badly tuned vid-screen. Shadow covered him; he looked back and saw lasgun shots flicker out of the buildings behind him, from his men. Straken flopped against the wall of the church and felt his head – some lunatic had sniped him, putting his artificial eye out of true. The buzzing in his head was a hard, constant whine as if an insect had crawled into his skull. Gunfire rattled from the wall above – an autogun, from the sound of it. More answering fire crackled from his own team. Straken rubbed his head, feeling the jagged edge of torn metal against his palm like the lid of an opened ration-tin, and suddenly realised that someone was running towards him.

'Back!' he yelled, waving his arm. 'Keep back!'

It seemed only to encourage his would-be rescuer. The soldier began to sprint, and Straken recognised the scarred face with white hair.

The side of Yalsky's head disappeared in a puff of red. He fell backwards, lascarbine clattering on the road. The soldiers in the ruins shouted. The lasguns cracked out again, and Lavant yelled, 'Cease firing!' Straken glimpsed the captain's face, set in furious concentration, and he flashed his palm twice to get Lavant's attention.

Straken pointed upwards. Lavant raised his hand, one finger extended, and mouthed 'Dug in.'

A nasty silence settled on the road. Straken's head didn't hurt, as such; it just felt as if he had drunk a lot, and quickly. He imagined the sniper above him, the long barrel pushed through the thick temple wall like a pipe through stone, watching the road and the dead body in it, waiting for the chance to fire again. Straken wondered whether his men had spotted the assassin. From the look on Lavant's face, they knew exactly where to shoot, and were just waiting for the opportunity.

He tapped his chest and motioned across the road. A ripple of movement spread through the ruins, as men reloaded and readied themselves. Straken caught Lavant's eye again and nodded. Lavant nodded back.

'Covering fire, on my mark,' Lavant said to the men. Straken could only just hear him. He took a deep breath, and ran.

He tore across the road, weaving crazily, and like an unfolding machine a dozen las-barrels swung into view and opened fire. Lasguns crackled and fire smacked into the stone. Straken heard chips break loose from the wall. Something struck his steel arm and spun away. He reached the ruins, scrambled up the slope and threw himself into cover.

Straken landed heavily on his side in the dirt. He sat up slowly, careful not to show himself. He looked down at his body; besides cuts and grazes, he was unhurt.

A voice barked, 'Cease fire!', and suddenly the road was silent.

Grimacing, he brushed dirt off his metal shoulder, and carefully reached to his head.

His vision seemed fine. He shook his head and ran through the list of mental commands to change the zoom and focus of his bionic eye. It flicked into the fuzzy-edged green of night-vision and back again. It hurt to zoom in; not much, but enough.

'How's your head?' Lavant said. He crouched three metres away.

'It's all right. Looks like they nailed that Yalsky kid.'

'Yeah. And they're probably waiting for us to go back out to him.' Lavant shook his head. 'Throne-damned snipers,' he said, disgusted.

Straken wiped his mouth on the back of his hand. He could taste grit. 'Looks like we found our killers, then.'

'And it seems they're human.' Lavant rubbed his chin. 'The church is clearly fortified – if they've got hold of sniper rifles, they may have all manner of other Guard equipment. Listen, we've got three krak mines back in the truck, with the rest of the gear we brought up. Give me a while to bring them up here, and I'll rig them to blow the place wide open. Otherwise, we'll need to fetch missile launchers from one of the rear bases, maybe even a Sentinel…'

Straken did not like the thought of the delay. It had been hard enough to take the hab-zones quietly, and not to obey his instincts and charge in against the orks, but to be here, eight metres from the dead body of one of his own men, and twenty from the sniper who had murdered him… He clenched his fist. Tempting as it was to run straight in, what would it achieve? If they reached the temple, how would they even get inside? If the Catachan Second had a weakness, it was their lack of gear for punching through heavy armour.

'Very well,' he said. 'Let's post a watch and get back to the vox tower. Then we'll arm up and take this place to pieces.'

'I could get in there.'

It was not Lavant. The two officers looked round. Private Marbo crouched a few metres away, behind a metal table turned on its side for cover.

'You?' Straken said. 'How do you mean, on your own?'

'Yeah. It's a one-man job. Break in, kill the guards and get the doors open. They'd see a load of people coming, but for one man, it's not too bad.'

‘You’d have a hell of a time not being spotted,’ Lavant said.

‘I’d need a distraction.’

Broad, dirty and squatting down as if to leap into an attack, Marbo looked almost inhuman. His sheer size made Straken think of a small ork, but it was the man’s eyes that disturbed him. They were at once cold and distant, unfocused but lethal. He was like a machine running on low power, saving its energy for the fight to come.

‘What the hell,’ Straken said. ‘Do it. We’ll give them something to think about.’

Marbo simply turned and crept away, disappearing back into the shadows.

There’s something very wrong with that man, Straken thought as the soldier slipped into the ruins. *But he’s crazy enough to try it – almost crazy enough to respect*.

Marbo heard the other soldiers moving around behind him, making too much noise. People always made a racket, wasting their time with small talk and stupid jokes, chattering to keep the dark away like children shouting to prove that they weren’t scared. For once he welcomed it; with luck it would give the snipers in the church something to look at, and distract them from his work.

He picked his way through the rubble, then dropped onto his belly and crawled past a fallen motorcycle, the promethium tank torn away. The ground reeked of spilt fuel. Marbo reached a doorway and stood up in the shadow inside.

Quietly, he climbed the stairs of the hab-block, past doors opening into unimportant lives. Little people, the ones on whose behalf he was supposed to be fighting. He felt nothing for them at all.

It was always better to fight alone, away from the risk of anyone giving you away. When you had nobody else to rely on, your victories were your own, and you had no risk of some fool letting the enemy know where you were.

A couple of lasgun shots rang out in the street. Straken’s men were firing at the church, trying to locate the sniper. *Good,* he thought. Perhaps the enemy would even think they were winning, and come out to encircle the Catachans. They would be easy meat then.

Two more flights of stairs, in near darkness. Halfway up the building, Marbo thought he heard something rattle on the steps. A creature slipped out of the shadows, a small, furred animal with no eyes and enormous ears.

The animal looked at him, clicking to itself, and realised that he was not a friend. It hurried past, as quiet going down the stairs as Marbo was ascending

them.

He reached the top floor. Marbo saw a ladder on the right, leading to the roof. He crouched down and took the coil of rope from his shoulder. Marbo tied a noose into the rope and climbed the ladder. He pushed the skylight open and crept onto the roof, almost bent double.

The temple had two advantages as a fortification: the walls were thick and high, and the open ground around it gave it a comparatively wide field of fire. If you wanted to get to the walls, you had to move very fast – not like Yalsky. Marbo thought of the corporal, his head blown open, and for a moment another face appeared in Yalsky's place: Marbo's eldest brother, cut down in the open by orks in the Urgok war. The face vanished, and he was crouching at the edge of the roof, looking at the temple across the road as if mimicking its gargoyles.

Marbo hurled the rope. The noose dropped around a gargoyle's snarling head. He pulled the rope tight. The gargoyle's extended tongue made it look like he was strangling it.

Swinging across would get him to the temple quickly – but would also send him straight into the side of the building. Instead, he tied the rope off on the trapdoor leading back downstairs, leaving plenty of slack. Then he returned to the edge of the roof.

Marbo spat on his palms and took hold of the rope. He pushed out and dropped. The rope caught, sagging between the hab-block and the temple, Marbo hanging at its lowest point. He drew his knife with his free hand and began to slice through it.

The razor-sharp blade slipped through the taut rope, and suddenly Marbo was swinging downwards, to the other side of the road. He gritted his teeth and his shoulder thumped against the side of the temple, knocking the breath out of him. He put his knife between his teeth, grabbed the rope with both hands and hauled himself up.

The first few metres were the worst: hand over hand, dragging himself up the rope by strength alone. Then his boot found a foothold – the top of a frieze showing miners bowing around the Emperor – and he rested his weight on his feet. His palms stung from the rope. Marbo slid his knife back into his belt and climbed.

He reached the gargoyle and wrapped his arms around it as though he were wrestling the beast. Marbo hauled himself onto its back. For the first time since stepping onto the roof of the hab-block, he looked down. The cut rope hung down the side of the block. The street was empty below.

There was a small window two and a half metres across from the gargoyle's head. A double-headed eagle, carved into the stone, wrapped its wings around the frame. Marbo leaned out, hooked his fingertips around the bird's nearest beak, and swung himself across. He paused, listened and dropped feet-first over the windowsill.

The inside of the temple was dark and cool and still. The air smelt of sawdust and brick. From alcoves, saints glowered out with a sort of angry sorrow, as if burdened by disappointment.

Marbo crouched there for a moment, watching motes of dust twinkle in the rafters, and heard bootsteps coming from the left.

He crept behind the statue of a robed cleric raising a power maul. Marbo drew his knife, using his left hand to muffle the soft hiss of the blade leaving its scabbard. He tilted his head and closed his eyes, hearing the footsteps get closer.

About nine metres away, to the left, on stone, and rising. That meant there was a staircase on the left. Good.

A figure entered the corridor. Marbo slowed his breathing and opened his eyes. The man wore a grimy white tunic over tough civilian clothes, with improvised insignia stitched onto his upper arm. An autogun was slung over his right shoulder on a leather strap. His wild hair and beard made him look like a madman, but as he turned Marbo saw that his eyes were calm and shrewd. Marbo stilled his breathing and waited.

As the man approached, the details of his outfit became clear: the padding on his tunic, the chipped armour on his elbows and lower legs, and the odd little hat he wore – red and almost ludicrously small, as if he had stolen a child's cap. Dozens of charms hung around his neck on a variety of strings and chains – Ecclesiarchy symbols and things that Marbo didn't recognise. They tinkled gently as he approached. The man didn't look like a priest, but Marbo didn't much care about that: he was a target.

The man walked past, boots squeaking slightly on the floor. He sniffed and paused, a metre from the darkness where Marbo crouched. The guard stood there a moment, head tilted to one side, seeming to listen for something. Then he rubbed his nose, breathed again and moved on. He wasn't going to sneeze after all.

Marbo rose up behind him as quiet as a cobra. The guard took another step.

Marbo grabbed him round the neck and drove his long knife into the man's back. The guard bucked, arching his spine. His hands grabbed Marbo's forearm, trying to find purchase to tear free. But the wound in his back was fatal, and

even if it hadn't been enough, the toxin on the blade had been distilled from some of the most lethal creatures on Catachan.

The guard stiffened violently, shuddered and went limp in Marbo's grip. Marbo lowered him, careful not to let the foam around the dead man's mouth touch his skin. He heaved the corpse into the dark space beside the statue.

Marbo crept down the corridor until he came to the doorway from which the guard had emerged. Keeping low, Marbo looked around the corner, down a wide staircase and into a sub-chapel of the main temple. Where the hab-blocks had been grim and functional, the staircase was darkly magnificent, decorated with carved crimson wood. Marbo paused to get his bearings, trying to work out where the best way in would be, then he sneaked down the staircase.

At the bottom of the steps, he looked into the little chapel and froze.

The chapel had been carefully and thoroughly vandalised – no, more than that: desecrated. A large painting hung along the side wall, showing a procession of guildmasters being blessed by Saint Helena. Someone had scratched her face out with a knife. Words were scrawled over the painting. 'LIES LIES LIES'.

Three statues stood on the opposite wall, their heads all knocked off. Behind the altar, a painting of the Emperor on his Throne was covered in the same scribble, too wild to read. The Emperor had a pair of upturned fangs. Tusks, like an ork.

Knife in hand, Marbo looked at the defaced painting of the Emperor as if sizing up an enemy.

Something yowled in the main body of the temple. Marbo whipped around, hand reaching for his ripper pistol, and speakers squelched and crackled into life. There was a scream of feedback, then the sound of a battle-hymn played over a recording of thousands of tramping boots.

'Cowardice, laxity, disrespect! Like worms we burrowed deep below the soil, thinking ourselves hidden from the Emperor's light. We were wrong – so very wrong! We lurked down in the darkness, hiding in the caves like beasts, and yet our sin has found us out!'

Marbo sniffed. The noise would make good cover. He crept out of the shrine and turned right, towards the nave.

He stopped at a pair of massive doors, twice his height and made of the same scarlet wood as the staircase. Marbo quickly checked them for traps: sensors fixed to the doorframe, vehicle batteries wired to the brass handles. It was impossible to be certain, but they looked untouched.

Something moved behind him. Marbo whirled as if on a spring, saw a figure

and threw his knife in one motion. A guard stood before him, the handle of Marbo's knife shuddering in his chest. A lasgun dropped from open fingers. The man stared at the blade sticking out of his robe, incredulous, and collapsed.

Marbo retrieved the knife. As he wiped it on the hem of the guard's robe, he saw that it was not the sign of the aquila hanging around the man's neck, but a row of spent shell cartridges and long canine teeth. He hauled the man into the chapel and dumped him behind a screen, then returned to the doors.

The handle turned easily. Marbo pushed the door open, just a fraction, and looked inside.

Between eight and ten men stood in the nave. About half of them were praying, the others standing guard. All wore robes and carried weapons – autoguns, shotguns, a chainsword and a flamer so crude that it seemed to have been made from an industrial blowtorch. In the centre of the group stood a tall, thin man, no more than thirty, his hood raised. A servo-skull hovered beside him, a vox-thief protruding from its eye socket. A piece of metal had been attached below the skull, like a jutting lower jaw.

Dozens of statues decorated the length of the nave, in alcoves and on pedestals, ranging from power-armoured giants to tiny figurines that could have fitted in Marbo's hand. The head of each one had been painted as if it were wearing a red cap. Several wore necklaces of spent cartridges.

Above the altar there hung a huge, crude representation of a skull, sliced from sheet iron. It bore the same red tonsure. Below it was a metal shape like a jagged crown. Marbo knew it instantly; no one on Dulma'lin could have failed to do so. It was the skull and jawbone of the orks, perhaps taken from them as a trophy – or perhaps made in imitation.

The preacher raised a hand, waggling a finger at the rafters. The speakers crackled around him. 'Oh,' he cried, 'you thought yourselves good, did you not? You thought yourselves safe in your guilds, digging tunnels out of the sight of the Emperor? Worms! You made your bargains at your household shrines, crept to confession to barter away your sins, yet the stain of your lassitude will not be washed away! For you cannot buy your way out of oblivion. You cannot deal your way out of the Emperor's wrath!'

Marbo quietly closed the door. There were too many to take silently, and a frontal assault would be suicide. Besides, he'd seen enough. He passed the small, desecrated shrine and glanced down the corridor. From what he'd seen of the outside, there would be a door leading out nearby – no less ornate than those inside the temple, but far more durable. He walked quickly down the corridor,

the ranting sermon covering the small amount of sound made by his boots.

The corridor opened into a small hall. A portrait on the far wall, showing Bishop Mardoni of Ryza blessing the troops mid-combat, had been draped with strings of teeth and shells. On the far side was the main door, an airlock of ornate metal.

A cowled man stood by the door, hood up, shotgun in his hands. Marbo drew back, listening, waiting for the sermon to rise to its peak. He drew his ripper pistol and checked the magazine.

'Oh, Excelsis, cavern of vice, harlot city among the fallen strongholds of Dulma'lin, now is your day of reckoning!' The voice swelled into a roar, testing the limits of the vox system. 'Just as the Emperor chose Samoth Sarr to speak the truth, the Master of Mankind has sent an angel among you – not to summon, but to reap, not to reveal himself, but to strike down from shadows an inexorable as death itself! The hour is come!'

Marbo stepped out, raised his gun and fired twice. Two bullets threw the guard into the doors. He hit the ground dead, leaving a stripe of blood across the wood. Father Sarr's ranting was at its peak. Surrounded by noise, as though he were in the centre of a storm, Marbo holstered his gun and heaved the dead man aside. He reached out to the console beside the door and pressed a button. The eyes of a little steel skull flicked from red to green, and the bloodstain across the doors split into two as they rumbled apart.

Lavant shook his head, half disbelieving. 'This Father Sarr is obviously mad. That's bad enough – but the fact that anyone would follow him… By the Throne, *why?*'

Marbo crouched beside them in the rubble, his story over. He shrugged his massive shoulders and looked away, as if nothing would surprise him.

'I've heard enough,' Straken said. 'We're going in. Either this crazy preacher surrenders and we restore order here, or we take him and his people down. Either way, we're putting this lunatic out of business.'

'Right,' Lavant replied. 'You say you unlocked the east doors?'

Marbo nodded.

'Let's go,' Straken said. 'We won't have long before they find out. Catachans!' he called, and the soldiers around him readied their guns. 'We're going in! Marbo, you lead the way. Lavant, let's get this done fast, all right?'

The captain nodded. 'I'm ready.'

'Then let's go.'

They moved out, falling back from their position in the ruins. Straken hoped they were still being watched: it would seem as if they had decided to retreat. Twenty metres away from the road, Marbo turned right into the ruined buildings, picking his way through gaping doorways and darkened rooms. Lavant hissed an order for silence. It was barely necessary.

They swung out in a wide arc, flanking the temple. 'There,' a trooper said. Straken knew him from the Borealis Incident, a few years back: Graves, a las scar like a stripe across his forehead. He pointed through an empty window at the doorway across the road.

It looked so easy. Lavant leaned over to Straken. 'You think it's safe?'

Straken stared at him. 'Safe for what?' He raised his voice. 'When I say, we rush it. If you see anyone inside, blast 'em. Let's not take any chances, not after Yalsky.'

'Damn right,' a voice muttered on the edge of the group.

'With me!' Straken cried, and he dashed out of cover. His boots hit the road, and he rushed towards the doors with great bounding steps, dimly aware of the yells of his men behind him but running too fast to register whether they were under fire. Fifteen metres from the door... Ten metres... Five–

A figure moved in the darkness. Straken's shotgun roared and someone stumbled inside the temple. A second robed body rushed across the doorway and disappeared to one side. A diode flickered in the doorframe, and the metal doors began to close.

Straken shoved his arm into the gap, wedging it open between elbow and palm. Lavant reached the door, dropped down and fired two quick bursts into the dark. Someone screamed within the temple and the captain scurried inside. 'I can't hold it long,' Straken called, and Lavant got to work on the door panel. The doors slid apart again and Straken rushed in after Lavant, pumping his shotgun as he entered.

'Lavant, take five men and clean out the upper floor,' he snapped. 'The rest of you with me.'

There was no point in trying to be stealthy. Straken ran across the entrance hall, then turned into the corridor. Following Marbo's directions, he glanced left into the small chapel. The desecration disgusted him – it was as bad as he'd thought – but there was no time to pause. A clatter of gunshots broke out above as Lavant got to work. It sounded like a storm beating the ceiling. Straken ran on, deeper into the temple. He reached the wood-panelled doors, took a deep breath and stormed into the nave.

The zealots saw him and went for their guns.

A bearded man swung up his autogun, and Straken fired one-handed into his chest. The man staggered, gun firing wildly into the rafters. The cultist beside him raised a hotshot lasgun, took aim and punched a burning hole into a statue centimetres from Straken's head. Straken dropped and rolled aside, using the pews as cover. One of Straken's team yelled, 'For Catachan!'

Straken rolled again, stood and shot the zealot in the side, the force of the blast hurling the man out of view. The low boom of the shotgun rang around the nave.

A door flew open behind the altar and more of Sarr's men ran in. Suddenly the raid became a gunfight. Lasguns cracked and spat. Autoguns rattled out shells. A robed figure ran out of the back of the hall, pushing past the newcomers. *Sarr,* Straken thought. It had to be.

Straken darted down the side of the nave, using columns and statues for cover. Stone exploded close to him, and he fired back and dodged behind a chipped pillar. Someone screamed behind him – one of his own men. He heard voices calling for support, and leaned out to see two Guardsmen dragging a wounded comrade out of danger. Straken leaned out and fired across the nave, his metal hand a blur as it racked the slide on the shotgun. Another of Sarr's followers cried out and fell, and two more ran for cover. Sergeant Halda dragged the injured Guardsman to safety. Straken took cover behind a pillar to reload.

A stained glass window exploded above the nave, and a robed man fell screaming onto the pews, his body smashing the wooden seats apart. Lavant appeared at the broken window, laying down enfilading fire. Straken almost grinned – perhaps there was some spirit in the captain after all.

Suddenly, a zealot lunged around the edge of the pillar. He was massive, his overalls pulled down to bare his chest, his head shaven and the scalp painted red. Straken aimed and fired in one motion – and the shotgun clicked.

The man roared and swung a chain at Straken. Blades and hooks flew out from the links. Straken ducked back and down, but the madman was fast, and whipped the chain down and left.

Straken blocked it with his steel arm, but the chain flicked past. He felt it hit his back, and the zealot cried in triumph and yanked it. Pain streaked across Straken's back like fire. Maddened, he leaped forwards and punched in one movement, and the man fell, his forehead caved in like an egg.

The shooting had stopped. Straken reloaded his gun. He could hear men moving quickly between the pews. He walked out, grimacing. His back felt as if he'd been scourged by a commissar.

‘All enemy down,’ Halda called. ‘Thorn’s taken a hit in the side. He’ll live.’

‘Good.’ Straken looked up at the broken window. ‘Lavant, what’s your status?’

The captain smiled. ‘Six enemy dead. We’re all fine. I got you a present, colonel.’ He tossed a rifle down, and it clattered on the stone. The barrel was almost a metre long. ‘We got the sniper.’

‘How about the priest?’

Lavant shook his head.

‘Hold position,’ Straken said. ‘I’m going after the preacher.’

He jogged to the rear of the nave, past the bodies and the defaced statues. The air smelt of burning and dust. A bust of Malcador gazed at him from an alcove, the face blackened by a stray lasgun shot.

The door behind the altar led into a narrow passageway. Spare robes hung on pegs along the wall. Straken slipped inside, still moving quickly but trying to stay as quiet as he could.

At the end of the corridor, a narrow set of stairs curled into the ground. Straken hurried down them, the lacerations on his back stinging like acid burning into his skin. As he reached the third step, half a dozen shots rang out.

He dropped down, bullets ricocheting around the staircase over his head, spinning and whining like Catachan bloodflies. A figure lowered a pistol and pulled out a spare magazine. Straken fired with his shotgun and the man howled, dropped the gun and ran out of view.

Straken jumped down the last few steps. Bunks stood against the wall beside the stairs. There was a large console on the far wall, no doubt for controlling the lighting in the nave. Before it stood Father Samoth Sarr.

Sarr glanced left, then right, quick and desperate. As Straken raised his gun, Sarr seemed to realise that there was no way out. He froze, and very carefully drew himself to his full height.

‘You killed my men,’ Straken said.

He had expected Sarr to fight, or rant, perhaps even to beg. But he had not expected him to smile. ‘Me?’ the preacher said. ‘Oh no. That was the work of one greater than I. I merely announce his coming. The Emperor has sent His angel of night, and he has marked the souls he reaps. Just as he marked me.’

Sarr pulled his hood back. His scalp was dried blood and bare bone. Someone, perhaps Sarr himself, had scalped him.

‘You see?’

Straken fired. Sarr folded over double, gagging. Straken pumped the shotgun to finish the job, and as he did Sarr lurched upright.

Sarr took two great, shambling steps away and fell across the console. Straken turned, almost unable to believe that the priest could still move at all. He flicked up the shotgun and fired it into Sarr's back.

The effect was hideous and lethal. Father Sarr slid down the console and onto the floor. His hand snagged on a lever and it flopped down, pulled by the weight of his corpse.

Straken saw the lever move, and lunged for it. He was just too slow.

The speakers squealed into life, but what came out was nothing like the hymns they had played before. It sounded like a jumble of human voices, deafening but indistinct, backed by a bass rumble of traffic.

Boots clattered on the steps behind him. Straken yanked the lever back up, but the sound did not stop; instead, it rose in volume. He looked round. Lavant was staring at him. 'The damned thing's locked,' Straken shouted.

'Then rip the wires out!' Lavant replied, and he rushed to Straken's side.

A voice joined the noise, if it was a voice at all. Over the racket came a snarling, guttural sound, grunting but somehow structured, like a wild boar given a voice. One of the soldiers made the sign of the aquila across his chest.

Lavant ducked down beside the console. Suddenly, he stood. 'Back,' he called over the animal sounds, 'Everybody back!'

They dashed back, to the edges of the room.

The console burst in a shower of sparks. A cable flopped out of the ceiling like a dead snake. Slowly, the noise faded. The speakers wound down, and the grunting voice dimmed and twisted into nothing, taking the street noises with it.

The silence that followed felt enormous. On Straken's left, a trooper who had looked tough five minutes earlier said, 'What the hell was that?'

Orks, Straken thought, and then realised that the noise wasn't quite right; the orks didn't really sound that way. Perhaps it had been a genuine ork's voice, recorded and doctored, but the way the noise had been made didn't matter as much as what it actually was. With a sick feeling, he realised what he had heard: an attempt to mimic the orks – to get their attention. Grimly, Straken said, ' Listen up, Guardsmen! We are moving out, right now. On the double, people!'

Morrell stood watch on the top of the vox tower, where Marbo had been lurking. He didn't want to spend time with the rest of the watch detail. He despised them, and he knew that it was mutual. They would be sitting in the control room, monitoring the vox, whiling away the hours with dirty jokes and impious chatter.

From his earliest days at the Commissariat his instructors had taught him that

being loathed by weaklings was the fate of the righteous servants of the Emperor. It was the duty of a commissar to drive the backsliders and the cowards forward, to force them to be strong and to destroy those who would never rise to the challenge.

The Catachans were different, though. When he had served with the Krommenweld Dragoons, the weaklings had been just that: little men who cried and squealed about their families when the time came to pay back their dues to the Imperium. A good commissar learned to harden himself against their blubbering. The problem with the Catachans was that they weren't cowards or idlers. They were born killers, tough, ferocious and skilled – they just had no respect.

He turned and headed inside. As he climbed down, Morrell heard laughter from the control room, and decided to put a stop to it. He opened the door and heard a voice behind say, 'Leash, boys!' He walked in, and as he did so the men turned to their posts and an awkward hush fell on the room. Morrell stood there, aware that he technically had the power of life and death over these men, feeling increasingly sure that they were about to shout abuse. As his certainty increased, so did his anger. He'd nail this rabble, one way or another. He'd return from this wretched hole as the man who'd brought the Catachans to heel.

'Report your status,' he said.

'We're fine,' the nearest soldier said. He was clearly the technician of the group.

Morrell looked around the room, at the wires and data banks. 'Any vox from Straken?'

'None, commissar,' said the soldier. Morrell was fairly sure that his name was Parnek, or maybe Loke. A lot of the Catachans looked alike to him. 'The buildings break a lot of it up. The vox-sets don't link in with these civilian rigs. Besides, if he's in any of the temples round here, chances are the walls will block the signal.'

'I see. So in order to contact us, he'll need to–'

The speakers yowled. The technician shoved his chair back and tore the headphones off as if they had bitten him. Morrell heard a crazed jumble of sound, a mix of human speech and grunting, boar-like noise. The sound seemed unusually clear, and suddenly he realised that he was hearing it not just through the man's headphones, but through the walls of the room.

'What the hell is that?' the Catachan said, staring at the control panel. 'It sounded like orks, but I don't know…'

Morrell reached to his side, for his power sword. ‘It’s orks all right,’ he growled.

As if in answer, several kilometres to the north, a light corkscrewed into the air. It sailed up, over the vox tower. For a moment Morrell thought it was some kind of flare, and then he saw it burst against the cavern roof in a bloom of red fire. Other rockets went up from the city, as though a giant box of fireworks had caught light.

‘Emperor!’ the second Guardsman cried. ‘Look at that!’

‘Damn it,’ Morrell said. His voice was hard and tight. ‘Give me that.’ He snatched the vox-comm, held it to his head. ‘Put me through to the nearest support team.’

A soldier said, ‘There’s one a kilometre south-east. Just linking up…’

A voice in Morrell’s ear said, ‘Who’s there?’

‘This is Commissar Morrell. I am at the vox tower. We have serious ork activity in the north.’

‘Right,’ said the voice.

‘I need immediate support. Send heavy weapons and Sentinels.’

‘Who’s with you, commissar?’

‘What does that matter? I’m giving you an order. You,’ he said, jabbing a gloved finger at the technician, ‘stay here. The rest of you, with me. We’re getting Straken.’

The two soldiers exchanged a glance, then followed him out of the room. Morrell’s boots pounded the stairs as he hurried down. In the distance, but not far enough away, something exploded.

‘That mining truck we came in on,’ Morrell said. ‘Either of you two know how to drive it?’

‘Yessir,’ Loke replied.

‘Good.’

They hurried down the stairs, boots clattering, Morrell leading the way. ‘I assume the guards are still stationed outside?’

‘Yessir,’ said the younger Guardsman. ‘Hist and Deveranx are watching the doors.’

‘We’ll take them too. We need all–’

The building exploded above them. The staircase shook and Morrell lurched into the wall. Great rattling crashes came from above, as though a monster were stamping on the roof. They ran downstairs, Morrell at their head, the building groaning around them. ‘They must’ve got the comms,’ one of the men panted.

‘The place’s coming apart!’

They reached the ground floor. Morrell kicked the door open and strode out. Wreckage lay in the street. Two Guardsmen crouched beside the big mining truck, using it for cover. ‘Orks’ve shot the roof off!’ one yelled, and looking back Morrell saw that the entire comms room had been obliterated. Smoke poured from the windows. Nothing could have survived that. *Two minutes longer,* he thought, *and I would be dead as well.*

‘Get that truck going,’ he barked. ‘We’re getting Straken’s team.’

They looked at him for half a second, clearly astonished that he’d think of helping anyone. Then one cried, ‘All right!’ and ran to the driver’s door. The engine growled into life.

An ork dropped straight out of the sky. It landed nine metres from Morrell, thumping the tarmac jackboots-first, and pulled itself up. Astonished, he saw a jump pack strapped onto the alien’s back, covered in pipes and dials. Steam hissed out of leaks.

The ork wore only black: a chipped helmet with a lightning-bolt glyph on the side, and a long, tattered coat, almost in a parody of a commissar. It looked at Morrell and roared.

‘Xenos filth,’ the commissar snarled, reaching to his side. ‘The Emperor protects!’ The ork swung its huge pistol up, but Morrell was much faster. The bolt pistol roared in his hand, spitting three shells into the monster’s chest. They detonated, and it dropped to all fours, struggling under the weight of its pack. Morrell drew his power sword and almost contemptuously sliced off its head.

Something roared overhead, crashing into the city beyond. ‘Into the truck, dammit!’ Morrell bellowed. He leaped up, using the rear tyre as a stepping stone. Three men stood in the back, one manning the heavy stubber. Morrell thumped the roof of the cab with the butt of his sword. ‘Go!’

The truck rumbled into action. They pulled off down the road, past the smoking ruin of the vox tower. ‘Look!’ one of the men gasped. Like meteors, half a dozen orks streaked overhead, hanging from rockets as though they were hang-glider pilots. One lost control and spiralled into the cavern roof.

‘Go faster!’ Morrell yelled, over the roar of the engine. He glanced left and caught the eye of one of the soldiers for a moment. The man looked almost impressed. Morrell looked away, angered. What, did the Catachans think he’d run off the moment orks arrived? No, duty required Straken’s team to be retrieved. Much as Morrell despised the man, the colonel was half of what drove the Catachans forward. Straken was the only officer who all of these thugs

actually liked.

‘That crazy preacher set us up,’ Lavant said as they jogged back through the nave. ‘You don’t think he was working with the orks, do you?’

Straken led them through the pillars where he had taken cover only minutes ago. He ducked under a statue of some furious sister of the Repentia, her shaven head daubed with red paint. The desecration enraged him suddenly, and he reached up and ripped a necklace of canines and shell cases from the statue’s neck.

‘No,’ Straken replied. ‘They’d probably have killed him if he’d tried.’ They ducked into a side passage, the walls suddenly very close, and ran towards the south doors. ‘I think he worshipped them.’

Lavant said nothing, but his expression of disgust was enough.

As they reached the side doors something crashed into the nave. Straken looked back, expecting to hear Sarr’s zealots raving about destruction. Instead a brutish roar ran down the corridor, like an animal gearing up to charge. ‘Orks!’ cried Corporal Stess. The wounded man, Thorn, flopped onto a bench and groaned.

The doors opened. Straken stepped out into a flurry of lights, like massive distress flares, rockets sailed overhead, leaving trails of oily black smoke. Beyond the hab-blocks, distant but menacing, horns blared and amplified voices barked out commands.

‘Looks like we stirred things up,’ Straken said.

Lavant looked back. ‘I doubt we can hold the temple, now the orks are inside. But maybe the crypts…’

An ork flew into the side of the temple. The impact would have killed a man, but it clung there, the jump pack on its back pumping out smoke. It turned, tensing for its next leap. Lavant pulled his lasgun up and blasted a hole into the monster’s eye. It grunted and dropped off the temple roof like a broken gargoyle.

‘We fight our way back to the vox tower,’ Straken said. ‘Then we hold and call for reinforcements. After that, we’ll come back and take these scum out. Follow me!’

He turned and started to run down the side of the temple, keeping as close to cover as possible. The team followed. Above them searchlights flicked across the cavern roof, sending clouds of bats whirling like embers over a fire. Flares hissed into the air. Straken cursed Sarr under his breath; the madman had certainly got the attention he had sought.

Up ahead, just visible through the rows of hab-blocks, stood the narrow tower of the vox station. A light was on in the upper window. *They must have seen it,* Straken thought. *They'll have called in for backup by now.*

'There!' one of the men shouted, and a volley of las-shots cracked out. Straken turned, saw an ork trooper stagger as it touched down, and blasted it with his shotgun. The beast crumpled. Behind it, others slowed down to land, retro-thrusters blasting from their jump packs. 'Keep going!' Straken called.

He had gone three steps more before the vox tower exploded. Straken gritted his teeth. This was going to be hard.

The truck rolled on, rockets roaring and looping over it, as if into the heart of a storm. Morrell stood in the back like a captain on the bridge of his ship, the engine growling and rattling around him. Ork tracer fire shot above them, much too high to hit, and he wondered what the xenos scum were doing. Were they trying to hit some other target, settling scores with one another, or just shooting for the hell of it? A shell rose up from behind, falling in a broad arc to land where the ork gunfire had come from. He realised that it was a mortar fired from one of the Catachan bases further back in the hab-zone. Emperor be praised, they at least had some support.

Something rose up above the apartment blocks with a dull hum of rotors, too stable in the air to be a rocket-trooper. It was a gyrocopter, armoured but rickety, the front end bristling with guns. 'There!' Morrell shouted, pointing, but the men were already at the side of the truck, bracing their weapons on the metal. 'Bring it down!'

Heavy-calibre bullets banged into the side of the truck like hammers beating adamantium. Morrell did not flinch. He closed one eye, blocking out the racket – and fired at the pilot's face. The bolt pistol lacked the range, but several las-shots hit home, and the craft dropped out of view, driven back but not destroyed.

'Faith is our shield!' Morrell shouted. He reloaded his pistol, and the copter swung into view again. The mismatched gun barrels let rip, setting the machine swaying. Shells banged against the truck, and with a loud hiss the right tyres went down. A soldier screamed and fell back beside Morrell, his chest suddenly open and red. The commissar stepped over him and bashed the cab roof with his gun. 'Left,' he shouted, 'left here!'

The driver cursed, yelling that he knew where to go, and the truck swung out. Morrell stumbled and fell against the side, lurched upright and heard the ork

flyer swing overhead. He raised his gun and fired five times. One bolt-shell punched through the crude armour. Belching smoke, it dropped back, las-fire pattering against its flanks. The pilot thrashed around in its chair, ork blood leaking from its shoulder. Morrell nodded, satisfied.

He looked back at the road. The truck slowed as it came out of the bend, the deflated tyres flapping against the wheels. Morrell leaned out to get a better view and saw a hulking figure in an alleyway swing a rocket launcher onto its shoulder. Light flashed, and something hit him from behind, a sudden force heaving him up and over, and the road rushed forwards as he fell. The pavement smashed into him, yanking his leg a way it was not meant to go. He rolled, his coat flapping as if to smother him, and suddenly he lay on his back, panting, as the mining truck drove away. He saw a face in the back of the truck, the features set and angry. Morrell shouted, shook his fist and tried to rise.

Pain shot through his leg like lightning. He gritted his teeth so as not to scream – a good commissar never showed discomfort – and a strangled noise came out as he flopped back onto the ground.

Straken ducked into an alleyway barely more than a metre wide. He glanced back, saw that the men were all with him, and pressed on. ‘Move it back there,’ he called over his shoulder.

Something snarled above him. Straken looked up and fired in the same motion, and the shotgun blasted a looming brute of an ork back out of sight as it scrambled into view. He heard it flailing, bellowing like a stuck grox, and wished for a moment that he could leap over the alley wall and finish the vile beast off.

He ran out of the end of the alley, Lavant by his side. The captain called, ‘Are we still heading back towards the vox tower?’

‘You got any better ideas?’ Straken pulled cartridges out of his vest and loaded them into his shotgun.

An ork ran into view around the corner of the road, on foot. It saw them and started firing wildly with a clumsy, long-barrelled gun. The shots went wide, but the beast came on, shouting, and behind it xenos voices roared in answer.

Two plasma shots took the ork down, but others lumbered into view. A massive brute shoved past them, its upper body covered in a patchwork of armour plate. Straken took careful aim and hit the ork straight in the chest. Buckshot seemed only to enrage it.

The Guardsmen fell back. Marbo killed two orks with two bullets from his

ripper pistol. Lavant fired las-shots into heads and knees, slowing the orks where they were too heavily armoured to kill. But the horde kept on coming.

A copter swung over the rooftops, its underbelly studded with spotlights. Stubbers rattled, and the ground burst around the Catachans. One of Lavant's men was hit twice in a second, the heavy shells tearing through his shoulder and chest. Straken fired upwards, shattering the lights but doing little real damage. He cursed. For once, the stinking aliens had decided to keep out of range.

A vehicle rolled out in front of them. Dozens of ork soldiers packed out the ramshackle wagon, clinging to the gun-slits and running boards. They began to dismount. The orks hung back, beating their weapons together, waiting until they were ready to charge *en masse*.

Straken balled his steel hand into a fist. His men were cut off, trapped between the horde on foot and the gang climbing down from the wagon in front of them. *Come on then,* he thought. *You want to take us, you'll have to get close.*

'Catachans!' he shouted. 'Draw your knives!'

The aliens rushed forward at some unseen signal. A huge grey vehicle rounded the corner and slammed into the back of the ork wagon. Sheet metal crumbled and orks were thrown howling across the road. The mining truck bashed the wagon aside, ploughed into its former occupants and ground to a halt. A trooper worked the heavy stubber on the back, sending shells chugging into the oncoming orks. The driver leaned out the window and beckoned, shouting.

'Everybody on board!' Straken yelled. '*Move!*'

The men rushed past him. Straken laid down covering fire until his shotgun was empty. The truck's engine growled and it pulled backwards, ork gunfire slamming against the hull. Straken opened the passenger door as it picked up speed and threw himself inside.

Morrell lay on his back and tried not to pass out. They would come and get him, if he could just hang on long enough. Hopefully. He stared at the cavern roof, and tried to ignore the pain blaring up from his leg. Somewhere, streets away, there was gunfire.

He wondered what the odds of being rescued were. The Catachans had a bad record for losing their commissars. He had expected to be hated, of course, and he didn't care what they thought of him, but that was no consolation for the fact that they might well have left him to die.

The pain was sharp, but it made his head swim. Scraps of memory floated through Morrell's mind. He remembered the massed ranks of Krommenweld

cavalry kneeling before battle, singing the old hymn ‘My hands labour for the Emperor’. Well, Morrell’s hands had done the same. Too bad his legs weren’t up to it.

He snapped back. He needed to assess his wounds. Morrell gritted his teeth and tried to rise. Pain jolted from his leg. He snarled like a dog between his teeth and heaved himself into a sitting position. His coat hindered him, like a pair of shattered wings. Very slowly, steeling himself, he pulled it back and assessed his wound.

A white, three centimetre-long shard of bone protruded from his dress trousers, just below the knee. Around it the black fabric was shiny with fresh blood. The bone looked unnaturally clean against the dirty cloth. Morrell looked away, his stomach churning. The world faded again.

Someone was coming towards him. He opened his eyes, and saw an ork running across the road. The drum magazine on its gun was as wide as a dinner plate.

It stopped three metres away and tossed the gun down. The piggy little eyes were like an afterthought in the lumpy green meat of its face. The ork did what Morrell had been dreading, and its eyes moved down to his leg.

The ork laughed. Morrell hadn’t known they could do that. It took a step forwards, up to his side, and lifted its boot to stamp on the commissar’s broken shin.

Morrell raised the bolt pistol and pumped two rounds into its chest. The sound utterly cleared his mind, banished the pain. The ork staggered back, its ribcage suddenly open to the world. Morrell lifted the gun a little, sighted it and blew out the alien’s brains.

A second ork appeared in an archway twelve metres away. It saw Morrell and ran out, either to avenge its comrade or loot its corpse. Morrell fired two-handed, squinting down the barrel. The shell missed but smashed a lump of stone from the wall beside it, and the beast flinched out of view. Morrell knew that he would feel no pain while his pistol kicked in his hands.

There were two frag grenades on his belt. He’d pull the pins before they reached him. A third ork ran in from the left and, despite his thinking, Morrell’s leg seemed to scream with pain as he twisted round to shoot at the alien. Morrell’s bolt knocked the brute onto all fours, and his second shot caught it straight between the eyes.

And then they were coming from all sides, rushing in like a tide. Morrell swore and shot down another ork trooper, blew an arm off a fourth and realised

that he was almost out of ammunition. The world swung in his vision like a ship in a gale. A fifth ork, big enough to be an officer, lumbered forward, and its head exploded. Morrell fired again, but the hammer clicked on nothing. A voice cried, ‘The commissar!’ The magazine dropped out of Morrell’s pistol, and as he reached for a fresh clip, the blackness welled up and the world capsized, pitching him into dark waters below.

PART THREE

13.

Greiss stood by the window as he sipped at his amasec, waiting for the warmth of the liquor to spread through him. A third of the window was taken up by the great blue sphere that was Purbech Alpha, a mass of roiling sea three times the size of Holy Terra. Construction yards and Naval bases hung in high orbit around the planet, much like the dock to which the *Radix Malorum* was now attached.

Down there, he thought, were the vehicles, the troops, that they needed – not just to retake Dulma'lin, but to avenge the ruining of Greiss's army. Perhaps they would even find men alive on Dulma'lin. Greiss had spent the last few months trying not to hope.

How long could one docking sequence take? Scrollworked hands crawled around the face of the ancient clock mounted on the far wall. The porcelain face was yellowed and covered in fine cracks like veins. Everything looked old and broken to the general, himself included.

Four hours ago, the *Radix Malorum* had drawn alongside the Purbech orbital dock, and the docking clamps had boomed against the warship's hull. Outside, the Adeptus Mechanicus were about their work, scanning the hull, performing rites and anointments, rituals of disembarkation. *And to think that I am in charge of this army,* Greiss thought, taking another sip. *None of us is in charge of anything. Consider yourself in control, and there will always be something to trump you, some other factor to ruin your plans… We are all in the Emperor's hands,* he told himself. *From the lowest common soldier lying in the infirmary, all the way up the chain. Let us hope He is feeling merciful.*

He heard noises outside the room and flicked round. Nork's voice was low and surly. 'You go in then. But I'm watching you.'

The doors parted and the ship's chief enginseer stood in the doorway. Magister Senex was human in shape, but the smooth grace to his movements spoke of heavy bionics. He slid into the room with a soft whine of hydraulics.

‘The rituals are complete. The airlock awaits you, general.’

‘About time, too. Have you any idea how long I’ve been waiting?’

Something huffed under Senex’s hood. ‘Air particles suggest some time, with considerable anxiety. I would advise against finishing your drink, general. For a man of your body mass, it could seriously impair your functionality.’

Greiss hadn’t much wanted to polish off a whole glass, but now he made a point of doing so. Before the alcohol could hit him he said, ‘The airlock, then.’

The walls grumbled with the racket filtering up from the ship’s workshops: even while docked, the tech-priests were labouring to repair the tanks and landers that had managed to escape the disaster on Dulma’lin. *All the better for it,* Greiss thought. The more armour of their own they could provide, the more likely that the army group’s request for support would be taken seriously. Without their own weaponry, they risked being treated like refugees.

Greiss, Senex and Nork Deddog squeezed into the lift. As the mechanism rattled around them, Senex gave his report. Less than a tenth of the heavy weaponry remained. If the ship’s repair bays continued at their current pace that would rise to seventeen per cent by the time they returned to Dulma’lin – assuming that it was tactically viable to do so.

‘Of course it’s *viable*,’ Greiss snapped, trying not to think of his fellow Catachans. ‘What about the men?’

The men had fared better, Senex added, without a great deal of interest. Of course, there were casualties, but about sixty per cent of the troops were at operational quality. If he wanted any more information on them, he would need to check with the medicae. Mere flesh was not the province of the Mechanicus.

The doors slid open. Senex’s deputy, Arris, slid over to join them. Rumour had it that Arris had started off as female, before ‘improving’ herself in the name of the Machine-God. If anything, she made Greiss even less comfortable than Senex.

They stepped out into the grand airlock-atrium, the *Radix Malorum*’s welcoming suite for dignitaries and high-ranking officers. Three of Greiss’s colonels waited in dress uniforms, including Frayling. Twelve soldiers stood to attention in a row beside the airlock doors; a squad of storm troopers waited out of sight, a standard precaution. A pair of gilded servitors stood in alcoves, ready to offer wine to the arrivals. It was sophisticated but not decadent, Greiss thought. Hopefully, it would give the impression that he was not desperate for help, but had come to welcome the Purbech regiments into his glorious crusade against the orks. *Hopefully*.

‘Everybody ready?’ Greiss asked. Men nodded. ‘Open the airlock.’

Straken took the calendar off the wall and flipped it over. ‘There’s a surprise,’ he said, looking at the new picture. ‘It’s all about mining.’ According to the calendar, it was six standard weeks until the festival of the blessing of the drills, whatever that was. More importantly, it was nearly six months since the operation to free Dulma’lin had begun.

He stood in what had formerly been a central enforcer station, a grim bunker-shaped lump in the middle of the hab-district. Apartment blocks surrounded the station, the roofs now permanently manned by lookouts and missile teams. There would be no repeat of the ork raid on the vox tower, prompted by the death of Father Sarr; this time they would see the orks coming from a kilometre away, jump packs or not.

The power station was now the Catachan supply base, their rallying point in case they were driven back. Although it still held their equipment and vehicles, as well as being the main medical station, the move to the enforcer building marked a change in the operation. The Catachans were advancing into ork territory.

Straken heard boots behind him and looked round. Piter Lavant entered the room, thumbs hooked over the waistband of his fatigues. For once the captain looked pleased instead of worried.

‘Good news, colonel. We’ve got the main avenues into our territory wired. Most of the narrow streets are barricaded off. It’s like a fortress down in the hab-zones.’

‘Good. Make sure you’ve got some decent marksmen on watch, in case the orks start using copters again. We don’t want the greenskins jumping over our defences. And make sure we’ve got places to fall back to – the top brass may love a last stand, but I don’t. Keep it flexible, Lavant. I don’t care what the *Uplifting Primer* says, I want none of this standing around in lines waiting to be shot.’

‘Yes, sir. You know what they say in the Catachan Fourteenth? You can’t see your *Primer* once the trees close overhead. Colonel Carroway used to say it all the time.’

‘Carroway says a lot of stuff.’ Straken glared at the calendar. ‘We need to take this fight to the orks, take the planet back. We’ve got the bases and the gear to do it now, provided we work fast. We need to send people into the engineering area and take control of the manufactoria there, once and for all. The Emperor only

knows what the orks are doing down there – probably turning our tanks into those lumps of unholy junk they like to drive.' Straken stepped back and looked down the length of the command room. He flexed his metal arm, listening to the tiny drone of servos. 'Lavant?'

'Colonel?'

'Check our food and ammo stocks.'

'Yes, sir.'

'Make a full inventory. And fetch me the maps. I'm going to come up with a plan for taking the engineering caves.'

The great brass doors hissed and rumbled apart. Behind them was the station vestibule. It was no less ornate than the *Radix Malorum*'s welcoming suite, but furnished in a very different style. The walls were patterned with smooth swirls of green glass, in imitation of waves. Silk tapestries hung like paintings, showing stylised lancers impaling leaping xenos sharks. It looked coldly elegant.

Rows of soldiers stood around the walls. They wore tall red caps and white shirts decorated with ornate stitching. A neat, white-haired man in a green frock coat walked between them, a servo-skull bristling with scanners hovering over his shoulder.

'General Greiss, I presume? Welcome to the Purbech orbital dock. I am Hubrik Art'Aren, Arch-Factotum, counsellor and amanuensis to His Lordship High Praetor Osh'Preen. Please, do follow me.'

Greiss stepped out of the spaceship. Art'Aren's servo-skull flicked a sensor beam over him, and he blinked as the light passed his eyes. Nork growled, and Greiss feared that the ogryn would snatch the skull out of the air and crush it in his fist.

In the centre of the vestibule, stone maidens cavorted around a fountain. The fountain activated as they approached, its water tinted a lurid shade of blue. 'This way, please,' Art'Aren said, gesturing towards a pair of doors turquoise with verdigris.

They entered a comparatively small chamber, little more than twenty-five metres square. Paintings depicted mermaids and fishermen with tridents. Lamps glowed from the walls behind thin screens of liquid, giving the impression of water rippling around the room.

'This is a very traditional style,' Art-Aren said, motioning Greiss towards a throne-like chair. 'We Purbech have been a seafaring people for six thousand years. That picture there depicts an ancient folk story: the dolphin represents–'

‘Very pleasant,’ Greiss said. ‘I take it you received my message?’

Art’Aren paused. ‘Yes, I did.’

‘I’ll be honest with you, the orks hit us hard. The xenos ambushed us as we were setting down.’

Art’Aren nodded sagely. ‘Always a vulnerable time.’

‘We need to take Dulma’lin back, and fast. The orks down there have access to an entire world’s supplies – add to that the tanks we had to leave behind when we pulled back, and the potential for the enemy to rearm themselves before moving on to Ryza is enormous.’

‘Indeed so. Your request has been passed to the Third Council of Hetmen for consideration. From there, if it is found to have merit, it will be forwarded to the–’

‘Wait a moment. *If* it’s found to have merit?’

‘Of course. These things need to be considered carefully. One does not deploy an army like that of the High Praetor lightly.’

‘Listen, sir.’ Greiss lowered his voice, forcing the counsellor to lean closer. ‘The High Praetor is an officer of the Imperial Guard. His forces lie within the greater Ryza warzone. As a result, as part of the ongoing crusade against the orks in this sector, he is liable to be ordered to assist by the acting warmaster. In other words, when the warmaster calls, the High Praetor comes running.’

Art’Aren tilted his head, weighing up options. ‘And do you have such an order?’

‘Of course not.’ Greiss stopped, bony hands clenched behind his back. He reminded himself that there was nothing to be gained from choosing to let his anger show. The fountain tinkled merrily. ‘How long is this likely to take?’

‘I’ll get you an interview with the High Praetor within the week. I’ll make sure he sees the documentation. Then… Well, it won’t be easy, but if we push things through – you’ll get a decision in about a month.’

‘A month?’

‘Indeed.’ Art’Aren’s eyes moved from Greiss to the ogryn standing behind him, and he swallowed. ‘A few weeks, at most. And in the meantime I’ll ensure that you and your deputation are treated as honoured guests. All luxuries will be made available to you.’

He smiled, bowed and walked away. As Greiss watched the counsellor depart, it occurred to him that the only luxury he wanted now was time.

Gunfire banged and rattled in the city. Lasguns answered, hissing like sizzling

fat. For a moment there was silence, and then a single, grunting cry.

Captain Tanner lowered his magnoculars. ‘That’s the last of them.’

Straken stepped away from the railing. They stood on the roof of the enforcer building, looking across the hab-blocks. The front of a shopping arcade gaped at them, the doors hanging open. Anything of use in the place was now stashed in the basement of the station they occupied, its cells piled up with cans of food and spare ammunition.

It had been a swift and brutal fight. The hab-blocks to the north of the cavern had been crawling with orks, and although disorganised, the enemy had put up a fierce struggle. Ever since the battle at the temple, the orks had kept up a constant pressure on the Catachans. The aliens were still ferocious, but they seemed more cunning than before. Straken’s men ambushed them, set traps, picked off scouts and stragglers. They feigned retreats and encircled the orks that came after them. The xenos had died in great numbers, and continued to do so, but it seemed only to encourage them. Perhaps they were driven mad by the smell of blood, Straken thought, even if that blood came from other orks.

‘They keep trying, though,’ Straken said. ‘Guess they can’t resist it.’ He glanced at his chrono. ‘Better not keep Lavant waiting.’

‘He’s here?’

‘He will be. Can you imagine him showing up late?’

Lavant was waiting downstairs. The Catachans had cleared the third floor to use as a command centre – with the cogitators and filing cabinets pushed aside, there was enough space to set up a detailed map. Lavant had laid out cards on the map as though he were playing some strange new version of Heretic’s Wake, each decorated with symbols drawn in pencil.

‘Right,’ Straken demanded, ‘what’ve you got for us?’

‘Clan markings,’ Lavant replied. ‘We’ve found them in territory we’ve taken off the orks, either on banners or sprayed on walls. It looks territorial.’

Straken nodded. There were half a dozen designs, all variations on the same theme: skulls. ‘I’ve seen that before. The Death Skull tribe.’

Tanner lit up a lho-stick. ‘But different squads. Like gangs in a hive.’

Lavant pointed. ‘Exactly. I reckon that’s why we’ve not had a full-on attack since we took out Samoth Sarr. There’s no centralised leadership in the hab-caverns any more.’

Straken zoomed in on the bits of paper. Seeing their base symbols sent a rush of contempt through him. *Filthy animals,* he thought, *scrawling over the city as if they could parcel it out between them*. He glanced at Tanner. ‘That sound right

to you?'

'Yeah, I think so. I've not really been checking to see what sort of orks they are – Throne, I'd kill all of them given the chance – but yes, now you mention it.' Tanner took a slow drag on his lho-stick.

'Maybe,' Straken said. 'But who knows how the orks think? I'm not sure I want to know,' he added, more to himself than to the others. 'Thing is, we've got them divided now. Here's what we're going to do. Each of you will take a hundred men, the toughest you've got, and I'll do the same. We're going to sweep through what's left of the hab-caves and take out every last stinking ork. We'll go through every block, every apartment, search every room and wipe them out completely. Leave none behind, and take this district for ourselves. Then we'll be all set to hit the manufactoria.'

Lavant raised a hand. 'Colonel. There's something I need to raise with you.'

'What?'

'Ammunition. I checked our supplies, like you said. We're running low.'

'How low?'

The captain opened his hands. 'It's hard to say. We've not got much ammo for the heavy weapons – there's about six hundred rounds for all our heavy bolters put together. We're virtually out of krak missiles for the Sentinels. We've got plenty of mortar shells – the local defence force had a cache – and we can improvise flamer fuel without much difficulty. But it's the lasweapons that bother me. We're running out of power packs.'

Straken said, 'Make sure nobody throws a power pack away when it runs out. We can charge them by putting them in fire.'

Tanner nodded. 'Oldest trick in the book.'

'I know that,' Lavant said. 'But there's only a certain number of times you can recharge a power pack like that before it breaks entirely. What I'm saying is that we can't fight this war indefinitely. We *have* to beat the orks, and soon – while we still can.'

'You know,' Straken replied, 'this may surprise you, but I wasn't planning to sit on my arse eating mushrooms in some Throne-damned cave for the next ten years. Listen,' he added, 'I hear what you're saying. But that's all the more reason to get these hab-caves cleared so we can take the manufactoria. That's where the orks took our tanks. We hit the manufactoria, and we can salvage some proper heavy weapons.'

Lavant stared at the map, arms folded. 'All right then. When shall we do it?'

'Tomorrow night. Get good men on the job – this is going to be hard work. But

as soon as we've cleared this place, the industrial caverns'll be open to us. Then we can nail Killzkar's mechs and get the tanks back. How's that sound to you?'

Tanner smiled. 'Pretty good.'

When the lights were down and the painkillers in effect, you could remember all kinds of things.

A gaunt drill-abbot strode down the dormitory of the schola progenium's outpost on Delta Pavonis, barking out the names by which the orphans would now be known. 'Sextus, Septimus, Octavius,' he called, pointing at each bed in turn. The children accepted their new names with the numb resignation of condemned men. They did not know it, but the drill-abbot had been using the same names for the past twenty years.

Three decades later, and rows of cavalrymen knelt beside their horses as the preacher gave them the Emperor's blessing, their lances lying before them. They rose as one, the kneecaps of their long boots damp with dew, and mounted as the dawn turned to morning. And, on the far wing of the phalanx, their commissar swung himself into the saddle, his horse as black as his uniform.

And now the same commissar lay in an ancient, creaky bed at the back of the Dulma'lin auxiliary power station, propped up and riddled with drugs.

Morrell stared at the door. The medic, a miner with some first aid knowledge, was wary around him. She knew better than to get in the way of a commissar, Morrell thought. Occasionally, he would hear a male voice outside the door, a Catachan soldier sent to check on his progress. They clearly wanted him to live, or at least Straken did. Emperor only knew why. Perhaps they had some plan for him, some vicious revenge straight out of the jungle. He'd shoot himself before that happened.

The leg hurt like hell under the splints, but they said it was healing well. Soon he'd be upright, able to walk with a stick. The earlier he could be seen around the place, the better. It might make these Catachan savages remember that they served the Imperium as well as themselves.

Someone moved outside the door. The stripe of light under the door flickered as boots passed by. Morrell's hand slid under the thin blanket, to the bolt pistol he kept by his side. It felt comforting, like the presence of a pet.

It would not be long before he'd be moving again. And then, he could get back to doing something useful. He leaned back, trying to make himself comfortable. One way or another, he was almost certainly going to die a martyr out here. It was strange to think that he would join the ranks of those sitting with the

Emperor in the afterlife, their souls one with the Master of Mankind. The only real question, he reflected, was whether it would be the orks or his own men who sent him there.

14.

Straken bounded up the stairs, two steps at a time. The backs of his legs ached, but he'd known far worse. The men behind him had fought their way up five storeys of ork-infested building, and he felt a jolt of satisfaction that none of them had dared to speak a word of complaint. Then they were on the fifth and final landing, and as they began to sweep the top floor of the block there was nothing else to think of except killing orks.

Down the main corridor, the smell of dirt and old food turned the air stale. At the first door Straken nodded to the man behind him – a quick-witted, long-haired fellow called Lozasky – and stepped to one side of the door. Straken shouldered the door and charged in, shotgun first. Lozasky went second, straight into some family's long-abandoned sitting room, swinging his lasgun to cover the exits while the third and fourth men threw open the big cupboards on the far side of the room.

There weren't many hiding places, nor much reason for the orks to be here. Lozasky checked the bedrooms while Straken looked the kitchen over.

'Empty,' Straken said. 'Next.'

There were six apartments on this wing, and they checked them all. Thumps and bangs came from the far side of the building as Sergeant Halda's crew followed suit: no gunshots, but the sound of locks breaking and plasterwood being kicked in.

Mayne waited with the vox gear on the staircase, covering the rear. 'Tell the others to report in,' Straken ordered. 'Let them know this place is almost clear.'

Six more teams were working through their own blocks, from cellars to rooftops, killing any orks in the way. They'd found the greenskins drinking, brawling, looting and some asleep. At points there had been the odd bored sentry, probably on the lookout for orks from rival clans as much as human attackers, but they had been easy to take out. Tanner had reported smashing up some kind of idol in mid construction, and Straken himself had thrown a grenade

into a cellar, breaking up what had seemed to be some sort of gambling event – but there had been no centrally organised resistance, nothing beyond the wild, ragged ferocity of orks.

He dispatched the rest of the team to the roof while he listened to the reports. All was going well. Only the building to the immediate north remained, and then the whole hab-cavern would be purged.

Straken voxed off, satisfied. He and Mayne followed the others up onto the roof. Behind an overgrown communal garden, the soldiers stood at the railing, watching the northern building. Lasgun fire flickered in the windows.

'Hell of a wake-up for the xenos,' one of the soldiers said. A second man gave a brief grunt of amusement.

'Just keep watching,' Straken said. 'They may try to get out via the roof. They know they're cornered. Maybe they'll get desperate.' He'd seen the same with men, Chaos renegades during the jungle fighting on Tsaon IV. The cultists had even scrambled up trees at points, as if they could wait out the fighting there.

Something moved in a window. Straken raised his shotgun as a massive ork heaved a bipod onto the windowsill. A metre-long barrel, riddled with cooling holes, swung out to cover them, and above it a huge mouth gaped open in a brutish laugh. The men pulled up their lasguns, no longer spectators but soldiers in the fight, but they were slightly too slow.

A face appeared behind the ork's shoulder. An arm snaked round its fat neck and yanked it off balance. The beast fell back, and a man almost its size leaned forward and drove a soot-stained knife into its throat.

'Damn, that's nice work,' Mayne said.

The man stood up and calmly wiped his blade. He looked out, seeing Straken's team, and Straken recognised him: Marbo. The Guardsman looked them over, without any apparent interest, and quietly turned away.

'See?' Lozasky said to the man beside him. 'What did I tell you? That boy's not right.'

They hauled the ork bodies into cellars that would not be needed, and sealed them inside. The Catachans damaged as many of the larger ork weapons as possible, tearing the same parts from the mechanisms wherever they could, and dumped them with the corpses. The orks weren't worth looting: the explosives they carried were as much of a danger to themselves as to anyone they fought, and it was well known that the creatures' weapons would not work in human hands – should anyone even want to dirty themselves in trying. Ork guns were crudely built and threw out enough recoil to dislocate an arm – besides, it was

obvious that if a xenos weapon had an actual machine-spirit, it would be a vicious and truculent thing.

Straken ordered a second scan of the area, to make sure. The teams took civilian gear with them, specialised auspexes designed to detect buried miners in the event of tunnel collapse that were equally suited to finding ork biomass through rockcrete walls. At twenty-two thirty-eight local standard time, the last team voxed in. The area was clear. Hab-cavern Spelus Minoris, and now the entire main hab-zone, was purged of orks.

The colonel called his two captains to the roof of the last apartment block. To Straken's surprise, Lavant arrived carrying half a bottle of amasec and three mismatched glasses. Tanner toasted to victory and Catachan, and Straken felt glad that the men couldn't see Iron Hand Straken sipping from a glass.

But far more than that, he felt satisfied. Above, the artificial lights dimmed and the dented mirrors turned in on themselves, darkening the cavern below. Straken looked across the rooftops and thought, *It's ours now.*

'You've done good work,' Straken said.

'Ah, it's not work,' Tanner said. 'Killing orks is a pleasure. Now, digging latrines, going on parade – that's work.'

'Enjoy it while you can,' Straken replied. 'As soon as we've got this area consolidated, we move on the industrial caves. And Emperor only knows what we're going to find there.'

'A whole load of orks,' Lavant said. 'Except this time, they'll have armour.' He gazed out across the roofs. 'I wonder how it's going on Ryza?'

'I'm sure they're missing us,' Tanner said, and there was a bitter edge to his voice. The Ryza warzone needed every man it could get.

'Strange, isn't it?' Lavant added. 'Most of the Dulma'lin population's currently on the way to Ryza to fight the orks, and here we are, standing in their houses. If they wanted orks to fight, they could have just stayed home and saved themselves the bother.'

'Welcome to the Guard, captain,' Straken said. Tanner laughed, and Lavant cracked a smile. 'Listen,' Straken said, 'we're here, and what matters is that Killzkar never gets to Ryza. The orks came here to arm up – to loot the mining machinery, I guess. Whatever they're doing, they're doing it in the manufactoria, with our tanks. All we can do is make sure they never get off Dulma'lin.'

'You think Killzkar's here?' Lavant said. 'In Excelsis City? After all, there are other towns. Nothing like this one, but, still…'

Straken shrugged. 'Even if he's not, it doesn't matter. When he sees the fight

we're going to give him, he'll come running.'

Lavant filled Tanner's glass. 'I'll drink to that!' Tanner said.

Straken shook his head. 'I never much liked booze, even before the medicae took half of my guts out.' He put his glass down, half-full. 'Killzkar wants to get to the real fighting – every ork does. And the real fighting's off-world. Sure, he'd like to kill us, but he really wants to be breaking heads on Ryza. If he could lift off tomorrow, he would. But he needs those tanks. Once he knows we're going after his armour, he's going to go crazy, even for an ork. You'd both better be ready for it.'

'Ready?' Tanner chuckled. 'Killzkar won't know what hit him.'

'Yes,' Lavant said, 'I'm ready.'

'Then that settles it,' Straken replied. 'Now we go for Killzkar's throat.'

General Greiss was finally on Purbech. It seemed to have taken weeks to get from high orbit onto a landing pad floating on the planet's vast ocean.

The High Praetor's hunting lodge looked out onto the ocean on all four sides. Almost all the lodge was underwater; only the grand ballroom protruded above the tides. The room was thirty metres square, but already full.

'I gather that there's been some excellent sport this morning,' a young noble observed, his voice straining over the musicians clustered on the stage. 'The High Praetor shot four sharks. Baited them himself, you know.'

Beside him, General Greiss tried not to scowl. This whole business was allegedly in his honour. He had turned down the offer of participating in the hunt, in the hope that High Praetor Osh'Preen would take the hint and get to business, but no luck. Clearly, Greiss's visit was an excuse for the High Praetor to demonstrate his greatness to one and all.

'I look forward to meeting him,' he replied. 'At last.'

On the stage, two girls swished about in feathers and not much else. Greiss ignored them. *They all look like fish,* he thought. The Purbech were very pale, and their skin had a slightly purplish tint, like something that had recently died. The waves outside, throwing rippling light across the ceiling, didn't help, and the Purbech fondness for green glass gave the room a sickly, feverish quality. A mingled scent of spiced food and herbal smoke made the general's stomach turn.

'Hungry,' Nork Deddog said behind him. 'Where'd the plate go?'

He had already swallowed the whole contents of a silver tray of curried seafood, to the mingled horror and amusement of the guests, and showed no signs of discomfort – yet. The rest of Greiss's party – six storm troopers, a

servitor and Senex, the chief enginseer – neither ate nor drank. The musicians started up a new song, and Greiss thought about the *Radix Malorum*, hanging in orbit like a levitating city.

I wish I could give them a taste of the guns, he thought. *Shoot a lance strike into one of their oceans and blast a few of their damned precious fish to the surface. That'd get the High Praetor's attention. About the only thing Osh'Preen seems to get out of bed for is to go hunting.*

But the damned trouble was that, if Greiss was to command any sort of army again, if they were ever going to return to Dulma'lin, he needed Osh'Preen's help.

You're getting sentimental, he thought. *You can't face the thought of leaving fellow Catachans behind.* And then, his contempt rising as he glanced around the room, *So what if I am?*

The young nobleman had acquired an older female companion, whose silvery gown looked as if it had been blown against her in a high wind. She drew on a cigarillo and dipped her head to whisper something. The nobleman laughed at the ceiling, and Greiss felt the strong urge to conscript the pair of them on the spot. Then again, it was fairly likely that the fellow was already a Guard officer. Round here, promotion seemed to rely on birth rather than merit.

The music stopped, and the chatter of the guests dropped to a low hum. Someone laughed at the far end of the room, high and nervous, and was quickly shushed. Guards in plumed helmets pushed the guests back, clearing a path. Two carved wooden doors swung apart, and a figure entered.

'The High Praetor!' Hubrik Art'Aren called, and the band raised their instruments and blasted out a fanfare.

Lurgan Osh'Preen was about forty, wiry and black haired. He wore polished riding boots and a silver breastplate over a purple tunic. Medals glistened on a green sash. Osh'Preen strode into the room, raised his left palm in greeting, and continued between the guests.

A short, hard-looking sergeant waited at the end of the line of courtiers. Osh'Preen held out his plumed, polished helmet. The sergeant took it and backed away. For a moment the room was silent.

The High Praetor snapped his heels together with an audible bang. 'Carry on!' he called, and the crowd broke into applause. The sound of people talking again was like a collective sigh of relief.

Magister Senex stared up at the ceiling. Greiss glanced up, the priest's metal face preventing him from following his gaze, and realised what the adept had

seen. A scrollworked hatch had slid open in the roof, and half a dozen servo-skulls now hovered above the crowd, their grav engines inaudible over the rumble of voices. Scanners and guns flicked over the visitors below.

Our High Praetor is either less cocksure or more wily than he looks, Greiss thought.

The musicians started up again. A burst of high-pitched laughter hooted out from across the room. Behind Greiss, a woman said, 'Entirely drunk, of course, and quite vulgar, really, but terribly witty!'

Smiling, the High Praetor approached. Greiss braced himself.

Osh'Preen was paler than most of the guests: it was a genetic trait of the aristocracy, Greiss realised, probably caused by inbreeding. The High Praetor halted, the smile still on the edge of his purple lips, and gave Greiss the smallest bow he had ever seen.

'General. Such a pleasure to have you here.'

The skin around his eyes had the same purplish tint as his mouth. *He looks like one of the sharks he hunts,* Greiss thought. 'The pleasure is ours, High Praetor. Your hospitality is much appreciated.'

'It's nothing, honestly.' Osh'Preen waved a hand. He looked over Greiss's shoulder and smiled. 'Your slave there seems to be enjoying himself.'

Greiss turned. Nork had cornered a frightened serving girl, and was taking food from the tray she held and stacking it in his massive palm. He kept glancing back at Greiss, almost impatient for someone to threaten him.

'Is that a Catachan?' Osh'Preen inquired.

'No,' Greiss replied, unable to keep all the distaste out of his voice. 'That's an ogryn.' He remembered the barrack-room jokes from his own service, as he'd worked his way up the ranks: Catachans got big from having mated with ogryns. '*I'm* a Catachan. *That's* an abhuman. A mutant,' he added, with a little scorn. 'Tolerated despite his impurity.'

The High Praetor's purple lips stopped smiling.

'You're very kind to invite us here,' Greiss said. 'I only wish our visit could be purely social. Unfortunately–'

'Ah, yes, your plea for aid. Frankly, I'm a little surprised that it's necessary. I was under the impression that the Guard could manage perfectly well without me, for the time being. When I say me, of course, I refer to the people of this fine world.'

Greiss said, 'The orks surprised our landing force. There were far more of them than we had been led to believe. Their technological level was much higher

than our experts expected.' He smiled, as if to say, *And everyone knows how good our experts are*.

'I was under the impression that the orks were simple barbarians,' Osh'Preen replied. A girl, probably the daughter of some noble house, passed by, her bare shoulders almost as white as her dress. She looked back over her shoulder; Osh'Preen smiled and bowed. She carried on, flushing a little, and when the High Praetor turned back to General Greiss, he was no longer smiling.

'I think a lot of people thought that,' Greiss replied. The room felt airless. The lights dancing on the ceiling, reflected from the water outside, were nauseating. 'If there's any lesson to be learned from this, it's never to underestimate the greenskins.'

'I'm glad that you feel there is a lesson to be learned.' Osh'Preen beckoned over one of the serving girls and took a piece of cold fish from the platter she held. 'It sounds like you were badly served, if I may say so. These Catachans sound like a rabble.'

A servo-skull dropped down from the rafters and ran a scanner-lantern over Nork's face. The ogryn snarled, and it rose to safety.

Greiss said, '*They* were badly served. So was I. The field intelligence underestimated Killzkar's ability to counter our attack.' He sighed. He knew what he wanted to say. *Don't tell me you've not heard it happen before. Some scribe forgets to add a zero, some servitor gets a screw tightened too tight, and suddenly a billion new troops are being raised from Valhalla instead of Vostroya – you know what happens.* But even an army commander had to speak within certain limits. 'It's just bad luck,' he finished, as if he were trying to excuse himself.

Osh'Preen, from the look of him, thought the same thing. For the first time the smugness was gone. There was a little sweat on his pale, high forehead. 'Yes,' he said. 'Indeed. I know what you're talking about.' The High Praetor took a deep breath. He looked around the room as if to remember it should he never see it again. 'You'll get your men, General Greiss. Twenty standard days and we'll be ready to leave. I'll have a full mobilisation – tanks, artillery, whatever you need. But one condition, general.'

'Go on.'

'This is my army. I'm the named commander. We ride out in my name, you understand?'

Greiss wanted to recoil, as if from a slap. Anger shot through him, the same anger he'd known from the old days, when he'd led his fellow Catachans in the

field. Then he remembered the soldiers trapped on Dulma'lin, those still alive and fighting, and knew that loyalty to his old home world meant helping the living as well as remembering the dead.

He swallowed. 'As you wish,' he said, and he held out his hand to shake.

Straken felt almost nostalgic to be back in the power station. It now contained more civilians than Catachans. Mining trucks stood in a row outside, waiting to be checked and overhauled. A unit of Dulma'lin's citizens, motley but dangerous, crept through the fungal trees under the supervision of a few Guardsmen left behind to train them. The militia would never be anywhere near as good as the Catachans, but they were turning into respectable fighters. There was something about the way they held their weapons now, about their willingness to look the Catachans in the face. The cringing and the fear were going, replaced by aggression and pride.

Even Guildmaster Tarricus didn't look petrified any more. He came to find Straken with a fresh heap of maps, some of them hand drawn. He still wore his overalls, still smoked continuously, but there was a neat cap on his balding head and a freshly-polished autopistol at his side.

'Colonel,' he said, as Straken flicked through the maps, 'I've been thinking. This ork warlord you've mentioned…'

'Killzkar.'

'Right. He must have ships, yes? Spacecraft.'

Straken looked up from a diagram of industrial output. 'So?'

'So did you see any on your way in? What I mean is, where are they?'

For a moment, Straken said nothing. Then he lowered the papers. 'We didn't see anything. One of the other cities, maybe?'

'There's a maglev line running out of the industrial quarter,' Tarricus said. 'It takes gear out from the manufactoria to the other settlements. Maybe it leads to him.'

'Maybe.' Straken was interested now.

'I've been thinking,' the little man said again. 'Our guild trucks are pretty solid. We've got one or two that could go outside the city. We could scout around.'

'I thought it was the storm season.'

'Oh, it is. You go out there without the right protection, and the wind won't just knock you flying – it'll rip the skin off you as well. But some of our trucks have sealed, reinforced cabs. The wind wouldn't be able to get inside.'

‘I see. How long is the wind going to last?’

Tarricus chuckled. ‘Last? At the very least, another month. Probably more than that. It’s storm season, colonel. That’s one of the reasons we’ve been so cut off in the past. Once the winds are up, you’d be hard pushed to land anything smaller than a spacecraft. Hell, it’s the main reason why we thought Dulma’lin was safe. If the orks had landed three months later, they’d have been dead long before they ever got in here.’

Straken frowned. Killzkar’s ships would be able to take off whenever the warlord chose; ork spacecraft might be patched together, but they would at least be storm-proof. But anything smaller, including light tanks, would not stand a chance once the winds were up. Whatever battles were to be fought now, they would be fought underground. Other than the maglev line, Excelsis City was cut off.

Sometimes, he thought, *controlling where the battle is fought goes a long way towards winning it.*

Straken continued his tour of the base. Militiamen saluted as he approached, and non-combatants stood a little straighter in his presence.

Straken passed an infirmary and glanced in. Two Catachan soldiers lay on a row of beds. One was unconscious; the other raised a hand and saluted, gritting his teeth. His chest was heavily bandaged.

Straken recognised him. He was one of the lads from the raid on Father Sarr’s temple, shot as they fell back in the truck that had come to rescue them. The orks had given chase, but it would have been better for them had they hung back – they had slammed into Catachan reinforcements, and suffered badly for it. Straken nodded to the injured man and went on his way.

He met the medic in the corridor. She was called Strauss, a short, broad woman with a single bionic eye. She reminded him of the medicae personnel back on the *Radix Malorum*. No matter the rank of the officer in her midst, the infirmary was her territory, and she was not afraid to make it clear. Straken respected that.

‘Doctor,’ he said. ‘How’s it going?’

‘Good as it can be,’ she replied. ‘We’re bringing in more pallets. Figure we might need them soon enough.’

‘And how’re the patients?’

‘You’ve just seen them. Or do you mean the commissar?’

Straken nodded.

‘He’s moving about – slowly. He’s in a lot of pain – that’s an ugly wound he’s

got there. But yes, he's doing all right. He's surprisingly polite,' she added. 'Not much of a talker, though.'

'Don't talk to him if you can help it. Nothing about your work.'

'I'll be the judge of that, colonel.'

'Has anyone come looking for him?'

'No. And I've been watching, like you said. So have all my staff.'

'Thanks.'

She saw that he was about to go. 'Don't you want to talk to him?'

Straken looked at her for a moment. 'You know,' he said, 'I don't think that would do either of us much good.'

The industrial caverns were connected to the hab-zones by road and rail. Most of the mine workers owned no vehicles, Tarricus explained – instead they had been shuttled to work either by small, makeshift-looking trams or on trucks laid on by the guild. The maglev was purely industrial, and connected the Excelsis forge-works with the few other outposts of Dulma'lin. As well as being by far the largest city in terms of population, Excelsis was the centre of industry. If anything was to be made on Dulma'lin in large amounts, it would be in the manufactoria of Excelsis City.

'Damn it, which lunatic designed this place?' Tanner said as they pored over plans in the enforcer building.

'Shame the tram isn't linked to the maglev,' Lavant said. 'Then we could load it with mining explosives and a few melta bombs, and shoot the damn thing straight down the line.'

Straken sipped the Barabo tea in front of him. He'd had it warmed up – although it didn't improve the taste, the local habit of taking it cold disgusted him. Cold, the stuff tasted as clammy as condensation on the cave walls. 'There's two ways into the industrial caverns,' he said. 'First, we have the main road and tramway – the front door. It's a lot like the tunnel between the power station and the guild headquarters, except that it's much longer and wider. And probably full of orks. And even an ork can shoot straight down a tunnel.'

Tanner said, 'But…'

'There's a second way in. The access route. We can't get a large force into the cavern that way, at least not without being noticed, but we can get enough men through to hit whatever's guarding the tunnel from behind. And once the tunnel's open, we can get the heavy stuff through and clean the place out. But first, I want to recce the area so we know what to hit. Lavant, you're the demo man, so

you're coming with me. I want Halda and Mayne as well. We may as well take Marbo too – he may be half crazy, but the boy knows how to kill orks. We'll also need a local guide, someone with experience in the industrial caves. Tarricus, do you think you can arrange that?'

'I'll go,' the guildmaster said.

'Are you sure? It'll be dangerous.'

The little man didn't look sure. He licked his lips. 'Yeah. I'll do it. I know how to go quietly – I spend enough time avoiding cave-ins down in the mines. Besides, what kind of a guildsman am I if I send someone else to do it?'

'The sensible kind, I'd have thought,' Tanner said. He reached out and clapped Tarricus on the back, nearly knocking him over. The Catachan was hulking and massive beside him, confident and heavily muscled. He looked like a different species. 'I think,' Tanner said, 'our new recruit here has definitely earned himself a shot of amasec. After all, nobody rides out with the Catachan Second who doesn't have guts, right?'

Straken glanced at Lavant. The captain rolled his eyes. 'Fine,' Straken said. 'Just make sure you can all stand tomorrow.'

Lavant was having the dream again. Part of his mind knew that it wasn't real, but he couldn't make it end. He felt as if he were tied to the front of some vehicle, rolling forwards towards disaster, unable to stop but certain of the collision ahead.

He was back on Miral, moving down the slope towards the bridge. It was broad and high, spanning the gorge that split the jungle like an open wound. He looked it over as he approached, from the dirt surface of the bridge, burned and flattened by tyres and eldar grav-tanks, down to the massive struts of local wood that held it upright, lashed together with creeper-rope. He ran his eyes over the workmanship like an expert appraising a piece of art, looking for weaknesses. He wanted to look away.

Lavant felt the prickling of sweat on his neck and the weight of the det-charge in his hand. He heard his boots crunch softly on the vegetation, felt the spring of moss under his soles. He chose the place to put the charge – or rather, his body chose the place. His mind was locked in, forced to watch.

He heard voices behind him. '…the blast shoots upwards,' an older man was saying. 'Hits their tanks from underneath. Only way to get a grav-tank…'

Reaching the bridge, Lavant ducked down and slipped between the struts, to the point he wanted. Insects whined around him. A small, six-legged creature

watched him from under the bridge, staring with round, nocturnal eyes.

The explosive looked old. The Munitorum stamp on the top of the bundle was faded; chemicals had discoloured the packaging. *What a lump of junk,* part of Lavant's mind thought. *Well, you work with what you've got. That's the first rule of sabotage*.

But another piece of his mind, the part that was condemned to watch, struggled to get free.

He tied the bomb on nice and tight. Then he unrolled the det-cord, spooling it out. Lavant pushed the det-cord into the remote receiver and stuck it to the side of the bridge, a neat little box. Then he crept back.

He climbed into the bushes, where the presence of men watching the road had flattened the grass into a sort of nest. 'Signal's not getting through,' a voice said beside him. He wanted to look round, but he could not. Besides, he knew the man's face already – knew what it had been like. 'I'll go and check,' Guardsman Serradus said, getting up, and he started back towards the bridge. 'You wait here.'

Wait, Lavant tried to say. *For the Emperor's sake, I'll go. The gear's old – it might not be stable. I'll do it. Let me do it! I laid the damn bomb, didn't I? I should be the one, not you!*

Yet no words came out. Serradus looked back and smiled: a cheerful, healthy-looking lad, with a wide forehead and very clean teeth, and Lavant tried to scream as the man turned to the bridge again.

Then came the flash, the blast of noise and light, and Serradus fell over and was lost among the grass. And in his place stood a ghost, a dark shape. It looked at Lavant, accusing him, and he saw that its ruin of a face was a skull, the flesh blasted away.

He jolted awake. A hand shook his shoulder. 'Hey,' a voice said. 'Hey! Are you all right?'

Lavant blinked. He sat in the enforcer station in a leather chair, his feet up on the desk before him. Tarricus stepped back from the desk, his tired face full of concern. 'You were talking. I thought you were having a nightmare.'

Lavant got up slowly, grimacing as if hung over. 'Really? I… don't remember.' He forced his mouth into a smile. 'Well, there you go. Even Catachans can have bad dreams. Most of the time, we're other people's nightmares, but once in a while…'

'You sure you're all right? There's a shrine downstairs. Maybe you should ask for a blessing or something.'

‘Maybe.’ Lavant moved towards the door. ‘I’ll do that,’ he said, but he knew that it would take more than a few minutes’ prayer to wash the guilt away.

15.

The road leading into the industrial caves was six lanes wide. Above it, the great arch of the tunnel gaped like the mouth of a beast.

Straken crouched as near to the edge of the tunnel as he could safely allow. The orks had never been great shots, but some of their gretchin were surprisingly skilled, and the sheer volume of gunfire the aliens could put out still made them dangerous at range. He switched his bionic eye to image-enhance and willed the amplification up as far as it would go. He gritted his teeth as the eye zoomed in; the pain in his head had become sharper. Like all their equipment, his bionics were starting to show the strain.

Vehicles lay on their sides in a dog-tooth pattern, to slow anyone entering and expose them to enfilading fire. At the far end of the tunnel, the orks had built a wall of scrap, topped with small towers. A hulking figure lumbered across the barricade, a huge pair of night-vision goggles strapped over its tiny eyes. Behind it, the head of a gretchin orderly bobbed above the parapet, following the ork like a child imitating a parent.

You had to hand it to them, Straken thought. They'd got the tunnel pretty well sewn up.

The others waited a little way back, in an alleyway behind the hab-blocks. Marbo stood aside, ignoring the others as he checked his equipment. Halda leaned against the wall, watching him suspiciously. The old sergeant's beard made him look like a wild man, some sort of berserker pressed into service. That wasn't far wrong. By contrast, Mayne looked like a lad playing with a toy as he fine-tuned the vox gear. Tarricus, tiny compared to the others, sucked on a lho-stick as though he'd die without it.

As Straken came into view, only Lavant saluted. The captain was even neater than usual. Although his face had been carefully striped with paint, his hands were scrupulously clean.

'Ready when you are, colonel,' he said.

‘Then let’s go. And for the Emperor’s sake,’ Straken added, lowering his voice a little, ‘ease down.’

‘I am eased down, sir.’

‘Then I’d hate to see you tense. Let’s go, Guardsmen! All of you, stick behind me.’

They started off, picking their way between the hab-blocks, keeping out of sight of the tunnel entrance. Straken had fought in jungles countless times, and in a way this was no different. He was made for close-ranged, hard-fought war, where individual ferocity was vital and a knife was often more useful than an autocannon. And from the looks of the route they would be taking, they would be needing their fieldcraft. He heard someone cough behind, and guessed that it was Tarricus even before the miner whispered an apology.

The first port of call was a squat box of a building, formerly owned by the Dulma’lin senate’s Departmento Lux. Two soldiers waited outside: where another Guard regiment would have posted them standing by the door, the Catachans had taken point in cover nine metres away, guns covering the entrance. The watchers nodded Straken’s team through.

They entered the little building. The left side of the room was a jumble of wires and switchboards. A deactivated servitor drooped over the machinery, arms at its sides. It looked defeated and miserable, powerless.

At the rear of the room there was a hatch. Straken slid the bolts and lifted it. Steps ran down into a dark corridor.

Tarricus unhitched a lantern from his belt, broke a light-stick and put it inside. Sickly yellow light surrounded them. *Seen from the front, I’ll look like a silhouette,* Straken thought. *Great.*

He hurried down the steps and the others followed. There was dust on the floor; a prayer scroll hung on the wall, mounted behind dirty glass. He wondered when someone had last been down here – hopefully, a long time ago.

Thirty metres on, the corridor turned right. Straken followed it round. Arches had been cut into the stone, and behind them machinery stretched away. He had no idea what it did, but it was obvious that the stuff wasn’t working. In a way, that was encouraging: had the orks bothered to come down here, they would probably have stripped it for components. The pickings had been richer, and easier, in the city above them.

A statue of Saint Helena stood in a little alcove. The light halted as Tarricus stopped, fished a coin out of his pocket and placed it between the saint’s boots. ‘Old custom,’ he whispered. ‘It never hurts to favour the saints, right?’

Halda snorted derisively.

'Keep going,' Straken said. 'We can't be far off.'

The corridor sloped upwards now. The place made Straken think of tombs. They walked on in silence – thirty metres more, then fifty. Dead control panels lined the walls.

Straken saw steps ahead. 'We're here,' he said. 'Kill the light.'

He climbed the first few steps, reached up and tried the trapdoor. It would not move.

'Locked.' Straken crept up further and put his back against the metal. Lavant raised his lasgun and crouched down, covering the top of the stairs.

Straken gritted his teeth and pushed down with his legs. His metal shoulder strained against the door. He felt the machinery within his body start to grind, reaching its limits. He thought of his spine, like a jointed steel whip, struggling to straighten out…

The trapdoor began to give. Halda squeezed in beside Straken and helped. Slowly, the door started to rise.

The bolts ought to have burst open now, Straken thought. There must be something on top of it.

A sheet of metal tore loose above them. It shook as it came free, vibrating like a saw-blade. Straken stopped pushing and listened. Very carefully, shotgun first, he opened the trapdoor.

He was in a small room, much like the one at the other end of the tunnel. Here, though, it looked as if a hurricane had struck: wires dangled from walls, prayers and offerings lay smashed on the floor. Nothing electronic remained.

They followed him out. A sheet of thin plasteel had been welded to the floor and a couple of lockers put on top of it to hide the trapdoor. Overalls hung in one of the lockers.

They must have tried to keep it a secret, Straken thought. He wondered who they were – surely there couldn't be another resistance group, hiding out so close to the enemy – and thanked the Emperor anyway.

Straken crossed to the door. The others drew back into the shadows, and he turned the handle.

It swung open silently. He looked out into a vast junkyard.

It took a moment to adjust to the sheer scale of the place. The cavern was, he guessed, several kilometres across. He saw a whole complex of workshops, refineries and repair yards, linked by roads and parking bays big enough to hold ten-wheeled all-terrain trucks. That would have been awe-inspiring enough. But

the orks had heaped the place with raw materials: groundcars, tram carriages, plant machinery, mining trucks and huge containers still stamped with purity seals by the customs authorities. It was as though an immense hand had poured a bucket-load of machines over the cavern, shoving them into rough piles.

The place was alive with activity. Ork mechs clambered over the junk, directing teams of gretchin to haul out prize pieces. Several dozen masked orks sliced through sheets of plasteel with stripped-down blowtorches, the blue flames throwing an evil glow over their sweating bodies. They worked like butchers, tossing scrap into iron tubs as though carving meat from bones. Their voices hardly carried over the hiss of their burners and the clang of falling metal.

Mayne whistled softly. Straken said nothing: the lad was inaudible over the chaos outside.

Straken opened the door a little further and slipped out. He ducked down, took a deep breath and slipped behind a heap of pistons, each the height of a temple column. A moment later Lavant tore out of cover, raced the nine metres across the open ground and dropped into a crouch beside him.

Something boomed on the right. Straken looked back and saw Halda's face in the doorway behind them. He quickly raised a hand before the sergeant could emerge. Halda nodded and waited, his long hair and beard fading into the shadows around him.

'Look!' Lavant whispered, but Straken was already looking.

A scree of household goods slid down the side of one hill-sized pile of junk. A massive walker lumbered into view. Four times the height of a man, bodged together out of crane arms and ancient tank turrets, the machine waddled forward, each footstep sounding like the fall of a gigantic hammer. The thing strode between the heaps of machinery, reached out and plucked a groundcar from a great pile of vehicles. It turned the car over, as though it were looking for a weak point, and a colossal buzz-saw whirred into life on the end of the Dreadnought's right arm. Neat as a fisherman gutting his catch, it slit the car's front end open in a flurry of sparks, plucked the engine out and tossed it onto a mound of similar engines. Then it stomped on, claws flexing as it assisted its smaller brethren in tearing a tram car to bits.

Lavant breathed out. Straken tried to understand what he had seen. For a moment he watched as the Dreadnought loaded an ork truck with a heap of axles, the way a man might fill a cart with sticks. He felt as if he had been shrunk. Then he looked back and motioned for Halda to advance.

They crept out, one after the other. Tarricus ran out second to last, his short

legs pumping. Marbo was swift and casual, almost sliding out of cover.

Straken looked at the guildsman. ‘You know this place?’

Tarricus gawped at the back of the Dreadnought as it stamped a pylon into scrap. ‘I thought I did. But now…’

Lavant said, ‘I don’t see any of our tanks.’

‘Then we move on,’ the colonel replied. He pointed with his flesh-and-blood arm. ‘That way. Follow me.’

Straken checked that the coast was clear, and ran from one pile to the next. He rushed into the shadow of a mass of sheet plasteel. Doors ripped off vehicles, the walls of prefabricated buildings, off-world freight containers stomped flat by ork machines, all piled up like the sheets of documents heaped on an Administratum bureaucrat’s desk.

Emperor, he thought, *if the tech-priests could see this…* Like most Catachans, Straken had little time for the Adeptus Mechanicus, even if they had pieced him together after the land shark had bitten off his arm. Better to trust your own skill and a good knife than some metal contraption that might break down if its spirit took a dislike to you. But there was something terrible about this place, beyond mere size. It was a kind of blasphemy. The sight of orks working so methodically like this, turning humanity’s machines against their former owners, was as unnatural as a Chaos cult.

He waited for the others, then ran to the next heap of cover.

It was a pile of tyres, each taller than a man. They stank of rubber. Several had the Imperial aquila moulded into the tread. He felt tiny, as though he were one of the rats that infested the holds of the *Radix Malorum*. For a moment Straken was almost bewildered, his mind struggling to take it in.

Mayne whispered, ‘What in Holy Thor’s name are they doing with this stuff?’

‘What do you think?’ Halda growled back. ‘Making weapons. That’s all they do.’

‘Quiet,’ Straken said. ‘You all ready?’ He looked them over, his gaze settling on Tarricus. The little man nodded. ‘Then let’s move.’

Straken ducked out of cover – and an ork stared back. It carried a metal box in one hand, its burner slung over its shoulder. Under the raised mask its tiny eyes widened as it saw the human before it.

Straken’s hand flicked out into its neck. His fingers snapped shut like a trap, and he snatched his hand back, plucking the windpipe from its throat. In a second he grabbed the alien and yanked it towards him, as if to embrace it, then hauled the monster into the shadows.

The brute might be about to die, but it fought. Marbo dropped down and pushed his long knife into its chest – even then, it thrashed and spat, head shaking from side to side like a dog tearing off flesh. The ork finally stopped moving. Straken nodded at the tyres.

They heaved the body up between them, muscles straining, and pushed it into the middle of a pile of tyres as if shoving it down a well. The corpse slid into the makeshift tube, hidden except for a pair of boots jutting from the end. It would do, Straken thought. If the orks ever found their comrade, they'd probably just smile at the indignity of its death.

The truck was loaded now. The driver snarled something at the orks still cutting scrap, and one laughed. Then the vehicle rolled away, engine growling. It turned right, behind a column of rock, and disappeared from view.

'That way,' Straken said.

The Dreadnought stomped past, each footfall like an explosion. Straken watched it, recalling the days when he'd learned to hunt on Catachan, hiding from beasts as large and brutal as any ork walker. As soon as it had turned back to the piles of junk, he signalled to his men and crept out.

The six men slipped out of cover and hurried towards the turning point where the truck had gone. They had run ten metres when Tarricus said, 'I hear something!'

'Yeah, your own voice,' Halda growled.

Lavant said, 'No, he's right. A vehicle.'

'Move it,' Straken snapped. 'Into the shadows, now!'

They rushed towards the cavern wall. An overhang of rock threw a shadow across the road; they pressed against the stone as though sheltering from a storm. An ork truck turned the corner and rumbled past, belching thick black smoke. The wagon shook and rattled past them, bouncing on armoured tyres.

Tarricus pulled a rag out of his belt and wiped his bald head.

'You all right?' Straken asked.

He nodded. 'Yes – yes, I'm fine. That was a bit close, that's all.'

'Then let's go.'

They moved up, following the road, ignoring the bangs and rumbling that rang through the cavern. Straken crouched down, checked that the way was clear and turned the corner.

Row upon row of battered armoured vehicles lay before him. They were parked as if in some huge tailback, in rough lines that obscured the view beyond. Straken saw Leman Russ battle tanks, the flat rear hatches of Chimera personnel

carriers, the loading platforms and huge artillery cannons of Basilisk self-propelled guns, all ranked up as though waiting to embark on a gigantic ship. All had been gouged and dented by gunfire; several were little more than hulks.

The orks had parked the tanks with enough space to slip between them. *It's like a maze,* Straken thought, and he ducked down and crept into the ranks of armour.

The sides of the tanks surrounded him like walls. The ground was slicked with spilt oil. The smell of promethium and greased metal filled the air.

'Watch the turrets,' he said. 'The orks might be sitting on top.'

He advanced. At the end of each tank, he took a careful look to check that the enemy were not near – whatever the xenos planned to do with their loot, they clearly hadn't got round to it yet. A great drumming rumble grew around him. Something big was ahead.

'Emperor,' Mayne whispered. 'How many tanks *are* there?'

'Quiet,' Straken said, but the lad had asked the question in his own mind. How many vehicles had Killzkar captured? How large was this army of his?

There were at least a hundred tanks, Straken realised, in various states of repair. Enough to win a battle – enough, perhaps, to tip the entire Ryza warzone in the orks' favour. Killzkar's operation was simply vast.

Then Straken heard something else – an ork voice amplified by some kind of vox-array, and under it a sound that made him freeze.

A man was screaming. A gabble of words came out, some sort of plea, and then another louder shriek. Then the amplified voice roared again, and a boom accompanied it: the beating of a drum. Straken gritted his teeth, steeling himself for what was to come. He strode past the last few vehicles and looked into the cavern beyond.

The orks had turned it into a sort of hell. It was like some Ecclesiarchy sermon about the engines of the damned.

A gigantic steel idol rose against the rear of the cavern, almost scraping the roof. Smoke wreathed a head the size of a Baneblade super-heavy tank, its front crudely shaped into a caricature of an ork face. Hundreds of welding torches gave the monster a daemonic, glowing outline. Greenskins stood in the mouth, shouting instructions to the rickety cranes mounted on the scaffolding that surrounded it. Three copters carried a Chimera turret between them, lifting it to join the mass of heavy guns mounted on each shoulder.

'They're making a *gargant*,' Halda said.

Straken stared at the thing, repulsed. The monster's chest and belly was a

patchwork of tank armour, punctuated by flaps from which guns protruded. Straken saw bits of Imperial vehicles, tiny against its body. A barrel wide enough to hide a Sentinel jutted from the belly.

The right arm was a mass of guns and missiles. The left was still being assembled.

At the beast's feet, at least a hundred men were chained together. Some wore tattered uniforms, others miners' gear. Many wretches had dressed themselves in sacking, their uniforms long since fallen apart. Between them they dragged a huge drilling machine, the size of a railway carriage. It ended in a tapering screw.

Tarricus made the sign of the aquila. He looked like he was about to faint. 'Saints protect us,' he gasped.

Four other drills were already in place. Orks stood on top of them, welding and blasting huge rivets into the girders that connected them. Pistons and hinges linked the rear portions of the drilling machines, so they could be moved.

It's a hand, Straken realised. *It's the gargant's hand.*

Several men flagged in their chains; one or two actually looked dead, dragged on by their fellows. The drum sounded again, and they strained, scrawny arms hauling the drill a few metres closer while the orks bellowed.

Straken had seen men's faces like that before, but never away from the battlefield. The gargant loomed over the slaves like a wrathful god. The captives' labour, and their death, was a sacrifice to it.

Very quietly, Halda said, 'You think the Emperor can see this?'

'I don't know,' Lavant replied.

Marbo spat.

'No, no.' Tarricus seemed suddenly to collapse. He staggered to one side, and flopped against a Hellhound tank. 'Emperor save me.' He turned to look at the colonel. 'These are my people, Straken.' He caught his breath. 'And to think we hid! There we were, all that time – hiding – when this was happening.' Tarricus raised a hand and covered his eyes. '"Essential personnel!" We thought we were lucky when the Guard didn't take us off to Ryza.' Grief twisted his voice as well as his face; his mouth was wrenched downwards, like the masks Straken had seen Chaos cultists wear. 'Essential? They should have taken us all to Ryza!'

The Catachans stood there, five heavy, muscled soldiers, while the small man in overalls put his head in his hands.

Marbo glanced at Straken and raised his eyebrows. Straken shook his head.

'Easy, man,' Straken said. 'Easy.'

‘Emperor pity us,’ Tarricus moaned.

Straken looked at Lavant. ‘Have we got enough explosives to destroy that thing?’

‘Back at base,’ the captain replied. ‘Provided we can get a truckload of them up here.’

‘We can. Tarricus, we’re going. I need you to keep quiet. Think you can do that?’

The guildsman stared at Straken as if he had never seen him before.

‘I said, can you do that?’

Tarricus swallowed. He took a deep breath and nodded. ‘Yes.’

‘We’re coming back,’ Straken said. ‘We’re going to blow that thing sky high. Then we’ll take our tanks and run these xenos scum off the planet.’

‘What about my people?’ Tarricus demanded. ‘We can’t just leave them, Straken. Not like that. Throne, it’s better to die than–’

‘Them too,’ Straken said. ‘We’ll bring them back as well. Let’s go, people. Marbo, lead the way.’

He watched as the others turned. The drum was sounding again, the orks roaring and grunting over the whine of motors and the banging of hammers on metal. With a sound like the slamming of a colossal door, the copters dropped another turret onto the gargant’s shoulder. Immediately, a team of orks scrambled onto it, spraying red paint over the Imperial markings. A voice snarled over a loudspeaker. Straken turned away and followed his team.

He took half a dozen steps and looked back. The gargant loomed up, as gross and brutish as the ork gods it was supposed to represent. Aliens stood on the war machine’s head, outlined against the red glow of engines and orkish blowtorches. Straken boosted his vision.

They were the mechs, the architects of this monstrosity. Several held up tattered plans. Most wore helmets festooned with lenses and sighting gear. Gretchin assistants swarmed around their knees, holding up blueprints and oversized tools.

A huge mech rubbed its chin with a metal hand. Two jointed arms folded down over its shoulders like the claws of a mantis, ending in what looked like welding torches. It wore a Space Marine’s shoulder pad strapped to its left arm, the cog-and-skull symbol of the Adeptus Mechanicus embossed on the ceramite. That meant that it had killed a Techmarine. Even a large ork would find that extremely difficult. Straken realised that he was looking at the boss of the mechs.

He remembered the ragged men slaving at the gargant’s feet, sweating and

dying under the ork whips, and thought, *I will kill you. All of you, even if I have to pull the whole planet down on your heads to do it. Your precious gargant will be scrap once I'm done. None of you will leave this world alive.*

He turned away and followed his men.

The guardposts were heavily manned. Behind them, a converted groundcar was doing the rounds, carrying gear and food between the lookout points. When he'd finished monitoring the day's patrol, Tanner caught a lift with the driver and his assistant and headed south.

The men chatted among themselves. Tanner made a bit of small talk, laughed at a couple of jokes about hab-dwellers, but the business he had planned hung over him like a cloud. *The men see it,* Tanner thought. They knew that he was preoccupied with something. *Well, let 'em think what they like*.

They passed twenty of the survivors of Dulma'lin, now its militia, advancing down the street in combat gear under the eye of a lieutenant called Korth. It must be strange, Tanner thought, to practise fighting in the same streets where you'd once lived. Perhaps, when the orks were all dead, the Dulmalians would live there again.

The car dropped him off at the edge of the mushroom forest and swung away, heading for the guild headquarters. Tanner gave the soldiers on board a cheery salute and set off alone, his face hardening as soon as he looked away.

He felt much more nervous than he had expected. As he walked between the white trunks of the fungal trees, he couldn't help but glance over his shoulder, although he knew that no one was there. Had somebody been following, he would have noticed them long ago.

There was nothing to worry about. He'd give the medics a suitable story – a lookout falling from his post at the chapel down the road, perhaps – and even if they didn't all go to check it out, he'd have enough opportunity to get to work. He thought about the laspistol at his side, and the knife on his left hip. It would be easy.

And yet he still wanted to search the area. Tanner looked back the way that he'd seen Lavant looking sometimes, as if expecting to see an evil spirit following him, or a sniper tracking him. As Tanner reached the power station, he realised what it was: not the fear of pain or death, but the knowledge that he was about to do something that his commanders, and the whole bureaucracy of the Imperial Guard, would never allow.

Morrell's back was uncomfortable. He stood up from his chair, grimacing at the far wall. At least he'd been able to get the medic to remove his splint, and to move back to the room at the rear of the power station, taking a pallet-bed with him. He was not a good patient, and enforced idleness infuriated him. He'd been tempted to hack the bandages off with his power sword a month back, although that would probably have taken his leg off too. Morrell was an enthusiastic swordsman, but not a precise one.

He limped across the room and lowered himself onto the pallet. He could walk with a stick now, although he limped like a broken servitor. Good thing that he'd brought his marching boots; the other pair had been sliced open to get to his wound. Now the pain was no longer a sharp jabbing at the surface of the wound, but a deeper ache, steady and relentless, that told him that he was almost healed.

Not long, he thought, *not long at all.* Soon he'd be leading from the front again. That was the only way to get through to these Catachan louts, he'd decided; probably the only reason why they hadn't left him for the orks was that he'd been surrounded by dead xenos when they passed by.

Strangely, he'd not heard from the medics for a few hours. Perhaps they thought they had better things to do. They weren't a bad lot – technically out of his jurisdiction, not being military personnel, but sufficiently afraid of him to actually do their job and obey when he told them to leave him alone.

The stripe of light under the door flickered. Someone was outside. Morrell slid his hand to his side and called, 'Medic? I need–'

The door opened. A fist that held an autopistol came in first, as a voice above it said, 'Don't move.'

Morrell froze, his hand near his own gun – but not quite on it.

Tanner walked in and closed the door behind him. 'Commissar,' he said. 'And how are we today?'

'Where are the guards?'

'Busy elsewhere. They had a report of a fall a little way away. They'll be back later… But not too soon. Anyhow, how are you these days?'

'I was getting better,' Morrell replied. 'But now…' The words came out with a little difficulty. He had always expected to laugh in the face of certain death, but now that it had come for him, he seemed destined just to sit and glare at it.

'That was quite a fall you took, out of the back of that truck. I'm surprised you didn't get more injured.'

And no doubt disappointed, Morrell thought.

'I think you were pretty lucky. In fact,' Tanner added, taking a step closer to

the bed, ‘there’s a nasty rumour going round that you didn’t fall out at all. I’ve even heard people saying that you were pushed.’

Tanner’s face was quite round, for a Catachan, and while he wasn’t fat – none of them were – there was something about his features that suggested jollity. He was the sort of man who looked best smiling. The cold resolution of his features made him seem unwell, or crazed. The pistol appeared tiny at the end of his muscular arm, gripped in his massive fist.

Quietly, Tanner sat down on the end of the bed. Morrell felt the weight of the bed shift, and for a moment thought his leg was going to hurt. It didn’t.

‘I expect you want to talk about the man I executed,’ Morrell said.

‘His name was Zandro.’

‘Zandro, then. I suppose you expect me to have to explain myself to you?’

‘You can try. Seeing as I’m the one with the gun, you might want to try pretty damn hard.’ The calmness of Tanner’s voice was frightening. Morrell had expected him to rage, to wave his arms around to give the commissar time to grab his bolt pistol from under the sheet. No such luck.

‘He broke rank,’ Morrell said. ‘I saw him come running back from the gates, shouting about falling back, giving the order to retreat out of thin air. He gave no reason for running, no plan for a rendezvous or a second front. It looked like cowardice.’

‘Zandro was a friend of mine. He was a good soldier – not a coward. The Emperor knows that. So does everyone else.’

‘I can only tell you what I saw, and what I saw was a Guardsman attempting to initiate a full retreat. We all have our duty, captain,’ Morrell replied. ‘Yours is to destroy heresy on the worlds of the Imperium. Mine is to destroy it in the hearts of men. Better one man should die than a thousand, or even a dozen, risk corruption.’ He was reciting the phrases his tutors had drilled into him at the schola progenium, but they were not just a comfort – they made him feel proud. So what if he was a brutal man, doing a thankless job? So what if this half-savage Catachan was going to kill him over the death of some unimportant thug that he’d considered a friend? Morrell would die without fear, as hard and unforgiving as the Emperor could want a commissar to be.

Tanner didn’t pull the trigger. He still wanted to talk. ‘You know, I thought about that. Whether you really thought Zandro was breaking rank, or whether you just killed him because you didn’t much like the guy… Maybe you were honestly wrong. But you know what I think, commissar?’

‘No,’ Morrell said. ‘And I don’t care what you think, captain, no matter what

sized gun you point at me.'

'That's exactly what I thought. You don't give a toss. After all, it's only some Guardsman. If you get it wrong, there'll always be some other poor kid to take his place. The one thing the Imperium isn't going to run out of is men. You people think you're doing the Emperor's work, which in actual fact means you get to do whatever you like. You don't see many soldiers complaining to the Commissariat, do you?'

Morrell waited.

'I'm not going to kill you,' Tanner said. 'Want to know why? It's not because you don't deserve it, because as far as I'm concerned, you're a murderer. I don't give a damn about you – to be honest, the galaxy would be a better place with you not in it. But I've got orders not to harm you, orders from someone worth hearing. Catachan's a hellhole, you know, for all we talk about it like we miss it. But anyone who can get out of there alive is worth listening to. If it wasn't for Straken I'd be dead a dozen times over. You'd be dead too. So when *he* gives an order, I listen. As for you, you're just another leash they send to keep us in line, while they give us the dirty work to do.'

He slid the gun into a holster on his hip. For a moment, Tanner could have been a friend come to visit a sickly relative.

'Get well soon, commissar,' he said, and leaned over as if to pat Morrell; instead, he thumped his palm down on the commissar's leg.

Pain shot through the Morrell's body like lightning. He yelped. He heard himself hiss between gritted teeth. Aftershocks ran through him. As Morrell took a slow, deep, pained breath, Tanner rose to his feet and opened the door. For a moment the light outside silhouetted the captain, and then the door closed and Morrell was alone again.

Very slowly, he reached out and touched his leg. Emperor be thanked, it hadn't broken again. It hurt – the ache was as steady and pounding as a tide – but it was just the bruising that Tanner had hit. Already the agony had begun to fade, although it would be a long while before it was gone.

He sat there, feeling one emotion after another. First, relief, and then furious outrage that some ignorant jungle-crawler could address a commissar like that. And then confusion as to what he would do next. He wondered what would cause Tanner the most distress, and then what a perfect commissar would do. Only then, when he had answered none of those questions, did Morrell realise that he could easily have shot Tanner in the back as he left the room.

16.

Two days later, Straken moved his men up through the hab-caverns. He told Lavant to bring his best: a hundred infiltrators and demolitions experts, men with long histories of sabotage and reconnaissance. They swung out on an arc, to avoid the mouth of the tunnel that led into the industrial caves. They were the first team.

The second team consisted of several hundred men, under Tanner's command. Once the infiltrators had hit the tunnel defences from behind, the main assault would begin, down the tunnel and into the caverns beyond. From there, they would fight their way to the gargant and blow the accursed thing apart.

Straken watched his troops advance. They passed as quietly through the empty streets as they would have done through a jungle. Faces, knives and gun barrels were darkened with soot. Commands were made in whispers and hand signs; for once, nobody joked. The sight of the Catachans advancing reminded him of the falling-back from the gates, when Killzkar's mechs had brought the Guard tanks into the city. But this time, the faces were hard and determined, the pace of the men's boots quick and businesslike. Emperor willing, today the war was truly going back to the orks.

Their heavy weapons were carried in mining trucks. Extra armour had been welded onto the vehicles, great slabs of plasteel cut out of the guild buildings, so that they looked like metal castles on wheels. A truck slowed before him, and Hal-Do Tanner jumped down. Seeing him approach, Straken realised how similar the captain's usual jauntiness was to the hunger for battle on his face right now.

'How's it going?' Straken asked.

'Good. The men're keen, that's for sure. It'll take an hour to get into position. Just give us the signal once you get to the top of the tunnel and we'll come down to meet you. And Emperor help any ork that gets in between!'

'What about the locals?'

‘They’re just as eager. They’ve got just as much love for the orks as we have – maybe even less.’ He smiled, without much humour. ‘If you tell old Tarricus that the raid’s been put back, he’ll probably go in there himself, with an autogun in one hand and a hammer in the other.’

‘He’s got cause,’ Straken said. Another truck rolled past, rumbling and creaking under its new armour. A Sentinel strutted along behind it like a handler driving a beast, a pod of krak missiles fixed beside the cab.

And then there were the orderlies, standing ready to take the inevitable wounded out of the line as quickly as possible. Even the stretcher bearers carried shotguns and autopistols: the orks made no exceptions as to who they killed. A groundcar stopped nearby, the back doors opened, and a familiar figure limped out.

Commissar Morrell walked with a stick. He wore tough army boots like a common soldier, but otherwise his uniform was undamaged, if dirty. He approached, grimacing a little, and stopped a couple of metres away. He saluted.

‘Colonel,’ he said. He looked up towards the cavern roof. It was the Dulmalian equivalent of the small hours, and the light diffusers were off. Shapes spun and wheeled in the dark; the great bat-birds sweeping lazily through the clouds.

‘Commissar. How’s the leg?’

‘Healing, thank you. Almost done, in fact. However, I doubt I’ll be running anywhere soon.’ He took his cap off, ran a big hand through his dark hair and jammed the cap back on. ‘Anyway, I’m ready to resume my duties.’

‘Good. You’re going in with the main force. Captain Tanner here will be leading. If any order to retreat comes through, check it on the vox with him before taking any action. Understand?’

‘Loud and clear.’

‘The signal to advance is a green flare. Once you see that, the team you’re with will attack down the tunnel. It’ll be tough, commissar. My men will stick it out, but keep an eye on the locals. They want revenge, but they may run once they start taking casualties.’

‘Understood. I’ll make sure they stay put.’

Morrell saluted again and limped back to the groundcar.

Straken looked at Tanner. ‘Still got a problem with him? Because if you have, it waits until this is done.’

‘I’ll always have a problem with him. But don’t worry. He’ll live.’

Straken took a deep breath. ‘Are you all set?’

Tanner nodded.

‘Then get your people ready and wait for my sign. Once the flare goes up, get in there and kill every green scumbag you see. Remember, we can’t get any armour up to the gargant until the tunnel’s cleared.’

Straken headed off to join his team. He took the same route they had used two days ago, when scouting the way in.

Just over a hundred men waited at the entrance to the service tunnel. For Catachans they seemed heavily equipped, with satchels and rucksacks as well as their usual gear. It was almost all explosives. If they were to wreck the gargant, they’d need all the equipment they had.

Lavant gestured to his team. ‘We’re all set, colonel.’

‘Then let’s move.’

The captain whistled. ‘We’re moving out! Form up, men! The colonel’s command squad goes first, then the rest of first team follow Sergeant Dhoi. Second team, you’re with Sergeant Carrow here.’

‘Right.’ Carrow wore a broad-brimmed hat, the Catachan bandana protruding from under it. He wore his combat vest open – his forearms and bare chest were tattooed with camouflage patterns. ‘Second team, move out the way. Let the others through!’

Straken was the first to enter the Departmento Lux electrical room, Sergeant Halda and Private Marbo close behind. They lifted the trapdoor and descended quietly into the smell of damp concrete, taking the tunnel they had followed before. Lavant and Mayne followed.

‘Vox is out of range,’ Mayne said.

‘Turn it off until I say,’ Straken replied. ‘The orks may be able to target the signal.’ He wondered what they would face, once the fighting began. Ork mechs had a strange way with machines; for brutes, they could build some remarkably complex and deadly weapons. *We can take them,* he thought.

They advanced down the passage, boots quiet on the dusty floor. Up ahead, the steps rose to the trapdoor. *Ork territory*.

He gave the hand signal for silence, and motioned for the team to dim their torches. They waited behind him in near darkness, the edge of the trapdoor marked out by a strip of light. As he had done two days before, Straken put his metal shoulder to the trapdoor and carefully pushed it up.

He climbed into the shed, hearing Marbo and Halda behind him. He motioned them to one side. Taking hold of the door, Straken opened it a crack.

Outside, nothing moved. It was three hours before the artificial dawn. The great heaps of parts and junk looked like hills in a metal landscape.

‘Looks clear,’ he whispered.

‘Colonel.’

Straken looked round. Lavant crouched beside the trapdoor, shielding his torch with his hand, looking at something on the ground.

‘Colonel, there’s something here, tied to the trapdoor. It looks like a piece of wire.’

‘A trap?’

‘I don’t know. It leads off into the wall. Doesn’t look like it does much.’ Lavant ran a gloved hand over his chin. There was tenseness to him that Straken didn’t like. ‘At least, not any more.’

‘Was it there when we came here before?’

‘I don’t know.’

For a second, Straken wondered what to do. What if the orks had detected them, somehow? No, orks couldn’t do something like that, not secretly. Then he thought of the scalped bodies they’d found in the lead up to the raid on Father Sarr’s temple. But surely that had been the work of men, not aliens.

There was no real choice in the matter. ‘Follow me,’ Straken said. ‘Be careful.’

He crept out into the dark. His men followed, spreading out from the entry point in standard formation, splitting to cover the angles. Straken ducked behind a heap of engine blocks, piled up like ribcages outside a monster’s den. There was something almost elegant in the way his men moved out and divided into groups, as if he was watching a machine go to work. He counted twenty, then fifty of them.

As the eighty-sixth man emerged, the flares went up.

They shot up like frightened birds, a dozen lights shooting skywards to burst and flood the ground below. ‘Ambush!’ Straken cried, and a hand-cranked siren wailed.

In the stark light of the flares, massive figures lumbered towards the Catachans. They broke from cover, seeming to form out of the junk itself. Straken saw tiny red eyes and broad, stooping bodies covered in armour plate, and then the orks opened fire.

Half a dozen men went down in a second, their blood black in the hard light. ‘Take cover!’ Straken shouted, but his men had already thrown themselves down, firing from prone. Lasgun blasts smacked into the nearest ork, sending it stumbling in a weird dance before it hit the ground. Someone cursed. Straken fired his shotgun into a brute in goggles and the remains of a long coat, blowing its hand off. It bellowed and rushed him, waving a massive wrench, and his next

shot destroyed half the beast's head.

A storm of gunfire came from the left. Floodlights banged into life. On a raised platform, greenskins worked shoulder-mounted cannons. A corporal was hit by some kind of beam and blown to pieces. One of the orks staggered back in a flurry of sparks as his gun malfunctioned. Straken saw a trooper hurl a grenade. Lavant yelled something about covering fire.

Straken blasted at the walkway. He hit an ork gunner in the leg, and the weapon slipped off its shoulder as the alien's knee buckled. Sergeant Carrow passed something to Marbo, a broad flat disc, and Marbo rushed out of cover, head down, towards the orks.

Somebody shrieked from behind. A huge ork, almost two and a half metres tall, had grabbed one of the demolitions team and was beating him against the ground. Straken tried to get a clear shot, couldn't, and ran straight at the monster.

The siren hid Straken's war cry. At the last moment the ork looked round, and Straken rammed the butt of his shotgun into its jaw. The beast dropped its prey and stumbled back, and Straken's metal hand grabbed its forearm, the steel fingers tearing into alien muscle. Howling, the ork reached for its pistol, and Straken yanked his knife from his belt and buried it in the ork's throat.

An explosion made Straken turn. He looked round just in time to see the walkway collapse, pitching the ork gunners onto the ground. Marbo led the charge, hacking the fallen orks before they could respond. Weighed down by their cannons, they were cut to pieces almost instantly.

The siren faded and died. But further back in the cavern, others rose to answer it.

Lavant glanced at Straken. There was no need for either to mention the wire on the trapdoor. 'They were waiting,' the captain said.

'The tunnel,' Straken said. 'We've got to give the signal.'

Lavant nodded. 'I think–' he started, and then he threw his arm out, pointing. 'By the Throne – look!'

A vast form lumbered out of the dark, belching smoke. The ork Dreadnought came for them like a runaway train, the voice of its driver amplified into a deafening roar. It batted a pile of sheet metal aside with one arm and ploughed straight through what remained. The sound was like a car crash.

'Move!' Straken bellowed, jabbing his arm towards their destination. 'Go!'

The last few soldiers emerged from the trapdoor just as the Dreadnought reached them. It stomped the shed flat, the screams of men mingling with the whine of servos in its massive legs. It reached down with its gangling arms and

grabbed at the Catachans. A fist designed for cutting plasteel scooped up three men and scissored them into bits. Lasgun fire pattered off the patchwork body.

Straken glanced at Lavant. ‘We need explosives. What’ve you got?’

Lavant opened the satchel at his side. Half a dozen melta bombs lay inside like eggs in a nest.

‘Good.’ Straken took one, Lavant another. ‘With me.’

The Catachans ran from the machine, scattering out of reach. Teams covered each other with lasgun fire, but they hardly slowed the Dreadnought. A grenade burst against its side, to no effect. A pair of demolitions men lingered too long, and it punted them as though kicking a ball. Broken bodies flew from its massive foot. The Dreadnought’s speakers howled with laughter.

It’s not seen me, Straken realised. ‘Now!’ he cried, and he ran out behind it.

He rushed at the Dreadnought, Lavant beside him. The captain was a little faster. He darted at the massive legs, matching his speed to the rise and fall of its huge feet. At the last moment Lavant changed course, and as the leg smashed down beside him he slapped the bomb against the great cog of its ankle.

Lavant threw himself aside, hit the ground and rolled. He came up as Straken primed his own bomb. Straken hurled it overarm, and as it struck the back of the ork machine, Lavant’s bomb exploded.

The blast was small but massively powerful. In a rush of white fire the Dreadnought’s knee buckled and collapsed. It flopped forward, claws breaking its fall. The speakers bellowed. Six men rushed forward and hurled fresh explosives as it struggled to rise. The explosives hit the Dreadnought like razorwings diving on a stricken animal, and Straken looked away as a second set of explosions flared into life.

The Dreadnought was silent now. But it had drawn others to the fight. Hulking shapes gathered behind the piles of junk, their gretchin minions hauling up heavy weaponry.

‘Move it!’ Straken called. ‘To the main tunnel!’

In Tanner’s command squad, a scar-faced lieutenant watched the tunnel entrance. He twisted round, lowering his magnoculars. ‘Cap. We’ve got firing down there.’

‘How come? Give me those.’ Tanner knew the answer before the man handed him the magnoculars. For half a second he hoped that it was just another of the bloody arguments through which the orks gave and received commands, but that would be too much of a coincidence. Straken’s party had been spotted.

The image enhancers on the magnoculars turned the tunnel into a moonlit shadow-world. Looking down, Tanner saw the ork watchtowers strung across the tunnel and, below them, the massive plasteel wall marking the edge of the ork mechs' domain. Figures moved on the battlements, pointing further down the tunnel. An ork wearing a bizarre headset yanked a mounted gun off its tripod and disappeared from view.

They must be sending troops after Straken, Tanner thought. *Or else they just can't bear to hold back when they know there's a fight going on.* Whatever it was, Tanner had no choice.

'What's going on, trooper?' Morrell stood a few metres away, addressing the lieutenant.

Tanner said, 'They've spotted Straken's team. Get the locals ready. We're going in.'

The commissar stared at the tunnel for a moment, as if expecting to see the flare that was supposed to signal them to advance. Hatred ran through Tanner's body like a shot of poison. He'd spared Morrell once already. If the leash played up now, he'd nail him and damn the consequences. Right in front of the men, in front of the locals too, and they could report it to the Emperor Himself if they liked.

'Right,' Morrell said, and he turned awkwardly, leaning on his stick. 'Good luck, captain. Emperor protect.'

Tanner turned to his men. 'Quickly! Get the trucks forward. I want full Sentinel cover on this! Move out!'

The orks had hardly bothered reinforcing the rear of the tunnel. Straken couldn't tell whether they had tried to make chicanes or just strewn the road with broken vehicles. Now the wreckage made excellent cover for his men.

Other Guardsmen might have flinched at the idea of fighting orks at close range, but then they weren't Catachans. The demolitions men rushed the back of the ork defences, and the battle for the tunnel began.

'Mayne!' Straken shouted, ducking for a moment behind a burned-out enforcer wagon. 'Get Tanner on the vox. Tell him to get his people moving. We'll distract the orks while he hits them from the front.'

A frag grenade boomed up ahead. Orks grunted and bellowed in pain. 'Say what?' Mayne called back.

'Do I have to do everything here? Just tell Tanner to get his lazy arse moving.' He glanced over his shoulder, back at the great yard. Orks scurried between the

piles of junk, setting their guns up. This bunch seemed less keen to run into close combat than the brutes in the main city, but they made up for it through firepower. Straken's men would have to move quickly to avoid being trapped.

He ran forward, and a pinging hail of bullets crashed into and through the enforcer wagon. Straken ducked back, cursed and pulled a grenade from his belt. He flicked the pin out, counted two seconds and tossed it over the wagon. A gretchin shrieked over the bang of the grenade, and an ork bellowed some sort of command.

Straken ran out of cover and saw an ork champion shouting orders to a pack of gretchin clustered round a mortar. In a moment Straken saw the rear of the enemy battlements. Bulky green figures operated mounted guns on the wall, firing not at Straken's team but down the tunnel, away from him.

That means Tanner's begun his attack. Thank the Emperor for that. Now, I just need to–

The champion saw him and charged. Below the waist it was a mass of pistons; one hand had been replaced by a whining buzz-saw. The big ork let out a gurgle of laughter, almost childish, and Lavant ducked in from the side and emptied half a lasgun magazine into its flank.

Most of the shots were wasted on armour plate or the brute's thick hide, but it was enough to make the ork swing round to face this new threat. Enough time for Straken to leap in, ram his shotgun under the alien's chin and blow out its savage brain.

Something exploded beyond the battlements, and the ork gunners bellowed with joy. One stumbled back, overcome with amusement. *Xenos filth,* Straken thought, and he gave it a cartridge-worth of buckshot in the arse and thigh. It slipped, fell, rolled off the wall and hit the ground. Three of the demolitions team sprang on the ork before it could rise, jabbing and hacking.

All around Straken, men yelled and fired and struggled to advance. A young lad, hardly out of his teens, threw a krak grenade at the wall. A grey-haired veteran, his bandana tied around his forehead, fell to the ground with an ork bullet in his spine. Shots came from behind Straken. The orks were bringing troops from the forges into the fight.

'Move, damn it!' Straken yelled. 'Get up on the wall!'

Speakers crackled and squealed along the barricades. More orks jumped down to meet Straken's team, and as they did something huge hit the ork defences from the other side. The wall rocked.

A gretchin leaped from a pile of junk, a rusty knife in its bony hand. It lunged

at Straken, jabbering, and he blocked with his steel arm and shattered its skull with a single punch. *Almost at the wall,* he thought. *Almost there.*

Gunfire turned the tunnel into a drumming, roaring echo chamber. Four rockets corkscrewed out of the ork defences and over Tanner's head. Two hit the roof, throwing sparks and debris onto the men below – one was a dud, but the last smashed into the Sentinel *Blood Ridge*. The cockpit seemed to burst; for an instant the legs still stood, and then they buckled and crashed into the road. Nine metres behind, Sentinel *Catachan Fang* raked the battlements with its multilaser. Tanner saw orks drop out of view.

Sergeant Dhoi ran over to him. Around them, men advanced in the strobing light of las-fire, while their comrades struggled to keep the enemy too busy to shoot back. They had to reach the walls. Once they were at the barricade, they could plant melta bombs, break through and relieve Straken. They just had to get there first.

'Cap,' Dhoi shouted, 'the colonel's just come in on the vox. He's under heavy fire, wants us to back him up.'

'What does he think we're doing?' Tanner called back. 'Tell him we're on the way.'

Dhoi nodded. The sergeant's left arm had been gashed by stone chips thrown up from a rocket, blood oozing over old tattoos.

'And get those vehicles up here!' Tanner added.

An ork leaned over the barricade, trying to spray the attackers with a flamethrower, and its head popped. The Catachan snipers, stationed far back to cover the advance, were doing a brutally effective job.

The trucks rolled forwards. They seemed painfully slow; as the rockets and heavy stubbers got to work on their improvised armour, Tanner wondered if they would just fall apart. *Too bad the orks stole our damn tanks,* he thought, *or we could just blast on through.*

He ducked behind a heap of plascrete rubble, apparently dumped there to impede vehicles, and took a shot at a figure lining up a shoulder-mounted gun. It stumbled back, the gun belching out sparks. Not a kill, but it would at least slow the brute down.

A truck rumbled past. 'Go, go!' Tanner shouted at the cab, pointing to the walls. 'Ram it!'

Soft-arsed locals, he thought. They wouldn't have the guts to go right in. Catachans ran up behind the truck, using it as cover, keeping a little way back. A

head appeared at the rear of the vehicle, stuck over the back, and Tanner recognised Jocasta Ferrens. She and two others heaved up a flag. Shouting hoarsely, she pointed to the wall, and the truck gathered speed. The old woman looked like a vengeful ghost.

Vicious fire ripped from the barricades, the sheer volume of shots making up for their inaccuracy. *Catachan Fang* stumbled under a hail of bullets, righted itself and sprayed the battlements with high-power las-shots. On Tanner's right, three mortars lobbed shells onto the ork defences from the cover of an overturned tram. A broad figure in a leather coat stood among them, shouting out ranges. Commissar Morrell drew his bolt pistol and shot an ork off the battlements with the quick precision of a duellist.

Tanner glanced round and saw a Catachan setting up an autocannon, surrounded by debris. The other member of his gun team lay nearby, missing an arm and half his head. Tanner rushed over, grabbed the gun and helped the man haul it free. 'Move up!' he shouted at the advancing soldiers. 'Get some bombs on the walls!'

The first truck hit the battlement. The metal wall creaked, but the ork defences were as strong as they were haphazard-looking. Tanner ran over to the vox-trooper, grabbed the vox-mic and shouted, 'Everyone out of the truck – get the charges set!'

We have to get through, he thought. *We have to, otherwise–*

Figures appeared on the battlements: slim and upright compared to the orks, but far more muscular than any gretchin. Catachans, Tanner realised.

'Belay that order!' he barked at the vox-trooper. 'Tell the leash to stop those mortars. Everyone, give our boys some covering fire!'

On the wall, three soldiers dragged an ork away from its mounted gun and heaved it over the battlements. Tanner grinned to see it fall; around him, both Catachans and militiamen cheered. Tanner took careful aim with his lasgun and put a burst into a firing slit. A massive alien stumbled about in the shadows behind the slit. More Catachans appeared on the wall, many of them armed with long knives. A gretchin fell shrieking from the parapet. From the looks of it, Tanner thought, the men were rather enjoying throwing the greenskins off.

A figure suddenly climbed onto the wall. Catching hold of a sheet of iron, the man heaved himself up, standing entirely in view. Light glistened on one half of his bare torso. At his hip, the skull of a land shark stared down the tunnel. Colonel Straken raised his shotgun above his head, and yells of triumph answered him.

Tanner rushed forward and his men followed close behind. It was time to open the gates.

The orks were built for strength, but without much subtlety, and with the help of the butt of his lasgun Lavant managed to bypass the controls. Doors swung open in the wall. Other soldiers threw ropes down from the battlements for their comrades to climb. A truck rumbled up to the wall and its occupants put up ladders. The Catachans swarmed through and over the wall, and the rendezvous with Straken's scouting party was complete.

But they were far from safe. The smashed vehicles behind the wall were now being used as cover by dozens of orks. Worse still, the greenskins were trying to bring in tanks.

Lavant motioned his men forwards. They advanced under the cover of mortar fire, running between heaps of machine parts like rats in a junkyard. A missile from one of the militia squads shot past Lavant's team and smashed into the back of a looted Chimera as it backed out of the ork vehicle pool. The personnel carrier's tracks burst apart, the rear door flopped open and a dozen orks tumbled out like organs from a gutted beast. Lavant emptied a power pack into the snarling greenskins, slapped a new one into place and called for his team to move in.

The rows of captured tanks were near, Emperor be praised. An ork mech scrambled onto the back of a crippled Leman Russ and heaved an enormous gun onto its shoulder. The thing was an impossible mess of parts – part lascannon, part xenos weapon, connected with brass pipe and rolls of wire – but somehow it fired. Blue hissing beams pulsed out of the barrel, shattering stone like glass. Lavant saw a man fall down screaming, clutching at his face as the ground before him exploded.

The ork let out a set of grunting laughs. Lavant stopped, took careful aim and hit it in the head. The brute turned, its left ear now a ragged mess, and looked him straight in the eye.

Then it fired again. Corporal Hollis, three metres away, was blown to pieces. Lavant twisted away, felt blood patter against his side, and came up yelling. Grenades rolled out of Hollis's torn combat vest. A melta bomb the size of a grox's egg skidded across the ground and bumped against Lavant's boot.

For a fraction of a second, the world stopped. *It's got no pin,* Lavant thought, *it's got no pin* – and then the bomb rolled over, and he saw the pin, twisted but still intact. The rush of relief left him giddy, and filled him with a guilt he

couldn't understand. Images of the mission on Miral flashed through his mind, the bomb he'd set on the bridge exploding as his men checked it. Enraged, he lifted the lasgun, sighting as he pulled it into his shoulder, and shot the mech in the eye.

The mech dropped out of sight. Orks scrambled onto the tanks, pulling open hatches and dropping inside. 'They're starting the armour!' Lavant cried.

Suddenly the attack became all the more desperate. If the orks could get the captured vehicles moving in any number, the raiders would have no real way of fighting them off. The greenskins would be unbeatable then, safe behind metal plate.

A Sentinel loped past at full speed, cockpit bobbing with each stride. On the side, under a picture of a Catachan woman firing an autogun, were the words *Simple Pleasures*. It raked the tanks with fire from its multilaser, and beams punched through thick green bodies. Orks dropped down from the tanks as they tried to embark, but more climbed forward to take their place.

Five men reached the tanks and Lavant saw a goggled ork step out of cover, blue flame roaring at the end of a crude flamethrower. He called out a warning, his voice lost in the cacophony of the attack, and the ork hosed the men down in a blossom of orange fire. They stumbled away, burning, their comrades struggling to extinguish the flames. Lavant shouted curses, and his lasgun cracked out along with half a dozen others. The ork fell against the flank armour of a Leman Russ, its chest smeared with foul xenos blood.

Straken reached the tanks, and the fighting began in earnest. Suddenly they moved from the open space of the junkyard to the warren-like gaps between the vehicles. Both Catachans and orks were well-equipped for close range killing, and the battle among the tanks became a vicious game of hide-and-seek.

Shotguns and Catachan knives were deadly now, but at such close range the bad ork marksmanship no longer mattered. Bullets and las-beams ricocheted off slabs of armour, dancing between the vehicles and through anyone in the way. Worse, under the rattle and crack of gunfire, Straken heard the low rumble of engines coming to life around him. The orks were starting the tanks.

'Keep moving,' he called to the men around him. 'Flush 'em out.'

He stopped, put his boot onto a huge bolt sticking out of a Chimera and began to climb up. Hatches and welding lines gave him handholds. Straken clambered onto the bent barrel of a side-mounted gun. Grunting, he heaved himself onto the top of the tank.

The upper armour of a hundred tanks stretched away like roofs in a hab-zone, a field of turrets and riveted armour. Straken felt as though he were standing on the roof of a spacecraft. Beyond the tanks there was a yard, dotted with metal huts. And beyond the yard, like a steel mountain, the gargant began.

As Straken watched, orks began to climb onto the vehicles. They scrambled over the tank hulls as if they were on an assault course, their massive bodies ill-suited to the work. The greenskins ran past the first few vehicles, but then started to work the turret hatches. Two slipped out of sight behind a Medusa siege mortar – onto the firing platform.

In two seconds Straken had turned and jumped down. 'Mayne, get over here!' he called. The vox-trooper stopped beside him, taking as much cover as he could from a tank sponson. Mayne's face glistened with sweat. Up ahead, gunfire erupted and a man cried out.

'All Sentinels move up to waypoint three,' Straken barked into the comm-link. 'Repeat, get up here right now. We've got orks climbing over the tanks, trying to start them up. Shoot them off. Move it!' he added, and he tossed the handset back to Mayne. The sound of engines was rising; engine smoke spluttered into the air. Straken advanced, the young vox-trooper beside him.

A heap of metal sheeting blocked the way ahead. Straken turned right, slipping between the prow of one tank and the rear of another. The barrel of a battle cannon threw a wide shadow over them as they passed underneath.

'They can't move the tanks,' Mayne said. 'Can they?'

'Not most of them. But they can still fire the guns.'

'Emperor! I didn't–'

'Just keep moving. I– Look out!'

Two snarling balls of red flesh rushed into view. Straken glimpsed tiny eyes, legs running flat out and huge, snarling mouths. They looked like severed, bestial heads. Straken swung his shotgun up and fired one-handed. The nearest squig burst like a rotten fruit, showering the walls with purple gore, and the second one jumped at Straken's face.

He threw his arm up just in time, but the sheer force of the assault knocked him stumbling. He tried to draw his knife before the huge jaws snapped his metal arm. Mayne stepped in, pushed his lasgun against the beast's head and emptied a burst of fire into its earhole. The squig screeched and rolled away, its legs drumming against the side of a Chimera.

Straken gave him a nod of thanks. He quickly reloaded his shotgun; Mayne covered him. More troopers advanced around them. The warren of vehicles

rattled with gunfire. Somewhere to the right, an ork howled with either pain or rage.

A shadow passed over them. Straken glanced up and saw a rickety copter. Below it hung a net, crammed with scrap. Las-shots clattered against its hull, and suddenly it released its cargo. The tanks blocked Straken's view, but he heard girders rain down onto the Catachans. Seconds later, the copter pitched to the north, its engine belching smoke, and crashed whirling into the cavern wall.

He ran forwards. Around the corner, a bare-chested corporal had clamped his arm around an ork's throat. The man was almost as big as the alien, his torso a patchwork of old scars. They stumbled around, locked together like drunken dancers. Straken stepped forward, but the corporal twisted around and caught his eye. 'I've got him,' the corporal grunted, and he roared and hurled the ork head-first into a row of tank tracks. It flopped down unconscious.

Straken laughed. 'Yeah, you have,' he said. He nodded at the ork. 'Best make sure.'

The corporal crouched down and drew his knife. Straken stepped past him and looked around the edge of the nearest tank.

An ork lurched out and let rip with some kind of energy gun. Straken darted back, hearing plasma hiss against metal. Light flared overhead, and las-fire raked the turrets and hulls above him. He dropped down, rolled on his metal shoulder and came up firing. The ork fell back in a flurry of sparks. Its weird cannon had absorbed much of the shot, but the brute was still peppered with wounds. It tossed the gun aside, more enraged than hurt, reached down and pulled a spanner the length of a man's femur from its belt.

Fury made the ork clumsy. It took a massive swing at the colonel, but he darted aside, leaped in and barged it with his shoulder. The ork stumbled – it reeked of sewage and engine grease – and Straken grabbed its ear with his flesh hand and punched its skull in with his metal fist.

Around him, the orks were dying. His men were doing what they did best, and already cheers and shouts mingled with the sounds of battle. Straken let the ork mech drop, satisfied that it was dead. For half a second he wondered what the hell all the wires wrapped around its arms and waist actually did, and then he felt disgust well up. Time to kill more orks and rescue whoever they could.

Mayne said, 'Colonel Lavant on the vox, sir. He's moving up parallel through the tanks. Says it's clear.'

'Good. Tell him to keep moving and get those demo charges ready. Damn it, where the hell is everyone?' Straken looked over his shoulder and yelled, 'This

is the colonel – do I have to do everything by myself? Move it up, Guardsmen!'

Ten metres on, the tanks ended. Suddenly they were in a huge open space, strewn with machinery and workshops. Everything was dwarfed by the gargant. Its metal body was covered in gantries and scaffolding, like paths up a mountain. Straken paused, listening. Under the racket of gunfire and voices, he heard a rumble so low that it was almost a sensation.

Men stood at the edge of the tanks, securing the area. Among them, Lavant was barking out orders, pointing to the vehicles. 'I want these things checked, you hear? There may be orks hiding inside.' He saluted Straken. 'I'm having them search the tanks, sir. You can't be too careful.'

'Get your team ready,' Straken replied. 'We're going to blow the gargant. I want snipers and weapons teams up on the tanks, covering us. Mayne, vox Tanner and find out what the hell he's up to. Damn,' he added, looking over the yard, 'I thought there'd be more orks than this.'

At the edge of the group, a dark-haired trooper looked at Straken for a moment, and then glanced away as if he saw nothing of interest there. It was Marbo. Ork blood was drying on his forehead and cheek.

'They've got slaves down there,' Lavant said, looking at the sheds. 'Best get 'em out before we blast the gargant. If we climb up on the left, plant charges on… Wait. Wait a moment. There's smoke coming out of its head.'

As Straken boosted his vision, the gargant's eyes boomed into life. Two broad beams of light burst forth, throwing huge blurred shadows of the gargant's ork crew onto the cavern wall.

At Straken's side, Mayne whispered, 'Look!'

Slowly, as though it were rising from the grave, the gargant began to move. Armour plates rumbled as huge engines fired up beneath them. Greasy black smoke rose from chimneys. Lights flared up in clumps over its massive torso. In the eyes, fire arose, and the ork crew were silhouettes against it.

For a moment, nobody moved.

'What do we do now?' Lavant said. 'What now?'

'Mayne,' Straken said, 'Vox Tanner and the commissar. Tell them both that there is to be no retreat. We can't let the orks get it out of here. Tell them to get all the heavy weapons trained on the gargant. If they've got people who can work tanks, they're to bring them up right away.'

Mayne ducked down and spoke quickly into the comm-link.

'Lavant?' Straken said.

Blinking as if jolted awake, Lavant looked at him. 'Yes?'

‘See those gantries? Let’s get up there and plant the charges.’

For a moment, Straken thought the captain was going to refuse. Then Lavant saluted. ‘Yes, sir.’

‘We’re going to have to work fast,’ Straken said.

‘Right.’

Straken yelled, ‘Let’s get that thing! I want charges placed on the main joints before the orks can get it walking. Catachans – follow me!’

Straken and Lavant tore forwards. As they ran a great drawbridge in the gargant’s belly fell open. A gun barrel appeared in the aperture; behind it, massive cogs turned. The barrel was like the entrance to a tunnel.

The gun boomed so loudly that rocks fell from the cavern roof. A nine-metre shell sailed up, turned almost lazily and slammed into the rows of tanks.

The explosion sent tanks flipping over like tossed pennies. Men were liquidised by the force of the blast, hurled into the air or crushed between rows of sliding vehicles. A stack of cannon shells exploded, and forty tonnes of Leman Russ rolled onto the rear of the demolitions team.

Mayne was blown to pieces as he worked the comm. Sergeant Dhoi turned to run, and the walls closed in on him, killing him like a fly between two clapping hands.

Morrell saw the tanks fly upwards as though punched from beneath by a giant fist. A moan of dismay rose from the citizens behind him. He would have known that noise anywhere: the sound of cowardice.

Their faces were twisted with fear and astonishment. Suddenly the proud guildsmen of Dulma’lin thought twice about staying put.

Morrell drew his bolt pistol and fired into the air. Men and women cringed. ‘Hold position, damn you,’ he roared. ‘The first man to break ranks will get a bolt in the back!’

The explosion hit as Tanner was ordering his men forward to support Straken’s attack. ‘Wait!’ he cried. ‘Hold it!’

The gargant glared out at them like an evil god. Tanner could just see figures on its front, in the square hole from which the great gun protruded. ‘Snipers,’ he shouted to the vox-officer. ‘I want those ork crew shot. Give me that,’ he added, snatching the vox. ‘Morrell? Are you there?’

‘I’m here,’ the commissar replied. ‘We’re holding position.’

Tanner had more urgent things to think about than his loathing for the man.

‘Morrell, get all the heavy weapons you’ve got firing at that thing. Mortars won’t crack the armour – use the lascannons. Aim for the belly gun and the head, you hear me?’

‘I hear you. It’ll be done.’ Like a preacher, the commissar called, ‘The works of the xenos are false! He who labours without the Emperor labours in vain!’

Straken heard the explosion and knew that there was no option to fall back. ‘Come on,’ he roared. ‘With me, Catachans!’ He rushed on, towards the gargant.

Lights flickered on its shoulder. A turret began to swivel. It was a matter of minutes before the whole machine, unfinished as it was, could be activated. Straken didn’t know what it could achieve once it was fully operational, but one step of those massive feet could crush his entire team.

‘With me,’ he cried again, and he ran at the bottom of the scaffolding.

Lasgun fire crackled against the gargant’s hull. An ork yelped and fell out of the belly gun. The snipers had got to work.

Straken reached the bottom of the scaffolding, slung his gun over his shoulder and scrambled up. The pistons whined in his steel arm as he climbed, hand over hand. Above him, a gretchin stuck its head out of a gun turret, pointed and screeched. The turret swung to cover him, but the angle was too narrow. A siren whined into life.

Straken clambered hand over hand, his metal arm hauling him up. He scrambled up one ladder, ran across a gantry and hurried up the next, the gargant’s engines rumbling around him. At last, he reached the top of the scaffolding and pulled himself onto a walkway. A network of boards and ropes ran up the side of the gargant to its unfinished arms. He bounded forwards, hearing his men shout behind him. He glanced back and saw Lavant hauling a trooper with a bionic eye onto the gantry. Others followed, carrying bombs and melta-charges.

Cranes stood around the gargant like gallows. Ork overseers lumbered out of the gargant’s head, shouting directions to the gun crews. Gretchin scurried up the cranes. Lavant pointed and yelled, and several Catachans began to pick them off, sending scrawny green bodies tumbling to the floor below.

More spotlights bloomed on the gargant’s chest. Engines growled, sending a shudder through the great metal body and the scaffolding around it. Above Straken, a heavy stubber chattered into life, spitting a stream of bullets at the Catachans. A krak missile streaked into the gargant’s hip from below, and a chequered metal plate nine metres square dropped off and struck the ground with

a clang like the tolling of a colossal bell. But for all the damage the humans did to the gargant, it was steadily coming to life.

'With me!' Straken called, and he charged up the gangway. An ork jumped down, landing in front of him, and he blasted it in the gut for its trouble. Lavant struggled along in Straken's wake, a satchel charge over each shoulder, a melta bomb in either hand. He looked desperate, knowing that to stay still was certain death, and yet terrified by the explosives he carried. He paused.

'What's wrong?' Straken demanded.

'Nothing, I– Nothing,' Lavant shouted back. A creak issued from the gargant, the result of something breaking or powering up inside it.

'Then move it!'

They ran up the narrow walkway, the boards swaying and straining underfoot. The sheer intensity of the ork gunfire began to take its toll. Men cried out and dropped from the gantry behind them. Sparks burst on the scaffolding poles.

Lavant felt the touch of the reaper on his shoulder. The gantry reminded him of the bridge on Miral. He scrambled after Straken, and suddenly wondered whether he knew what he was doing at all.

They were level with the gargant's shoulder. A riot of scaffolding stretched across its upper chest, from a landing pad on the shoulder to a set of narrow ladders reaching to its castle of a head. The machine was almost fully operational now. Straken shouted and pointed, and Lavant ran after him, across the machine's chest.

The gargant moved its unfinished right arm. It shrugged its shoulder, and a walkway full of gretchin sharpshooters collapsed, sending them shrieking to the ground fifteen metres below. Their bodies pattered off the machine's belly like hail.

It took a step forward.

The gantry fell apart. The walkway vanished; the planks under Lavant's feet split open as the gargant moved. He dropped, his head hit a pole and white light shot through his brain. Lavant flopped onto the remains of the walkway, on his side.

Someone screamed – Kreiz, a Guardsman from the demo team, fell past. Trailing a satchel charge, he twisted in mid air agonisingly slowly and bumped twice on the gargant's chest before hitting the ground.

Lavant lay on the walkway – panting, frozen. *So far down, it's so far down,* he thought, and just as quickly, *Get a hold of yourself*.

The charges were still attached to his body. He struggled onto hands and

knees, coughed and stood up.

And looked straight at death. Down below, a figure had clambered onto one of the tanks, and stood with one boot on the turret like a game-hunter posing beside his prey. Lavant took in the details – the long cape, the hood pulled back, the huge rifle held ready, but he didn't need to. It was the figure he had dreamed of a thousand times, the man with no face, the demolitions man who had gone back to check Lavant's charges on that bridge back in Miral and who had come back for his revenge.

His eyes were the dark circles of image-enhancement goggles. There were no lips, just teeth. Quietly, the reaper raised his gun.

Lavant just stared. The Ecclesiarchy preachers were right: sooner or later, your sins called you to account.

The reaper leaned in to the scope, and fired.

Behind Lavant, an ork screamed. It fell back, half its head missing, and toppled over the edge. The sniper lowered his gun.

Lavant was still alive. Suddenly, he saw the world around him again. People shouted. The gargant's hull throbbed with power as it prepared to take another step. Above him, perched on the war machine's shoulder, Straken was yelling to him to climb up.

Lavant hurled the charges up to Straken. The colonel set them beside him, dropped onto one knee and reached down with his metal hand. Lavant jumped and grabbed it.

Straken's cold grip ground the bones in Lavant's hand against each other. Teeth gritted, Straken hauled the captain up onto what remained of the scaffolding. Lavant fell down beside him.

A hatch flipped back on the gargant's head, and an ork mech emerged. It was bigger than most, and so covered in power cables that they looked like a mass of tendrils sprouting from its back. Goggles covered its eyes, the lenses tinted red. The mech heaved a gun onto its shoulder. Vanes flicked out of the barrel and began to spin.

'The bombs,' Lavant gasped. 'You should've set the charges.'

'And let you fall? I don't leave anyone,' Straken replied. 'And you're the demolitions expert, right?'

'Yeah.' The captain staggered upright. 'Yeah.' Lavant looked over the gargant's head as quickly and efficiently as a scanner, looking for structural weaknesses, welding lines that could be torn apart. He felt suddenly confident. The frozen, superstitious man on the gantry was gone. Straken had frightened

him away.

'There,' he said. He flicked the switch on the explosive pack, and hurled it. The magnetic lock kicked in, and the charge banged into place just below the gargant's eye.

The end of the mech's gun was a blur of rotating steel. Energy crackled between the prongs. Over the chaos of battle, Straken heard the ork snarl.

'Is it good?' Straken demanded.

Lavant nodded.

'Back the way we came. Go!'

They ran. With a sound like lightning, the mech's gun fired. The scaffolding on which they had been standing, along with a chunk of armour welded to the gargant's front, simply disappeared.

Straken and Lavant raced along the gargant's shoulder, past the dead bodies around the turret. A gretchin sprang out, a sharpened screwdriver in its hand, and Straken kicked it off the edge.

'Wait,' Lavant said.

Straken stopped. 'What?'

The mech swung its cannon towards them. Bolts of electricity darted around the barrel, reflected in the red lenses. It grinned.

The gargant's head exploded. White light burst out of the melta bomb like a tiny sun. Straken twisted away, the shutter flicking closed over his bionic eye. A rippling ball of fire enveloped the gargant's head. Ork crew beat on the portholes as flames ate them up. For a moment the big mech was silhouetted against the fire, the coils of wire like tentacles around its hulking body, and then the inferno swallowed it up.

Lavant whooped and shook his fist. He grinned crazily at the gargant's burning head. Something creaked and dropped inside the great metal body, crashing from its throat to stomach. The scaffolding, such as it was, groaned.

'Let's get off this damn thing,' Straken said.

'Right,' Lavant replied, taking control of himself with an effort. The captain would probably have just stayed up there if left, dancing and cheering in triumph, Straken thought.

Carefully, struggling to get down quickly without triggering a total collapse, they descended.

It was chaos on the ground, but *their* chaos. The Catachans were raising hell against what remained of the ork force – it looked as much like a fireworks

display as a military operation. Several dozen orks had taken refuge in a row of workshops, and as Straken gladly stepped off the gantry, mortars blew the thin roof in. Tripod-mounted autocannons punched through the plasteel walls, and the Guardsmen poured las-fire in after them. A truck rolled up, carrying more soldiers to help finish the job up close, and Tanner jumped down.

'Nice work!' he laughed. His combat vest was open, his bare chest flecked with alien blood. He looked past Straken at the burning gargant. Several Catachan guns still fired at the war machine's chest; as they watched, a lascannon shot blew one of the emplacements open. 'By the Emperor, that's a pretty picture.'

'Yeah,' Straken said. He glanced at the row of buildings, where the orks were holed up. Catachans and locals formed a loose circle and closed in, like a net being pulled tight. 'Kill the rest of the orks and carry out a full sweep – auspexes, the lot. None of them are getting away.'

Tanner grinned and saluted. 'With pleasure.' He climbed back up onto the truck and thumped the metal with his fist. 'Let's go!'

Straken folded his arms, not sure what to feel. It seemed to have moved from battle to celebration, almost without pause. He felt satisfied but still wary, as if the gargant might suddenly come back to life.

He looked round and saw Lavant resting against a powered-down Sentinel, looking as if he'd just run fifty kilometres. Lavant met Straken's eyes, and there was guilt in his face as well as exhaustion.

Whatever craziness there is in you, Straken thought, *it came out back there*. But that was a matter for later. Right now, there was an area to secure. 'Check the gargant and plant charges on its joints and main guns. Get men up on those cranes – see if you can pull the armour off the front of it. And check the tanks for booby traps.'

Lavant said, 'I lost a lot of my team back there, up on that scaffolding. They were good people.'

'I know. But we need this place secure, or we'll lose even more. Take some of Tanner's lads, or the locals. I'm sure they'll love the chance to smash some ork stuff.'

'Yes, sir,' Lavant said. He stood up straight and saluted, then walked away.

Straken looked back at the gargant, to savour his victory. Something caught his eye: at the bottom of the machine, pale, scrawny figures were emerging from a hole in the ground. They wore rags, and moved as if being above ground confused them. Straken boosted his vision, and saw that some of the rags had

once been uniforms of the Imperial Guard. Suddenly he felt not just triumph, but a deep and justified rage.

The militia had caught an ork. It had taken half a dozen las-shots to the body and legs, and whilst still alive, was unable to stand. It raged at the men around it, beating its fists on the ground, snarling out what could have been curses or promises of revenge.

Most of the people around it were Dulmalian. Someone threw an empty can at the ork. It bounced off the creature's shoulder. The ork roared and tried to crawl forwards, and the circle changed shape as the humans stepped away.

Straken stepped over to Tarricus. 'What's this?'

'We caught one of them.'

'So I see. Why?'

The miner scowled. 'You've seen what they did to our people. We're going to make it pay.'

'How? You going to make it apologise? Just blow its brains out and let's get going.'

Tarricus stared at him for a moment, and Straken saw a depth of fury in the man's eyes that startled him. Tarricus glanced away.

'In the name of the people of Dulma'lin, and the immortal Emperor – death to the orks!' Tarricus raised his autogun and pumped four shots into the alien's head. It flopped onto the ground, freshly spilled blood mingling with that already there.

Straken looked at the broken red mess that had been the ork's head. 'You missed a bit,' he said.

Tarricus laughed. His comrades cheered. Straken remembered the miserable, broken-looking man he'd met when the Catachans had first arrived. What a change some good honest fury could make. He'd have to be careful, though. This was a Guard operation, and the last thing the Catachans needed was a bunch of locals deciding that they were too important to follow orders any more.

On the far side of the cavern, the orderlies were doing what they could for the wounded. They'd be busy, Straken thought. The orks had been quick to beat their prisoners, and, perhaps worse, had barely fed them. No doubt there would be more fatalities.

'Know the xenos by the foulness of his works,' said a voice behind him.

Straken looked around. With his dark clothes and pale face, Morrell looked like some kind of revenant, doomed to haunt the battlefield.

‘You’ve got a point,’ Straken said, watching as the prisoners were led off by the medicae. A fair few were seriously ill; some couldn’t stand unaided. Straken wondered how many would survive.

‘They will be a considerable drain on our facilities,’ Morrell said. ‘Liberating these people gains us nothing. Militarily speaking, of course.’

Straken felt a rush of contempt. He pushed it down. *Commissars: all the same.*

‘I get the feeling it wouldn’t much help morale if I left them to die. Just a thought, commissar.’

Morrell nodded. ‘You know,’ he said thoughtfully, ‘in some regiments, men who were captured by the enemy would be assigned to a penal battalion for allowing themselves to be taken alive. Prolonged exposure to the alien invariably corrupts the soul.’

‘That’s not how we do it here,’ Straken replied.

The commissar said, ‘No, I gather that we don’t.’

The remaining orks were leaderless and outgunned, but they could not and would not surrender. Straken joined a team of men searching the workshops on the eastern wall of the cavern. They found nothing except dirt and junk; it seemed that all the orks had rushed outside to join the fight.

As Straken concluded his sweep, something huge exploded outside. He froze under a swinging bulb, the steady trickle of dust from the ceiling raining around him.

Then he grabbed his shotgun and ran outside.

Straken spun round, half expecting to see the gargant come waddling towards him, flattening buildings under its massive feet, but it was motionless. The head and shoulders were covered in soot, the torso riddled with holes where armour had been dragged or blasted off the body.

A young militia soldier stood nearby, eating half a ration bar. She looked entirely at ease. If there were orks on the loose, the girl was about to get a nasty awakening.

‘You!’ Straken called. ‘What’s going on?’

She jerked to attention and stuffed the ration bar into her pocket. ‘Colonel. They’ve blown the maglev tunnels, sir. The demo crew put a bomb on one of the wagons and pushed it down the tunnel. Excelsis is cut off now. It’s that way, sir,’ the soldier added.

Straken strode towards the sound. He passed the rows of tanks, previously awaiting conversion by the orks. Catachan teams were still searching them for

booby traps. Behind them, a mixed group looked over the vehicles, searching for workable machinery. Straken saw Catachan Sentinel pilots, local repairmen and even a couple of sickly looking tank crew from the Selvian Dragoons freed from ork captivity. Straken wondered when his men had last slept, and felt a rush of admiration for all the people under his command. They might be exhausted or half starved, but they wouldn't rest, not while there were orks to fight and Iron Hand Straken was in command.

Further on, a trio of battered trucks belonging to the mining guild were loading up with captured guns and ammunition. With a little repair work and a lot of rededication, the machine-spirits of the heavy bolters and autocannons captured by the orks could be appeased. And what better way to return them to the service of the Emperor, he thought, than to turn them on the greenskins?

A gang of Catachans was cutting apart the gargant's enormous fist. Sparks filled the air as they wielded their blowtorches, their faces hidden behind masks. Each finger of the gargant's hand ended in a rock-drill the size of a railway carriage – thank the Emperor, Straken thought, that the xenos scum hadn't been able to attach it. As he passed, the men stopped, raised their visors and saluted, and Straken shouted at them to stop slacking and get back to work. They laughed and carried on.

The maglev station took up most of one of the smaller caverns behind the manufactoria, not far from the ruins of the gargant. The walls were covered in machinery, and even now technocrats of the mining guild were busy anointing the workings with sacred oils. The orks had covered the walls with clan markings like gangers marking their turf – a glyph depicting a skull on two crossed spanners seemed particularly popular. No doubt it symbolised some powerful mech, Straken thought. The sooner the alien scrawl was erased, the better.

The entrance to the maglev tunnel was broad enough to fit a whole company of the Guard, walking side by side. Straken boosted his vision and saw a great heap of rubble in the shadows further down the line, choking the passage off entirely. *Try getting through that, Killzkar*, he thought.

The militia woman had been right: with storms raging overground, and the maglev line cut off, Excelsis City truly was on its own. *For now, anyway.*

Straken wondered whether any of the orks had escaped the fight around the gargant, and were currently trudging down the maglev line to bring the news to their counterparts in the lesser cities of Dulma'lin. *Well, let 'em. Let them know what we did here. They deserve to be afraid.*

‘Quite a thing,’ someone said beside him.

He looked round. The man beside him was Catachan. His tattoos identified him as a corporal.

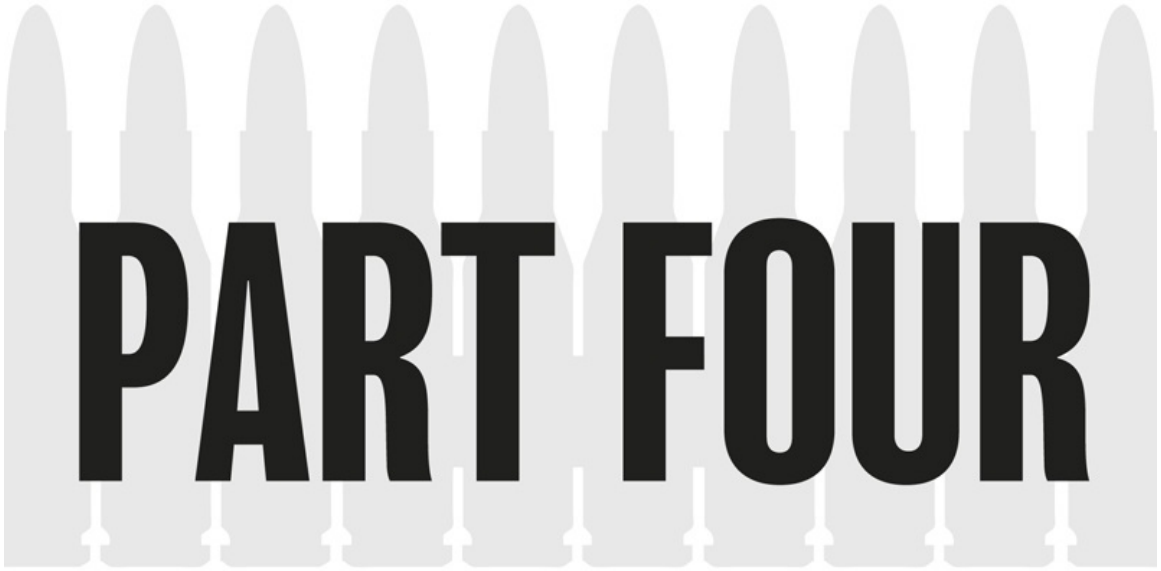
‘Certainly is,’ Straken replied. ‘You don’t see that back on Catachan.’

‘The wildlife would just eat it,’ the corporal replied, and he smiled. ‘That’s not the best of it though, sir. We’ve got the communications relay up and running. The locals reckon they can patch up a transmitter to send a vox-comm off-world.’

It seemed only right that Straken should send the message. One of the local techs led him to a small, cramped room whose walls rumbled with the throb of motors. The orks had detuned the array and daubed the housing with their foul glyphs, but the machine-spirit of the transmitter was still strong, as though it had returned to celebrate the fall of the gargant.

Straken sat in an ancient, throne-like chair, and the vox-comm was lowered in front of him. An engineer nodded to him and made the sign of the aquila. The vox came alive, and the crackling of the comm-link was like a fighter cracking his knuckles before making a fist.

‘This is Colonel Straken, of the Second Catachan Regiment. I am speaking from the industrial transmitter in Excelsis City, Dulma’lin. We have made contact with local guerrillas and are purging the orks cavern by cavern. We request assistance from any Imperial Guard or Navy forces hearing this message. I repeat, we are alive and fighting. If you are receiving this transmission and you want to help us kill some orks, converge on this signal. Believe me, there’s enough enemy to go round. This is Straken, signing out. Emperor protect.’



PART FOUR

17.

Strange, Straken thought as the groundcar rolled through the empty streets, *how things change*. Parts of the city were almost deserted now, where a few months ago vicious gunfights had raged. He remembered the purging of the hab-zones, charging up one flight of stairs after another, kicking in door after door while his legs ached as if there were acid in his veins. Now, by Catachan terms, the place was safe. Of course, you went armed – he had ordered that everyone was to carry a weapon, even if it was just an autopistol, to encourage the locals to think of themselves as a fighting force.

The car turned at a corner and a Guardsman lowered his weapon and let them through. The city was still full of guardposts and improvised bunkers, chokepoints and bottlenecks where an ork force could be lured up close and shot down. It was only a matter of time before they came back.

The orks had tried to stage a counter-attack to retake the manufactoria, but it had been a comparatively weak affair. They had come bellowing out of the Mommothian Vault, but had lacked numbers and tactical skill, and the Catachans had simply mown them down. Seeing the aliens rush forward, straight over Lavant's traps and into lasgun range, Straken had wondered whether they lacked any real leadership.

But they still held the Mommothian Vault. The great central caverns, the heart and mind of the city, were still ork territory. That meant that the orks controlled the Great Gate and, therefore, large-scale access to the surface. They could bring reinforcements in and, unless the Catachans destroyed Killzkar, they would.

Straken leaned forward in his seat, the civilian plushness of the car feeling unnatural to him, and wondered how many of the hab-blocks they were passing would ever be occupied again. Well, there'd be a lot more fighting before they were.

The car stopped outside the enforcer station. He climbed out, glad to leave the stifling comfort of the vehicle, and greeted the men at the door.

His team waited for him upstairs, sitting round a map like generals planning a campaign: Morrell, standing a little way back; Tanner, big and uncompromising on the opposite side, deliberately not looking at the commissar; Lavant, quietly leafing through a wad of paper, his combat vest fastened all the way to his throat. Also present were the two local heads: Tarricus, fresh from the factories, and Jocasta Ferrens, looking as if she'd just run a kilometre through a high wind.

Straken stood beside the map table. 'First up,' he said, 'damn good work on the gargant. That was a hell of a fight, and you all did well. I ask for the best from my people, but it's not often that I get it. Make sure your soldiers know that.' He leaned forward, 'Now that the hangovers have worn off, we've got work to do. First up, what are the orks doing?'

Tanner said, 'Since we took the manufactoria? One of my teams ambushed a group of them yesterday. They'd come down in one of their trucks, probably looking to collect something from the workshops. None got away.'

'Good. All forward teams are to go on alert. I want people watching every entrance to the Mommothian Vault. They'll know full well what happened at the manufactoria. Now their gargant's so much scrap, they'll be looking to gather their troops and come down here. Lavant, how's the map looking?'

'Good, sir,' the captain replied. He gestured to the plan spread out across the table. 'With the exception of the Mommothian Vault, Excelsis City is ours.' He frowned. 'That's a very big exception, though.'

He was right, Straken thought. The vault took up almost a sixth of the city. More importantly, it ran down the centre of Excelsis like a fault line. And most significantly of all, it contained the Great Gates. Straken remembered the moment that he had briefly captured the gates, and the sight of the orks advancing on his position instead of the Imperial Guard. It felt like a decade ago.

'Well,' he said, 'if we wanted to get Killzkar's attention, we most certainly will have it now. I can't imagine any ork ignoring the loss of a gargant.'

Tanner laughed. 'Yeah, now baby's lost his favourite toy, he's probably having one hell of a sulk.'

Ferrens laughed. Tarricus grinned. The corner of Morrell's mouth twitched.

Straken did not smile. He said, 'And that means that he will come for us. Even if he didn't need the gargant, the humiliation of losing it will be more than he can take. I don't know much about orks, but I'll bet his soldiers are seeing this as a sign of weakness. We may have annoyed him before, but back then he could afford to ignore us. Now we'll have the whole damn lot after us.'

Tarricus had stopped smiling. 'So… what're you saying? That they'll attack?'

‘Yes. And not just whatever they’ve got left in the north city. They’ll call in everything they’ve got. I don’t know how many orks there are in the other cities, but we should prepare for at least four or five times the numbers we’ve seen so far.’

Lavant ran a hand through his hair. He let out his breath slowly, as if to prevent himself calling out. ‘Well then,’ he said.

‘By the Throne,’ Tanner said, ‘that’s a lot of orks you’re talking about.’

‘Oh, great.’ Tarricus ran a hand over his face, pinching the bridge of his nose. ‘That’s just great. What the hell are we going to do? You’ve been telling us that we’ve got to hit and run because we’re outnumbered. Now there’s going to be five times the number of greenskins as before. That’s just great. Where are we going to run *to?*’

Morrell said, ‘I don’t like your defeatist attitude, citizen. You would do well to remember that the Emperor provides for the valiant.’ He paused, scowling, as though there were something sour in his mouth. ‘Although, in all honesty, you may have a point. It sounds, colonel, as if you’re telling us that the game is up.’

‘Not necessarily.’ Straken looked around. ‘Any fight with Killzkar is going to be hard, that’s for sure. But if everyone fights, and nobody backs out of this, we could do it. We’ve got some advantages.’

‘Like what?’ Tarricus cried.

‘One, we know how to get up close. We’re jungle fighters – we’ve been killing things harder than orks at close range for centuries. We’ll use the city, lay traps, set ambushes – all the stuff we’ve been teaching you people. Two, this isn’t some conscript army we’re up against.’

‘You can say that again!’

‘Orks *want* to fight. They’ve got no real chain of command – it’s just the biggest ones giving the orders to anyone they can force to obey. If they see a chance to start beating each other, they’ll take it. And if Killzkar dies, his officers will fight to take his place.’

Lavant said, ‘So if we go after Killzkar himself – assassinate him – then his army will fall to pieces? I’ve got to say it – I can’t see them leaving the chance to fight us.’

Straken said, ‘Maybe. I can’t guarantee it. But it’ll slow them down. Kill the leader and they’ll have a real problem. Maybe without Killzkar they won’t ever get to Ryza at all.’

‘So they’ll be stuck here!’ Tarricus shook his head. ‘That’s fantastic. Maybe we could open a hotel.’ He laughed. There was an edge to his laugh that made

Straken uneasy. ‘Why not? Five thrones a day to stay in our delightful city. Come, see the sights–’

‘That’s enough!’ Straken’s voice rang around the room. In the quiet that followed, Tarricus let out a long, shuddering sigh. Straken leaned forwards again. ‘Unless you want to go outside and offer your apologies to Killzkar for smashing up his gargant, we’re going to have to deal with a lot of angry orks. That goes for all of you. If we have to make sacrifices, so be it. But mark my words. I’ve been with this unit for nigh-on thirty years, and I have never allowed anyone, Guard or civilian, to throw my men away. No last stands to make a point of so-called principle, no stupid charges into enemy guns to give some drunkard general an excuse to drink to our memory. The same goes for this.

‘We find Killzkar, and we kill him. Then we pull back, split up and hunt orks through the ruins like they’re so many wild grox. They’ll come in here like a mob looking for trouble, and we’ll make damn sure they’ll walk straight into it. They’re going to regret the day they crossed the Catachan Second. Or any of you.’ He looked round the table. ‘All right?’

‘Yeah,’ Tanner said. ‘Sounds good to me.’

‘Of course,’ Lavant replied. He added, ‘I don’t see any other option, anyway.’

Morrell gave a small, bitter smile. ‘Frankly, I think I’ve got more to offer the Commissariat than a glorious death on this rock. If we have to die, so be it – but we’ll fight first.’

Ferrens grinned. For an ex-member of the Dulma’lin senate, Straken thought, she certainly was good at looking crazy and hard. Maybe some people were just born survivors. ‘It’s too late to turn back now,’ she said.

Tarricus shrugged. He seemed very small among them, a child surrounded by killers. ‘I guess we’ll have to fight. What else can we do?’

As if you had a choice, Straken thought. ‘We’ll fight fierce, but we’ll fight smart. I’m thinking two groups, striking through the cavern and from underneath.’

‘Underneath?’ Tanner said. ‘What, like… tunnels?’

‘Why not? We’ve got the drilling gear. And the men to do it,’ Straken added, glancing at Tarricus.

Tanner said, ‘That’s a good point. I’m liking this.’

‘The orks have got to bottleneck around the gates to get inside. Every bomb, every tank shell we can put on them is going to count for a hell of a lot. Now,’ Straken added, ‘for the ones that get past, we’ll have a little welcoming committee.’ He tapped the map with a metal finger. ‘See this, running down the

vault? It says on the map it's some kind of park. We can use that.'

Jocasta Ferrens said, 'It's called the Triumphal Gardens. The main administrative buildings run along the edges. At the top there's the Senate House. I used to work there – a long time ago.'

Morrell rubbed his chin. 'Surely it'll be seriously overgrown by now. The orks won't have done anything with it unless they've burned it down. It'll be like a jungle.'

Straken merely looked at him, and a moment later the commissar realised what he had said.

'Morrell,' the colonel said, 'that's exactly what I want it to be.'

'You'll love this, sir,' one of the new men said. The man in question, newly promoted Corporal Gratz, was showing off a knife he'd bought off a Tallarn desert raider. 'There's grooves on the blade,' Gratz explained, 'to make the blood run off, so it doesn't make the grip slippery. I've got eight kills with this so far,' he said. 'Five of 'em are orks.'

The demolitions team had made their headquarters in a clubhouse above a metalworking plant. Either the orks had not noticed the place or could not be bothered to climb the stairs. Most of the other buildings had either been wrecked out of spite or used to hold slaves, and were in a foul state.

'Bah,' Lavant said. 'You'll never get better than a Catachan Fang.'

The demolitions crew had taken heavy casualties in their attack on the gargant, mainly from the moment when the orks had fired their ordnance into the rows of tanks. Lavant barely knew a lot of the replacements, drafted in from other teams. It was felt that, after their performance in the industrial caverns, the locals could be trusted with medium-range support and even some light artillery, freeing up more Catachans for the kind of close-up work that would put their skills to better use.

A tank rolled past the window, one of the first vehicles liberated from the ork workshops. Three Catachans stood on top of it, using crowbars to prise off the glyph-plates that the orks had welded on. It was too bad, Lavant thought, that they didn't have a tech-priest to reconsecrate the vehicles. The ork workmanship was not just crude, but blasphemous. No wonder that the machine-spirits of so many of the vehicles were enraged, and that so few of them worked.

Lavant said, 'Anyone know how many tanks we've got working yet?'

One of the old hands, a dark-haired sapper called Meir, shrugged and raised his palms. He was missing the last two fingers on his left hand. 'Not many, from

what I've heard. I don't know the exact numbers.'

'But not enough.'

'Right.'

Lavant said, 'Then listen, everyone. When the orks come, they'll be bringing armour – it's the only way they'll get through the storm. We won't have the guns to knock it out, but we've got the explosives. I want everyone to check that they're familiar with the gear these miners use. It's slightly different to our usual stuff. Also, I need all officers to check the map for detonation points, both in our territory and the main vault, where we can cause the most damage to the orks if they make it that far. Main buildings, natural formations, anything that can put some hurt on the greenskins.'

Gratz raised a hand. 'Captain?'

'Yes?'

'What about cave supports?'

There was a rustle of comments and whispers. Someone gave a brief snort of amusement, but almost all the faces Lavant saw were serious and hard.

'Those too,' Lavant said. 'They're not having this place. If we have to, we'll bring the whole roof down on them.'

Again, the low rumble of voices. Lavant heard someone say, 'You reckon Iron Hand knows about that?' But they looked grimly approving, especially the old hands, as if they'd brought Lavant up properly.

The captain ground his lho-stick out. 'You know what to do. Now get to it. I'll be back in two hours. I've got something to sort out.'

Lavant hurried down the stairs, past a heap of oversized metal vests. They had once been part of protective suits for venturing into the wind on the surface of Dulma'lin; the orks had nailed and welded on extra metal to make themselves body armour.

He had business of his own to attend to, things that he needed to do alone.

As he passed the workshops and factory yards, he felt strangely guilty, as if he had come to the cavern intending to steal from it. Lavant shoved his hands in his pockets and walked on.

A great roar came from his left. He glanced round, startled, and heard an engine tear into life. In a great barn of a shed, a tunnelling machine had started to work. Men cheered it on. The metal nose cone spun faster, gathering speed. Half a dozen Catachans stood around it, mostly stripped to the waist, and beside them were just as many locals, in filthy overalls.

Lavant hurried on as one of the workers slapped a purity seal onto the side of the machine. The power of the driller, and its jutting nose cone, made Lavant think of the land sharks back on Miral. Miral, the place where it had all gone wrong.

Well, not any more. He quickened his pace.

He commandeered a truck and had the civilian driver run him into the northern hab-zone. Soldiers waved as they passed. As they got nearer to the edge of the Mommothian Vault, the smiles came less easily, and the guns were in the men's hands, not slung over their shoulders.

Lavant saw a grim, grey school up ahead, its smashed windows reinforced with plasteel plate. A plain red flag hung outside. 'Here,' he said.

As he climbed down from the cab the worry set in with a vengeance. It was the same fear he felt when he set his traps: the fear that he would get it wrong, that he would make another mistake and cause another disaster.

No, he thought. *This has to end.* He walked to the door, took a deep breath and walked into the entrance hall. Half a dozen men were relaxing between shifts, sitting around a fire stoked with broken desks and old notebooks. On the wall behind them was a mural drawn by children long ago, entitled 'Saints and Heroes'.

One of the Catachans laughed and passed a flask to the man on his right. None of them looked like saints, and as heroes went, they were rough and dirty. Lavant cleared his throat.

They looked up. Slowly, they stood upright. Lavant flicked them a salute and stepped towards them.

'Give me that flask,' he said.

'Ah, hell,' said the drinker. He held the flask out.

Lavant sniffed the flask: the stuff inside smelt alcoholic and strong. The man on the furthest left muttered something under his breath. Lavant didn't hear the words, but he knew the gist of it – that Captain Lavant was wired too tight, that he'd got a stick jammed up his back end, that he wasn't really Catachan.

He took a sip from the bottle. The stuff wasn't bad. It burned as he swallowed, but it warmed him too. He passed the flask back to its owner. 'I'm looking for a man called Serradus,' he said.

'Grim Serradus?' The oldest of the men, a corporal, nodded to a door on the left. 'He came off watch 'bout an hour ago. Probably sleeping. You want me to go and get him?'

'Yes,' Lavant replied. He watched the soldier go, feeling that he had set

something massive into motion, something that would either heal or destroy him.

One man came back, but it was not the one who had gone. The man was tallish and, for a Catachan, slight: heavily built by normal standards, but more wiry than obviously muscled. There were night vision goggles over his eyes. Unusually, he wore a long-sleeved shirt under his combat vest. His hands were gloved.

Lavant stepped forward. He felt alert, as if he were about to fight. It felt doubly strange to see the sniper stop two and a half metres away and salute.

'You called for me, sir.'

The man's voice came partly from the edge of his mouth and partly from the vicinity of his throat. No wonder he wore a collar, Lavant thought. There must be some bionics in there, tiny vox-mics… He felt intrigued, and then sick with guilt.

'Yes,' he said. 'Serradus, isn't it?'

'Yes, sir.'

'I need to talk to you. Outside.'

'Right, sir.'

Lavant led the man outside. He felt the other men's eyes on his back as he left.

He offered the soldier a lho-stick. Serradus refused. Lavant lit up, took a drag and said, 'You know who I am?'

'Sure,' Serradus said. He had trouble with the S. 'You're the captain.'

Under the goggles, Serradus's skin was fake. It must be some kind of leather, Lavant thought, a kind of mask. It covered his forehead, cheeks and upper lip, leaving a square gap for his mouth and lower jaw. The jaw was criss-crossed with deep, old scars, like the muzzle of an old grox. The mask was smooth; slightly too smooth to be real.

'Just thought I'd thank you for your work at the gargant,' Lavant said. 'You killed an ork that was coming for me. If you hadn't picked him off, he would've got me.'

'No problem,' Serradus replied. His voice, although distorted, was calm. 'Just doing what they pay me for.'

'Well, it's appreciated. Nice work.' *Say it,* Lavant told himself. *Say it.* 'You used to be demolitions, didn't you?'

Serradus looked at him. The mask ended around the goggles, Lavant saw. They must be permanently attached to his head, perhaps bolted onto the skull by some enthusiastic tech-priest of the Adeptus Mechanicus. Lavant wondered how Serradus slept.

‘That’s right,’ the sniper said. ‘I-I was with the demo crews, back on Miral. It was back at Ascendancy Bridge where I, er…’ He gestured at his face. ‘Yeah. Miral didn’t work out so well.’

‘I’m sorry about that,’ Lavant said. ‘Look… I was the one who set the charges. The one that went up too early and…’ He didn’t know how to finish, and he didn’t need to.

Serradus said, ‘The one that blew up in my face, you mean?’

‘Yes.’

Serradus said, ‘I’ll have that lho-stick, if you’re still offering.’

‘Sure.’

The sniper took the stick, lit it and said, ‘If you don’t mind me asking, sir, why are you telling me this?’

‘Because it’s been bothering me.’ The phrase sounded clumsy and false. ‘I’m sorry it happened,’ he said.

‘Not as much as I am,’ Serradus said. He turned his head away, the blank lenses staring across the cavern. Lavant wondered what he was looking at. ‘But it’s not your fault, is it? You want to blame someone, blame the Ministorum for the knackered-out gear they send us. That’s what it was. The charges we laid were set fine. The det-cord dated back to the Heresy, though.’

‘I’m more careful these days. I check everything.’ It felt to Lavant as if he was confessing a sin.

‘That’s probably a good idea,’ Serradus replied. ‘Although you’re the expert. Look, I won’t lie to you. It was the worst thing that’s ever happened to me. If you called being stuck in the Guard having any kind of life, my life got pretty much ruined when that bomb went off. Emperor, when I think of it… Sometimes back then I felt like taking a walk in the jungle and leaving my knife at home, you know?’

Lavant nodded.

‘But that’s passed now. I have good days, bad ones too, but nothing I can’t handle. I’m Catachan, right?’ Hampered by the mask, Serradus gave the captain a wry smile.

‘Right.’ Lavant ground out his lho-stick. He stared off into the distance, not wanting to look at Serradus. ‘I had nightmares about it. About getting it wrong again, about the charges going off too early. Couldn’t stop thinking about it, sometimes. Got to not trusting anyone else to lay them.’

Serradus shrugged. ‘Well, there were some good men when I worked demolitions. I’d trust them if I were you. But it’s your choice. Listen, I’d best get

back.'

'Of course.' Lavant held out his hand. 'It's been good to talk to you, Serradus. At last.'

'You too, captain. Just, er, take things as they come, eh? That's what I do.'

'Right. As they come. Emperor protect, Serradus.'

'You too.'

Serradus turned and walked back inside. Lavant didn't move.

Just one of those things, he thought. *Except sometimes 'those things' are terrible. The Munitorum sent a dud batch of explosives, and it was his bad luck to be caught instead of you. Bad things happen,* he told himself. *They really do. The best you can do is to keep on going, and not let it ruin you.*

He started back the way he had come.

Hell of a job not to let it get to you, though.

Serradus walked back into the abandoned school. His three colleagues sat on chairs built for children, preposterous-looking compared to their bulk. 'We're just dealing a hand,' one said, as he shuffled a pack of cards. 'I've cleaned out Narry and Jef, so I might as well take your money as well, eh?'

'Thanks, but I'll sleep for a while.'

'Sure. What did the captain want?'

Serradus shrugged. 'Nothing much. Just to thank me for shooting an ork when we hit the manufactoria.'

Narry, a young man with one ear, shook his head. 'He should've thanked *me*. The number of orks I've killed… If you ask me, that man is wound too damned tight. You wind yourself up like that, sooner or later you're bound to snap.'

'He's been out on the front line too long,' Serradus replied. 'He's had some bad luck, and now he's paying for it. He's not the only one,' he added, and he headed towards the sleeping quarters, unfastening his mask as he went.

In the north of the city, just below the Mommothian Vault, the snipers kept their watch. They marked the furthest expanse of Straken's territory, and they guarded the borders assiduously. Almost invisible from the ground, gun teams covered the roads leading into the vault, turning the roads into a network of avenues of fire.

Few orks came this way any more. A few green corpses lay in the streets, and occasionally a bulky shape might slip past a window before it was taken down; otherwise, nothing moved.

On the Lannatri Road, a prayer-scroll flapped in a window frame, fanned by a sudden breeze. Marksman Halski pulled his gun in a little tighter. There was no wind down here. Something had set it moving. He frowned, widened the vision on his scope, and waited for the source of the movement to appear.

Halski kept his eyes on the road. Movement, in a window – something rose and fell, the back of a creature or a man on all fours. The dark shape shook and shuddered. Halski licked his lips, as he always did when he felt tense, and waited for it to give him a good shot.

The thing moved like a wolf pulling a carcass apart. Maybe it was a dog gone feral. Halski hoped that it was eating an ork, then wondered if greenskins were poisonous.

It scurried into a doorway. Halski saw a red, round body, two stubby legs ending in huge claws, and an enormous fanged mouth.

A squig. Disgusting xenos things.

It paused, sniffing. Halski lined the shot up and calmly blew out its brains.

The squig sat down heavily. A trickle of purple blood ran over its eyebrow, down the length of one of its canine teeth.

Halski smiled. It wasn't an ork, technically speaking, but it was big enough to merit another kill mark on the side of his lasrifle, painted in dark green so as not to betray his position. Nothing more moved in the street.

He sighed. The orks were smart enough not to keep coming down here. They'd generally learned not to venture into range, even if their pets hadn't. In fact, Halski was starting to wonder whether the orks had orders to keep back, hidden somewhere deep within the vault, in what had once been the administrative centre of Dulma'lin. Surely they wouldn't be that organised, though. They must be waiting there, for the Imperial Guard to–

Something moved in the houses. It swung, gently, like a pendulum just tapped. Perhaps the squig had nudged it. Or perhaps it was coming loose. Halski could only see a vague outline, a long form hanging downwards, but it looked horribly like a man.

He thumbed the image enhancer, and stared straight at a corpse. It hung upside down, arms dangling. But he'd seen plenty of dead bodies before, and in worse states than this. What made him really afraid was the condition of its head, and the story he'd heard from his mates who'd stormed the chapel of that crazy preacher, Father Sarr.

The dead man had been scalped.

18.

In what had once been a meeting hall of the miners' guild, thirty Catachans sparred with knives. They split into threes, taking it in turns for one man to fight off his two partners. The techniques they used were fast and tough, designed to counter a massive enemy made clumsy with rage. They were, after all, going to be fighting orks.

And they'll need to be on top form for it, Straken thought. He stood at the rear of the hall, listening to the squeak of boots on boards and the steady thump of bodies hitting the floor. A sergeant toured the room, barking out commands. 'Your guard's too high! Keep those legs bent or he'll knock you on your arse!'

Straken barely watched. He held the map that he'd been given before reaching Dulma'lin, folded over on itself. He marked roads off, noted points where buildings converged. Parks and monuments became hunting grounds and fields of fire. Two overlapping heavy bolters here, a sniper point on the temple tower eighteen metres to the east, and you'd have cover for an advance across the gap between the courthouse and the public baths. If a tank could cover the main road, then the orks would be massacred as they crossed…

Open battle, he thought. Now, at last, they could draw Killzkar to them, have a chance to flush the warlord into the open and destroy him. This was the moment of greatest danger, but also their greatest opportunity.

A man slammed into the ground a metre from his boots. Straken glanced down, and the man picked himself up and shrugged his shoulders.

Straken nodded, and the soldier grinned and rushed back into the fight.

I'm up to it, Straken thought. *And so are they.* He thought about Killzkar, raging over the loss of his gargant, and knew for sure that when the ork hordes came looking for war, his men would be there to give it to them.

A man entered the hall. He was middle-aged, with a hard, bony face, his hair shaved into a single strip down the middle of his skull. Straken glanced up and at once saw that there was something wrong with him: not illness but the weight of

bad news. Bracing himself, Straken stepped to one side.

The trooper weaved past the fighting men, came close and said, 'Colonel, we've got a problem.'

Straken suddenly felt twice as awake as before, his senses unsheathed like a knife. 'What is it?'

'The scalpings, sir. They've come back. We've found two men strung up. They'd gone missing from a patrol.'

Straken saw the tattoos on the man's arm, spotted the skull and crosshairs of the marksman's badge. 'You a sniper?'

'Yes. That's how I found 'em. Strung up in a window of one of the hab-blocks, so we'd see them both.' A light seemed to come on behind the sniper's eyes, and for a moment there was fury as well as worry there. 'Whoever he is, he's making fun of us, colonel. Making us look like fools.'

Straken turned away a moment and picked up his shotgun. He nodded towards the door. 'Let's go. Show me the location.' He shoved the map at the man.

They walked outside together, into the vastness of the cavern.

The sniper drew a grimy finger across the map. 'This is the main nest. We cover an arc from here to here.' He swept his hand across the page.

'The main roads and upper hab-blocks, right?'

'Yes, that's right. Nothing gets in, nothing gets out, that's how we work.' He paused. 'Look, colonel, he's got to be one hell of an operator to have done this. We don't miss a damn thing. To have picked those men off must've been hard. Emperor knows it's hard to get the drop on our people, let alone beat them in a fight, but to get them strung up so fast–'

'He must've known when you'd not be watching.' Straken stopped. The sniper stopped as well. He looked shocked. On top of the killing, there was the knowledge that he'd been outsmarted, that their enemy had worked in plain sight of the experts watching for just that kind of activity.

'Look, colonel, it's not as if we've been slacking off. We've got to watch all the closer now, that's what the sergeant says.'

'He's right.' Straken looked across the street. He slowly turned his head back, gazing towards the cavern roof, suddenly wondering whether he was being watched. 'You people do a good job. Don't blame yourself.'

This should have ended with Sarr, he thought. *We thought that crazy preacher was behind it all. No, this is ork work. One hell of a smart, wily ork, one able to work silently, and even creep away when we come looking for him, instead of just running in… Orks are born killers,* he thought. *The difference is that this*

one's learned a new way to kill.

'Where'd you find the body?' he demanded.

'Here, sir, in the apartments. Do you want–'

'Get your people ready. Cover the area. But listen, nobody is to shoot unless I say. Understand? Nobody.'

The sniper nodded. 'Sure – yes, sir, I mean. We'll be watching. Are you going to be joining us?'

'No,' Straken replied. 'I'll be where you found the bodies – hunting this ork down.'

The wind tore screaming across the open plain and rushed through the forest of bent trees, setting branches flexing and cracking like whips. It hit the edge of Dulma'lin, tore over the outlying domes of various filtering plants and meteorological gear – most of it long since ruined – and across the melted and blackened ground where the drop-ships had landed seasons ago. It swept over the wreckage of General Greiss's raiding force, caught up bones, helmets and lasguns and bowled them along with it, and in a second every sign that several thousand men had died there was gone.

Corporal Gunnar Lao waited at the bottom of the slope. He was at the point where Lavant's team had first entered the city. As a fighting-point it was useless – too cramped for a proper ambush and too hard to defend – but it was a good place to wait out of the storm.

A reinforced mining truck rolled back down the slope. The cab and rear were sealed off, and weights fitted to the underside pushed the body down low over the wheels, to stop it being overturned by the storms. Once it was out of the winds, Lao shouldered his lasgun and left his rockcrete booth. He reached the back of the truck and thumped on the metal with his fist. A door swung open.

The whole back section of the truck was a single room. On the far wall, the skull of a pious miner gazed from a little shrine. Under it, an auspex had been rigged to a small cogitator unit. A Catachan sat on a pull-down bench, slowly chewing a ration bar. He looked huge in the little room.

Lao tossed a rucksack onto the floor. 'Well, Bann,' he said, 'here I am. Shift's over, you lucky sod.'

The seated man finished his ration bar, grimaced and stuffed the wrapper into his pocket. 'Ah, stop whining, Gunny. Even you can handle four hours of sitting on your arse.' Bann stood and began collecting his things. 'That's the main scanner,' he said, pointing to the auspex. 'Probably won't register much while

the wind's up. The optical kit's in the front, scopes and stuff. You'll know how to work 'em.'

'No problem.'

Bann tossed a dog-eared devotional pamphlet onto the seat. 'There's your light relief,' he added. 'And see this bottle? That's the toilet.'

'Pure luxury.'

'Could be worse. You could be back on Catachan. See you later.'

Bann slammed the door shut behind him.

A hatch led to the cab. It swung open and a boy put his head out. He looked tiny, Lao thought, the way all these Dulma'linnies or whatever they were looked: scrawny and pale-faced like urchins. They were much of a muchness, he thought, but this one seemed vaguely familiar.

'Lao, third platoon. Call me Gunny. Do I know you?'

'Don't think so, sir,' said the lad. 'I'm supposed to show you how the optics work.'

Lao squeezed through the hatch. He clambered into the passenger seat. The boy sat behind the steering wheel, looking absurdly small.

The boy pushed down on the pedal and the truck's engine growled around them. The machine crawled up the slope again, towards the surface. Lao felt the vehicle level out, and at once the storm was upon them, shrieking around the edges of the truck like a pack of angry ghosts.

Lao looked over the array of scopes and image enhancers attached to the windscreen. A small console screwed to the dashboard displayed a blurry green image. It was familiar stuff, he thought. He'd seen similar rigs on Sentinels and in the backs of Chimeras. The instruments were jury-rigged, and he wondered whether moving them around would have made them break, but from the looks of it their machine-spirits were not displeased.

'That's the main scanner,' the youth said. 'It'll pick up anything for sixteen kilometres, if there's not too much of a storm.'

Lao pointed to the blur of dirt blasting around the cockpit. 'What if it's like this?'

The lad shrugged. 'Then it could be sixteen metres.'

'Right.' Gunnar Lao looked down at the sensors for a moment, and then laughed. 'Hey, I do know you. You're that kid we found on the way in here, the one Captain Lavant captured. Still around, eh?'

'My name's Sark,' said the boy. Outside, the storm raged. 'Not really anywhere else to go, is there?'

Straken watched as four of the militia carried the bodies out of the hab-block. They worked quickly and with respect, loading the dead men into a guild truck under white sheets while a shrewd, tough-looking woman covered them with an autogun. An armband identified her as a lieutenant in the militia. Once the bodies were on board, she looked at Straken.

'You coming with us, colonel? We've got room.'

'I'll walk.'

'Whatever you say,' she replied, and she climbed up onto the truck.

'Wait,' Straken said, and the lieutenant paused. 'Send a patrol down here in an hour's time. Tell them to come ready to fight.'

'Yes, sir,' she replied, and the truck's engine coughed into life.

Straken watched it roll away. He wondered how many pairs of ork eyes were watching it as well. Then he turned to the hab-block and stepped inside.

He climbed three flights of stairs and stopped on the landing. A large window, long smashed, looked out onto the city. From the shards clinging to the frame, it had been stained glass. The door to the apartment where the dead men had been found was still open. He walked in.

It was small, of course, still neat despite the killing that had been carried out. The table in the main room had been pushed against the wall: otherwise everything was much as it had been when Dulma'lin had been fully inhabited. There was no blood. Chances were, Straken thought, the victims had been killed elsewhere and brought down here by the orks because the windows were more visible. An ork could easily sling a corpse over its broad shoulders.

And here's where he hung the bodies, Straken realised, looking up at the ceiling. *This alien's mocking us – mocking me*.

He clenched his metal fist tight, then opened it and flexed the fingers. No point getting angry. That was exactly what the enemy wanted: to madden the Guardsmen, to get them running about like startled animals. No, an enemy like this needed careful stalking.

Just like back on Catachan. It's not the biggest enemies you have to watch for, but the smartest ones.

He checked the little bedroom and the toilet. They were neither trapped not occupied. Then he pushed a chair out of the shadows, away from the window, and sat down. It creaked under his weight.

On the mantelpiece, two saints blessed him on a folding triptych. Between them was the Emperor on His throne. Straken quickly made the sign of the aquila and felt relieved when he put his hands back on his shotgun. There was no

point praying. The Emperor would already know what Straken wanted, because it was the same thing as always: victory and survival.

Minutes passed. Straken watched, shotgun across his lap, the barrel pointing at the windowsill. From his position he could see the door and the window, and cover them both. He wondered which the orks would choose.

Maybe there would be a whole load of them, but he doubted it. A horde would make too much noise. Besides, if they'd seen him coming here – and somehow he knew that they had – their leader would want to fight him personally. Straken was nothing if not a worthy enemy.

A timepiece ticked slowly in the bedroom. Straken made no sound.

He felt the prickling of his skin, the strange queasiness that came from nerves, the sense in the back of his head that hostile eyes were on him. They were feelings that Colonel Straken was said not to experience, and to which he would never have admitted.

But they were there, all the same. What was the old saying? When you stopped being nervous, it was time to give up. General Greiss had told him that, back when the old man had been a colonel, before the land shark had taken Straken's arm. He wondered where General Greiss was now, and whether he had survived the landing. Probably not–

Something moved.

It wasn't much at all, perhaps a local animal, but it was definite: a tiny scuffing sound, like a boot might make, outside on the landing. Straken held his breath. Perhaps it was the result of some flaw in the building. Perhaps it was nothing at all.

Outside the room, the floorboards creaked.

He wanted to leap up and rush outside, to ambush the intruder. But Straken made himself sit still. Very slowly, he angled the shotgun on his lap so that the barrel faced the doorway.

Had anyone stepped into the apartment then, they would have thought that he was a metal doll, some new sort of servitor waiting to be powered up.

I know you're out there, he thought. *And you know I'm here as well. One of us is going to have to break the silence*.

He felt certain that the ork would not retreat. Straken was too much of a prize for that. He looked over to the window. The ork surely wouldn't risk rushing straight through the door. No, this one was much too cunning for that. It would climb out and try to blast him through the window, from outside.

Come on, scumbag, here I am. Window or door, I'm ready. Just show yourself.

The ceiling burst above him. Straken leaped aside as a massive, hunched figure crashed through the roof. He ran for the door. Straken felt the air part behind him as a blade lashed out at his back, but he was too quick. He reached the doorway, spun around and fired.

The ork flipped the table up and the shotgun blew a hole in it. The ork ducked low and ran left in a swirling column of plaster dust. Straken flicked to image enhance, pulled up his gun and pumped – fired – pumped – fired at the lumbering green form. He saw a few dots of blood on leathery skin, and then it charged at him like a ball of muscle.

One huge shoulder slammed against Straken, knocking him back, and the ork swung its knife up at Straken's throat. He blocked, the blade clanging against his arm, but the force of the blow staggered him. He saw teeth, smelt the reek of dried blood and old meat. Light glinted on half a dozen lenses on its face, an insectoid mass of glass.

The ork punched at him, and he sidestepped and rammed his gun-butt into its jaw. It lurched aside, spitting fangs. Straken jumped back, levelled his gun and fired from the hip.

The ork screeched and whipped round like a discus thrower. Air blurred before Straken; he threw his hand up and one of the brute's knives ricocheted off his steel wrist. His shotgun clattered to the floor.

Straken felt a burning line on his left forearm. He looked down: debris from the roof had sliced the flesh open. A trickle of blood ran down his arm, dripping onto the dust-strewn ground.

On the far side of the room, the ork chuckled.

Only now did Straken get a good view of the thing. It wore heavy boots and trousers slick with filth. The upper body was bare, dirt-smeared, ridged with scars. It had covered its arms with thin metal chains.

Thick blood ran from its right flank. Several of the lenses had been smashed, and behind them, a single red eye glared out like a sore.

Straken glanced down at his gun. The ork snarled and moved forwards.

It reached up and thumped its chest with a massive ham of a fist. 'Snukud,' it said.

Straken glared back. Its vile speech disgusted him almost as much as the realisation that the chains wrapped around its wrists – dozens and dozens of them – were the dog tags of Imperial Guardsmen.

'Snukkrut,' it growled. Slower, more carefully, as if explaining something to an imbecile, it said, 'Snik-rot.' Then it lunged at him.

Straken dropped down and grabbed his gun. The ork rushed him from the side, before he could aim. Straken swung his metal arm, but it dodged his fist. The ork stabbed at Straken's throat, and he twisted aside and kicked its left leg. It stumbled, its own momentum against it, and Straken threw his weight into its back.

The brute was knocked off balance. For a moment it stood silhouetted in the window, the city behind it, and Straken brought up his leg and stamped into its chest. The ork fell, snarling, down into the city below.

'Pleased to meet you, Snikrot,' Straken said.

Quickly, he reloaded his shotgun. He walked to the window with the gun raised, and carefully looked out.

Snikrot had disappeared.

He scowled and turned towards the stairs. It was time to finish this.

As he reached the top of the stairs he heard boots running up towards him. Straken pulled the shotgun up, waiting for the figure to appear, but he knew it wasn't Snikrot, and probably no ork either.

It was Marbo. He ran into view, knife in one hand and ripper pistol in the other, his face set into a scowl.

Straken lowered the shotgun.

'What're you doing here?' he said.

Marbo shrugged.

'Did you see anything as you came in?'

Marbo shook his head.

'There's an ork,' Straken said, 'the one that's been scalping our people. I came down here to kill him. I lured him up here and threw him out the window. Now I'm going to finish him off.'

'Right,' Marbo said, approvingly.

Straken hurried down the stairs. Marbo followed him, quiet as a panther in his wake.

There was nothing outside. Straken walked out and looked up at the window. The ork should have landed where the two men stood, on the pavement. He crouched down and stared at the ground.

A few spots of ork blood marked the pavement. Straken put out his metal hand and touched the stuff. He looked at his fingertip.

Snikrot, Straken thought, *that's its name.* He wondered why it had seen fit to let him know. Perhaps it was supposed to be an honour, or some strange gesture of mutual respect. No. That wasn't the way orks worked. It was more likely that

the monster wanted Straken to tell his men, to spread its reputation.

He stood up. There could be no doubt that this was the beast that had been killing his people, the thing that mad Father Sarr had worshipped as an avenging angel of the Emperor. *Well,* Straken thought, *you may have got away, but now I have a name for you. And I know that you can bleed.*

Killzkar was coming – the only question was when. The men trained, laid traps, prepared fire-points and ambushes. Straken had in mind a quick-moving, fluid kind of war. Strike, fight, fall back if in danger of being overwhelmed, reach the next point and repeat. A succession of fierce attacks, launched from strong defensive points, could wreak havoc with an enemy like the orks. The aliens would *have* to attack – the urge would be overwhelming – and when they did, Straken knew, they would suffer terribly for it.

Except, of course, the defenders would sooner or later run out of places to fall back to. Straken stood in what he'd heard the militia calling the War Room: the upstairs level of the fortified enforcer station. Maps covered the walls, as well as the massive table in the centre of the room. Lavant, with predictable attention to detail, had made models of the higher buildings, to illustrate lines of fire. Straken was amused to see that he'd cut them out of old ration packs and cartons of *Felix Lux* brand lho-sticks.

The room was empty and almost dark. Straken loomed over the city – almost his city now – and wondered where the fighting would take place. The only real entry point for the orks would be the main gate: no other entrance could fit a tank. Killzkar would enter Excelsis via the upper gate of the Mommothian Vault, and then Straken would let him in a little way, before springing his trap. The warlord would be dead within a few minutes of entering the city, his moment of triumph ended in a hail of rocket fire.

Straken heard heavy boots, clumsy on the stairs. He looked round. A tall figure approached, still limping slightly. The leather coat was scuffed and the cap battered, but Morrell still looked every inch a commissar.

'Good evening, colonel,' Morrell said.

'Commissar.' Straken didn't want to talk to the man. It didn't matter what they went through together, the foes they faced or the odds they defeated. Morrell was still a leash, just like all his type. He might be better or worse than most, but he was a commissar, and that in itself tainted him.

'Studying the terrain, eh?' Morrell limped over and looked down at the map. 'This must be how the princeps of a Titan must feel, gazing down over the city.

It all looks much smaller from up here,' he said, and he smiled, thinly.

The expression looked wrong on his broad, boxer's face. Straken ignored it.

'You know, it seems like only a few weeks since we landed here,' Morrell said. 'How long has it been?'

Straken said, 'I thought you knew that. You keep records.'

The commissar looked sour for a moment. Then he said, 'Indeed I do. I find it easier to compile a report rather than rely on memory. It makes things more balanced.'

And makes sure you don't forget any of the juicy details, Straken thought. *Nice to see you, commissar. Now get out and leave me in peace.*

'You're observant,' Morrell said.

Straken looked up and focused his bionic eye on the commissar's left pupil. 'Comes with the job,' he replied. 'Listen, if you want to be useful, look at this. Here's what we'll be doing when the time comes.' He swept his hand down the main boulevard of the vault, throwing a shadow over the map like a passing aircraft. 'This is our main line of attack. We'll need to use all the cover you've got. This is where the civilians will be,' Straken said, 'in support, like when we attacked the factories. I'll put a few of my people among them, to make sure they stay put, but most of them will be local militia. They're not bad, for locals.'

'I'll make sure they don't run,' Morrell replied grimly, staring down at the city.

'I'm sure you will.'

The commissar scowled. His mouth moved from side to side, as if chewing something bitter. Straken looked back at the map.

'Keep it flexible, Morrell. If you're getting shot up in the open, fall back to somewhere you can defend properly. The orks'll keep on coming, and you'll be able to kill a load of them. Then move up again. Do whatever's needed to make them pay. I want them to be taking ten times the casualties we do. So no bayonet charges, no last stands unless you have to. Not unless I say.'

'I understand.' Morrell glared down at the map, then at Straken. 'I know you don't much like me, colonel,' the commissar said. The bad light put deep lines on Morrell's skin, and gave the impression that his eyes were far back in his head. 'To be honest, I don't really care. But you ought to be aware that I didn't come here with the sole intention of sabotaging everything you do.'

Straken was surprised. He waited.

'I came here because I signed up for it. I have a job to do, colonel, just like you. And no matter how distasteful it may be to you, I want victory, just like you do.'

Straken said, ‘Yeah. But I win battles by killing the enemy. People like you win battles by killing your own men. *When* you win them. You want to know how to make men fight? You don’t threaten them, or drive them forward like a bunch of animals. You lead them. You show them how it’s done.’ He shook his head. ‘I can’t change that you’re here. Just don’t expect me to like it, commissar.’

‘That’s about the first thing they teach you in the Commissariat,’ Morrell replied. ‘You can expect anything from the Imperial Guard except to be liked.’ He was silent for a moment. Then he pointed at the map. ‘Tell me something. Killzkar is going to bring every greenskin he can get when he comes here. Even if we do trap him at the gates, we are going to be massively outnumbered. Do you think we’re going to win this?’

‘Yes,’ Straken said. ‘I think we can win. But there’s a lot of things that could happen. If we get Killzkar, and if his troops turn on each other like I think they will, maybe. That means we’ve got to hit Killzkar and pull back to our defences as quickly as possible. Then we dig in and let the orks fight amongst each other. Whatever’s left, we clean up.’

‘There would be a lot of orks left.’

‘There will be.’ He sighed. ‘It’s a lot of “ifs”. But if you’ve got any better ideas, let me know.’

‘I’ll think about it. Goodnight, colonel.’ Morrell walked slowly back towards the stairs.

Straken said, ‘Morrell.’

The commissar stopped and looked round. ‘Yes?’

‘You said that you signed up for this. Do you mean you actually *volunteered* to come down here? With a Catachan regiment?’

‘Of course.’

‘Damn, we must be getting soft. We used to scare commissars away.’

‘That’s precisely why I signed up, colonel. To see whether your reputation was deserved.’

‘And is it?’

‘Oh yes,’ Morrell said, and his face soured. ‘Every last bit.’ He turned and limped towards the door.

‘Don’t forget to put it in your report,’ Straken muttered. *Commissars – all the same, every last one of them.*

An alarm rang. Straken jerked upright. For half a second he listened to the jangling noise, making sure that it was what he thought. Then he lunged towards

the vox-comm.

'Straken here. What is it?'

Static raged in the comm-link. 'Message in from the manufactoria, sir. They say to come at once.'

'I'll be there.' Straken grabbed his shotgun.

Morrell had frozen at the top of the stairs. 'Straken! What in the Emperor's name is that?'

'What do you think? It must be orks. They've attacked.'

He ran down the stairs, the commissar lurching after him like a clockwork toy. 'Warp take you, slow down!' Morrell yelled. Straken reached the bottom of the staircase and rushed out. The guards were already all set, hunkered down behind barricades. Two men ripped the cover off a heavy bolter while a third dropped behind it to man the gun. A young man with one ear consulted a cogitator just inside the door.

'You want me to get more details, sir?'

Morrell stumbled out of the enforcer station.

'No,' Straken said. 'Let's go.'

With the commissar a step behind him, he strode over to the armoured car by the side of the road. He dropped into the passenger seat, and waited for Morrell to clamber in behind him. 'The manufactoria,' he told the driver. 'And quick.'

The car tore through empty streets, wove between barriers and long-abandoned vehicles. Soldiers appeared from behind barricades and at windows as they passed, saw who it was and quickly let them through, knowing better than to delay Iron Hand Straken.

He sat in the passenger seat, almost hissing with annoyance. 'Come on, come on,' he muttered between his teeth.

'Should we stop and tell them what's happened?' Morrell asked from the back.

'I'll give orders when I know what the hell's going on,' Straken snapped back. 'Driver, can't you go any faster than this?'

The man accelerated and they turned out of the hab-zone into the wide tunnel towards the manufactoria. Men scrambled to open the gates in the metal wall and the car rolled through. 'Take us up there,' Straken said, pointing. 'The comms station.'

The car pulled up and Straken leaped out. The great yards of the manufactoria were almost empty, though the heaps of components that the orks had made were still standing. But as he ran to the comms office he heard yells and whooping,

and he readied his shotgun and rushed on.

Straken charged in, gun ready, and froze. Men stood around the communications gear, but they were cheering and laughing. The light of the auspex screens, normally eerie, made the room weirdly festive. A soldier noticed Straken and yelled, 'The colonel!' over the sound of celebration, and in a few seconds the men fell silent again.

'What's going on?' Straken demanded. He glanced around, instinctively looking for trouble. 'What the hell's this?'

'It's the *Navy*,' said Sergeant Halda. 'We've made contact.'

'The fleet?' Straken took a step forward. *Surely not.* He forced down the sense of hope that was trying to rise in him. Maybe they'd read the sensors wrong, or picked up some other transmission. He strode over to the main console. A Catachan technician sat in front of the screens, looking bored and tough. Beside him stood one of the Dulma'lin engineers, watching the soldier as if afraid that he'd start breaking things.

'It's the Navy all right,' the soldier said. He glanced round. 'Sorry, colonel, I didn't know it was you.'

'Keep watching the screens,' Straken replied. 'What've we got?'

'Standard coded signal, repeating on a nine-second loop,' the technician said. 'The code's the first line of the *Sanctus Imperator* – that's the same sign as our battlegroup.'

Straken took a deep breath, tried to remain calm. The possibility, however faint, of getting out of here was suddenly real. The thought of getting away from Dulma'lin was wonderful. But Iron Hand Straken would never have left while there were orks to kill and a victory to win. He said, 'What're you waiting for? Hail them.'

He leaned against the wall and waited while the comms men reeled out a list of numbers and codewords in Gothic. Static hissed over the speakers, followed by a garbled chatter of binaric. Straken stared at the speaker, his usual dislike of the Adeptus Mechanicus forgotten in the relief of hearing someone – anyone – from the fleet.

He leaned in and took the comm-link from the technician.

'This is Colonel Straken of the Second Catachan Regiment, acting head of operations on Dulma'lin, operating as part of the Ryza warzone force. Who am I talking to?'

The binaric stopped abruptly. A buzzing voice replied, 'Repeat your identification codes, Guardsman. You are not currently authorised–'

‘Just get me General Greiss. Now.’

The voice broke off into a gabble of binaric. Straken muttered, ‘Throne-damned cogboys.’

‘This is Greiss. That you, Straken?’

A cheer broke out among the men. Someone whooped, too damned close to Straken’s head. The civilian engineer grinned. Straken smiled. ‘It’s me, sir.’

‘Colonel, it’s good to hear your voice. You all right down there? What’ve you been doing?’

‘We’re fine, thank you, sir. We’ve been carrying out our mission – giving the orks hell.’

‘I’m glad to hear it,’ Greiss said. ‘Emperor knows the rest of the army took a beating. The savants were saying you people would be finished down there, but I knew better.’ He chuckled. ‘Call me sentimental, but I’m glad to hear that the Catachan Second are doing what they do best.’

‘We’re born survivors,’ Straken replied. ‘But we’ve got trouble on the way. Thing is, we’ve been busy down here, and now every greenskin on Dulma’lin’s coming for us. Killzkar included.’

‘Then I’ve got news for you, colonel,’ Greiss replied. ‘Because we’re coming for *them*.’

On the left, one of the Catachans punched his gloved fist into his palm. ‘All right!’

One of the local techs reached into her overalls for a lho-stick. ‘Thank the Emperor.’

‘We got some help,’ Greiss added. ‘The High Praetor of the Purbech regiments is with us. I don’t know how well they fight, but they’re keen to get stuck in. We’ve got the onboard workshops working flat out to gear us up for planetfall. I reckon we’re going to need it.’

‘Yeah, there’re a lot of orks round here,’ Straken said. ‘And soon there’s going to be a whole load more. I figure that we can take out Killzkar. With a bit of luck, they’ll start arguing once he’s gone. But it won’t be easy.’

‘The Emperor favours the brave, Straken. But save a few orks for me. I’m looking forward to paying Killzkar back for what he did to my army.’

‘We all are,’ Straken said, and he signed out.

A collective sigh went around the room. ‘Well, what do you know?’ someone said. ‘Some genuine good news.’

Straken stepped back from the vox. He felt the urge to grin with relief, but he fought it down. The Navy might be on the way, but that was no guarantee that

they were saved. ‘Listen, all of you. Now you’ve got a job to do and a way out of here. So let’s get on with it. I want this line monitored day and night. Sleep beside it if you have to. In the meantime, we’re going into the main gates. Given that we’re expecting guests, we ought to lay on something special for them.’ He turned to the door. ‘As you were,’ he said, and as he walked out the celebrations began again.

Straken stood outside the comms building and listened to the excited voices filtering out. He leaned against the wall, the shadows hiding him, trying to collect his thoughts. So, the Navy was coming back. He’d known that Greiss wouldn’t want to leave the Catachans, but he was still impressed: military necessity had a way of getting good men killed. You had to hand it to the old boy – he looked after his own. That, more than grand speeches or tactical genius, was what made good leaders, no doubt about it.

Three soldiers jogged past, talking loudly. ‘Holy Throne! You hear the news? We might actually get out of this hellhole! Hey, friend–’ the nearest man called. Straken looked around and the man saw the right side of his face. The three of them straightened up and saluted. ‘Colonel. Sorry, sir.’

Straken gave them a nod. ‘At ease.’

‘Sir, is it true? That we’re going home?’

‘Home’ seemed a strange description for a transport vessel, but Straken knew what they meant. ‘The army’s on the way,’ he replied. ‘But so are the orks. Keep sharp.’

‘Yes, sir!’

They hurried inside, to join the comms men. No doubt, even on rations, they would find some way to celebrate. He remembered the illegal still that Morrell had discovered back on the *Radix Malorum*, and wondered whether someone had tried something like that down here. If they had, Straken thought, they’d learned their lesson, and kept it well out of sight.

So what now? He looked his metal hand over, flexing the fingers. It could be possible to pull back to the outer caves, hide out in the power station where they had entered Excelsis City all those months ago. *The locals will want to hide down there,* he thought, *but that’s not happening.* Even the supplies of local food were dwindling. If the fleet was delayed, or ambushed again, they would be as good as finished.

He looked across the yard. In one of the workshops, soldiers were repairing the tanks. They were Catachans, brawny men hauling great slabs of metal

between them. They worked under the oversight of a thin woman in tanker gear, one of the Selvian Dragoons. She looked half starved, and there were dark scabs on the side of her jaw.

Straken licked his lips. He felt tired, but certain. Killzkar was coming, reinforcements or not. If Greiss's army and these Purbech fellows – whoever *they* were – got to Dulma'lin in time, then so much the better. But Killzkar wouldn't be deterred. It was far better to be waiting for him when he arrived than to hide starving in the dark and hope he wouldn't look too hard. It wasn't just a matter of honour, although honour came into it. No matter what, when Killzkar came, Straken would meet him head on.

A truck rumbled into the yard a little too fast and braked hard. A familiar figure climbed down from the passenger seat: big, broad even by Catachan standards, his face round and his body a little less toned than most, but still massive and strong.

'Tanner.'

The captain saw Straken and grinned. 'I heard the news. Am I hoping for too much to think that the Guard's going to get us off this rock?'

'Once Killzkar's dead, yes. I need you to do something for me.'

'Sure.'

'Get everyone together that you can spare. I want a full meeting as soon as possible. And in the meantime, I need a list of your best men – hard cases, real killers.'

'Oh yes?'

'Tell Lavant to do the same. We're going to get a welcoming committee ready for Killzkar.'

Tanner shook his head. 'You know what the men'll say. Only Iron Hand Straken would go hunting orks when there's a perfectly good fleet on the way.'

Straken shrugged. 'If people don't want to fight, I'd rather they didn't. I mean that – I don't want any dead weight on this. Better not have a man at all than one who's worse than useless. Besides, if they wanted to take it easy, they got born on the wrong planet.'

Tanner laughed. 'They'll come. I'll put the word out.'

The commissar was the last to arrive. Straken, Lavant, and Tanner waited for him in the rear offices of what had once been Parceltis and Son, Artisan Fabricators. Tanner drank cold Barabo tea from his flask, while Lavant drew slowly on a lho-stick and watched Straken watching the timepiece.

Morrell lurched through the door at oh-eight-hundred hours. The commissar pulled his cap off, jammed it under his arm and said, ‘Apologies, gentlemen. The drive from the power station took longer than I’d expected.’

‘Let’s move,’ Straken said. ‘Tanner, put that flask away. Lavant, stub it out. You look nervous smoking those things.’

Straken led them from the office, through the factory floor, past rows of rusting machinery. Voices filtered through from outside.

They stopped at a chipped iron door. Straken looked back, glancing over each man, and nodded. ‘Yeah, you’ll do,’ he said, and he opened the door.

They walked into the great shared yard of the manufactoria. The artificial morning hit their eyes, and as they emerged the fighters yelled and cheered.

The soldiers stood in teams in the yard, not drawn up into lines. As they saw their leaders the men stood up straight, ground out lho-sticks and turned to face them. Near the front, Jocasta Ferrens, self-appointed standard bearer of the Dulma’lin militia, sat on the front of an armoured car and grinned ferociously. Larn Tarricus raised his fist and shouted. The troops became harder, more alert, as if the sight of the commanders had filled them with discipline.

Straken very much hoped that it had. He walked towards the salvaged Chimera that had been converted into an ad hoc command vehicle, stuffed with comms gear and rigged with massive loudspeakers like blunderbusses on the roof. Without breaking stride he leaped onto the front and clambered up onto the armour. Tanner followed him, then, more cautiously, Lavant. Morrell approached, but stopped at the base of the Chimera.

Straken tapped the vox. Behind him, the speakers made a muffled booming sound. ‘Everyone hear me?’ he asked.

They yelled back their approval. Men cheered; boots drummed on armour. A short civilian gunner, perched on one of the Leman Russ battle tanks like a mascot, lost her footing and was just caught in time. A boy no older than ten held up a laslock above his head the way noble citizens did in Munitorum propaganda posters.

‘I’ll take that as a yes,’ Straken said. ‘I’m not much of a one for speeches – the way I see it, if something’s worth talking about, it’s worth doing – but I reckon I ought to say a couple of things to you while we’re all here.’

While I’ve got the chance, he thought. *While you’re all still alive.* For a moment he looked across the mass of fighters, and wondered how many would be left by the time the Guard arrived. It would be like scribbling faces off a photograph. He shoved the thought aside.

‘First, I’ve not had the chance to say that you’ve done a good job. You’ve stuck it out for months down here – some of you, more than that. We’ve all taken a kicking from the greenskins, one way or another, and I’m pleased to say that you’ve given them one hell of a beating in return. The Emperor only knows how many of the green scum you people have taken out. Make no mistake – the orks fear us, and every one of you is part of the reason for that. You’ve done well, and any one of the men I command will tell you that I don’t say that very often.’

‘Too right!’ one of the sappers yelled, and around him people laughed. Straken smiled.

‘By now you’ll know that we’ve got visitors coming to this fair city. The way I see it, the orks are on their way, and, in case any of you don’t know it, the Imperial Guard are coming too.’ He stopped as applause broke out. By his side, Lavant made chopping gestures, to no avail. Straken held up a hand, and at last the noise died away. ‘I don’t know who’s going to reach here first, but whoever does get here, it’s not going to change our plans. No matter who comes through the gates, we’ll be giving them the warm welcome they deserve. The Guard’ll be getting a helping hand, and the orks’ll be getting something a little bit… different.

‘What that means is this. You are all now on high alert. All of you have a job to do and will do it. My people here,’ he gestured to the men around him, ‘will be leading you, depending on your position. I myself will be taking the front.’

‘There’s a surprise!’ a woman shouted, and there were laughs. ‘Go, Iron Hand!’

‘The plan is to get the whole district around the Great Gates sewn up – but quietly. When Killzkar comes in, he’ll think he’s walking into a friendly neighbourhood. Then we’ll jump him, and the filthy animal who did all of this – who trashed your city and took my army out – will finally get what he deserves. Tomorrow, I’ll be taking a team up to start scouting the area. In the meantime, get ready. You’ve taken this war to the orks – now it’s time to take it to their leader.

‘Now get to it!’

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‘I’ve got Gorsen, Naas, Rickel, Poole and Lodder,’ Lavant said. ‘They’re demolitions people, all very good. Then from the other teams, you’ve got snipers. Maddox, Halski, Aduro, Kerriksen and, er, Serradus. All of them have the marksman’s badge.’

‘I know most of ’em,’ Straken said. ‘And if you vouch for the rest, I’m sure they’re a good crew.’

They stood outside the enforcer station, in the north end of their territory, close to the entrance to the bottom of the Mommothian Vault. The infiltration team numbered thirty men, hand-picked for their skill not just in fighting, but stealth. Those few who Straken did not know by name, he knew by sight; even by the standards of the men he commanded, they were all tough and capable. They wore heavy packs, and for men used to living by their wits seemed overladen, but Straken knew that they would need all the equipment they could carry.

At the edge of the group, a single figure waited, next to the team but not quite part of it: Marbo.

Halski clapped Serradus on the shoulder. ‘Hey, Grim. Ready to work your magic on the greenskins again?’

Serradus adjusted the straps on his pack. His sniper rifle was strapped in sections to the side, ready to be assembled. ‘I think I could manage that,’ he said, his voice slightly muffled by his mask.

Behind the team, the Sentinel *Wild Boy* waited, its exhausts filtered and legs fat with muffling gear. Its pilot, a bearded trooper called Albric, tossed the end of his lho-stick out the window and used the Sentinel’s padded foot to grind it out. The machine carried bulky panniers full of high-density mining explosives as well as a scatter laser.

Tanner looked up from the comm. ‘Weather report, colonel,’ he said, handing the comm-link back to the trooper. ‘The boys topside say the storm’s easing down.’

Straken nodded. ‘Then the orks’ll be here soon.’ He took a deep breath. ‘All the more reason to roll out. Tanner, tell Morrell that I want progress reports every six hours until I give the order to go quiet. Got me?’ They nodded. Straken checked the land shark skull on his belt. It had brought him luck so far – hopefully, it still would in future. ‘Well then, let’s move it, Guardsmen!’

They moved out – thirty men, heading north, the Sentinel following like a tame beast. As they reached the entrance to the Mommothian Vault, they split from the road into two thin columns and picked their way between wrecked vehicles, from one piece of cover to the next. When they stopped, they hid.

The archway was easily eighteen metres tall. Two statues held up its sides, their raised pickaxes crossing over the keystone. In the road, vehicles lay scattered like thrown dice.

Straken glanced back at his men. ‘Marbo, Pharranis, with me. The rest of you, move up in threes on my signal.’

The two troopers hurried to his side. Sergeant Pharranis looked as rough and grimy as ever. Only his bionic eye was clean. He clutched his meltagun in scarred hands and scowled at the way ahead. Marbo looked the same as usual: sullen, cold, unimpressed.

Straken ran up to the first car. Something had flipped it onto its side. He peered around the edge, watching the road before them.

This was the most dangerous moment. The vault belonged to the orks – it was their last stronghold in Excelsis City – but Straken didn’t know how much of it they still controlled. If they spotted his team entering, they could use the archway as a chokepoint, where even ork gunfire could be murderous.

Nothing moved ahead of them. Straken ran to the next vehicle, a pedlar’s electro-cart, and ducked behind it. Pharranis and Marbo followed a moment later, covering the road while the colonel boosted his bionic eye and scanned their route. The pain of zooming in had worsened; he gritted his teeth at the whine that bored through his head.

‘It’s clear,’ Straken whispered. He looked back and gestured for the rest to follow. ‘Let’s go,’ he said, and he jogged into the shadows at the side of the arch.

The men dropped in behind him. They moved up in little groups, Lavant and his sappers taking the lead. The Sentinel loped along at the back, using cover to hide its outline. Straken looked around the corner.

The wide streets were deserted, the plush hab-blocks and administrative buildings empty and windowless as if burned out. A few statues flanked the road, most of them without heads. One or two buildings had been reinforced

with a frantic patchwork of plasteel plate, but nothing moved inside them. In the far distance stood the two great statues of Lord Solar Macharius and Saint Helena, sculpted from the columns that held up the roof.

The place looked abandoned, and somehow alien. Straken thought, *This is xenos territory.*

They advanced.

They met their first orks on a side road called Via Calgaris. Three aliens lumbered into view, scowling under steel helmets. Straken let them pass him, gestured for Marbo to follow and hit them from behind. He grabbed one and clenched his steel fingers around its windpipe. As Straken lowered the corpse to the ground he saw Marbo toss his own victim aside. The third ork turned to run, and one of the snipers, Kerriksen, took it down with a shot to the neck.

They dragged the bodies aside and moved on. Straken kept to backstreets, only bringing up the Sentinel once the coast was clear. Progress was steady, but careful. Twice Straken noticed smoke up ahead and led the team around.

At one point, they heard roars and shouts, as if a fight had broken out. Straken crept forwards on his own. About fifty orks stood around a deep crater where a building had once stood. Gretchin swarmed round the edge of the crater, watching something going on in the bottom of it. As Straken sneaked away, bestial snarls came from the pit.

Further on, they found sentry posts and crude alarms, strings tied across pathways, mines scattered over roads. They might have caught out an inexperienced Guardsman, but Straken doubted there was a fighter under his command who would have been fooled. They disarmed the traps and moved on, noting the way they had come.

The architecture became grander and more formal. They passed Administratum offices, courthouses, even a museum. Two hundred and seventy-five metres away, the wrecked dome of the Dulma'lin Senate House looked like a smashed egg rising out of the city. Straken consulted the map. They were on course.

Some of the buildings were obvious ork strongholds, bristling with guns, the roofs covered in rockets. The greenskins had created a few compounds, throwing up barricades to turn city blocks into metal castles. Straken avoided them. He had bigger targets in mind.

As the lights dimmed above them – the orks had shot out many of the illuminators, throwing the vault into twilight – they reached the edge of the

Triumphal Gardens. The park was hopelessly overgrown, and stretched almost to the Great Gates. The tangled foliage had been of no interest to the orks, and was now a mass of brambles and fungal trees.

'You could hide a whole army in there,' Lavant said, lowering his magnoculars.

Straken nodded. 'That's the plan.'

Tanner was in the mess room of the enforcer station when the call came through. He'd been playing a hand of Heretic's Wake with the militia commanders, and was losing badly. Jocasta Ferrens was a crafty player, and had just cleaned out Tarricus and one of the lieutenants of the militia when the vox-trooper called him over.

'Straken here,' said the crackly voice on the end of the headset. 'Your people all set, Tanner?'

'Absolutely.'

'Get 'em moved up by squads. I'm going to give you the locations of ork camps we've passed. Hit 'em hard and quick, understand?'

'Will do.'

'Good.' Straken read out coordinates, and the captain marked them off on his map with a stub of pencil. 'Nice and quietly, Tanner. Make sure none of them get away. I don't want anything to put Killzkar on edge.'

'Right. I'll get the armour moving.'

'Do that. Good luck.'

'Emperor protect, sir.'

Straken set up camp in the park overlooking the Great Gates. In many ways, it was the safest place there was, especially for jungle fighters: although overgrown, it was easy terrain for men who had grown up on Catachan. He helped set up tripwires and booby traps along the edge of the park facing the gates, from which an ork attack might come. At nightfall, he sent patrols to clear out the neighbouring buildings, to give clear avenues of fire for snipers and heavy weapons.

More teams joined them, encircling and destroying the scattered ork units they met along the way. Now that the mechs had been killed and the gargant factory wrecked, the greenskins in the main vault were without leadership, clinging to their patches of territory and squabbling with each other. The first of Tanner's crews, led by tough, wild-looking Sergeant Halda, surprised a pack of orks that

had been using a Basilica Administratum as a barracks, and cleaned it out with grenades. They reached Straken's team later that afternoon and joined them in reinforcing the park district. Slowly, piece by piece, Straken began to bring his army in.

If there were any serious numbers of orks left in the vault, they were lying very low. The converging human units hunted down a few small forts, so that the orks could not attack them from the rear as they passed by. As teams brought their reports to Straken, it became clear that the orks had either died, hidden or fled into the wastes above, seeking to escape the city in whatever vehicles they could find, presumably with the aim of joining up with the main horde.

It made sense, Straken thought as he sat in the verdant shambles of the park, consulting his map. Killzkar had never wanted Dulma'lin itself; the planet had been a stopping-point for his main attack on Ryza. Killzkar's main interest had been in the engineering faculties provided by the manufactoria, and now that the industrial caverns were in human hands, his main purpose for being on Dulma'lin was thwarted.

Which made it all the more certain that he would try to wreak revenge.

Lavant's sappers moved up to the gates. They laid traps, set explosives and readied the roads around the entrance for Killzkar's arrival. With a little effort, the once-grand avenues leading into Excelsis City would be turned into a bottleneck of broken ork armour, and a killing ground for the Catachans. Lavant supervised the work, unloading the Sentinel with his own hands and sending it back for extra thermite charges. Then he turned his attention to the great pillars that supported the roof, the fail-safe to be detonated if all else was lost.

The nose of the drilling machine was a thrumming blur. Generators fired along the length of the machine, all eighteen metres of it, throwing blue light over the nose cone. The massive teeth whirred past, sending shadows strobing across the yard.

Morrell watched from the entrance to a solid-looking workshop, his eyes narrowed against the glow. The local militia had supercharged the drilling machine, despite it having been only recently recovered from the orks, and had not been able to run the system auguries that would normally have been carried out. Morrell knew that he could duck into the workshop if the drill malfunctioned, but also knew that there would be little point in doing so if the plasma engines blew up.

'Quite a piece of kit, isn't it?'

He looked round. Tarricus stood beside him, grinning. As guildmaster, he had come out to oversee the deployment of the drilling gear, and looked as proud as a new father.

'It's a phase field generator,' Tarricus explained. 'Very old tech, that. It dates back almost to the founding of Dulma'lin. The field pushes the driller through the rock, while the drills and melta nodes do the rest of the work. It's very effective. You can see why the orks wanted them as fingers on their gargant. That would cut through any armour like a knife through butter.'

Morrell had never much cared for civilian company – they lacked the discipline of Guardsmen, although civilians at least blasphemed less often. 'Is the machine reliable?'

'I think so. We've had to cannibalise some parts from the other drills, but the orks seem to have left most of the workings alone. It's seen some honourable work, that driller, but this must be the most honourable yet.'

'Let us hope its machine-spirit is favourable.'

The drill dipped, and where it met the ground, the stone disappeared into the blue glow. Morrell tensed, hearing not just the crack of breaking rock, but the hiss of melta-fire. The nose of the driller slipped into the ground: slowly, but smoothly, as if it were retracting into the body of the machine.

'How fast does it go?' Morrell demanded.

'Well, that's the thing. We've got a lot of power going into that one machine. It's almost at full power now, and we need to be moving even faster… Too bad none of your tech-priests were up to sticking around when the draft came.'

'They had their reasons to go,' the commissar replied. 'I'd advise you against questioning the judgment of the High Command.'

They fell silent, watching the drill sink into the ground. Morrell realised that he hadn't thought about General Greiss's army for a long while. He had been so concerned with keeping order down here, and watching his back around the Catachans, that the idea of leaving Dulma'lin suddenly seemed alien and strange. He wouldn't miss this misbegotten bunch of caves, but somehow, as little as he liked the idea, he felt that his place was here.

Idiocy, he thought. *Sentimental nonsense,* and he tried to crush the notion out of his mind.

Tarricus smiled and lifted a mug of Barabo tea to his lips. 'Now I'd like to see the orks anticipate that,' he said, and he took a deep swig. Impressed but wary, Morrell turned away and set off towards the rear of the caverns, to check on the tanks.

Two days later, Lavant reported his success to Straken's ad hoc forward command. The upper end of the vault was a heavily mined chokepoint, a corridor of fire waiting to be unleashed. The colonel sent him back with the sappers to help the guild militia with their drilling efforts, leaving a few men to operate the gatehouse controls.

Straken gave orders to his men to tear up the long-disused water pipes around the edge of the park. The long tubes made good conduits for spare promethium, and were laid out in the undergrowth, ready to ignite. Then he forced himself to wait.

There were nearly two thousand men in position around the gates now, a third of them Catachan, the rest local, dug in but ready to move. Further back, heavy weapons and sniper points were installed in the main buildings facing the entrance. The tanks were out of sight of the main gate, ready to move up into position.

Straken looked over his men with satisfaction. The trap was set.

Gunnar Lao was three hours into the watch. Watching the storm outside was as hard on his eyes – and, he suspected, as much use – as staring at a detuned vid-screen. It wasn't like stalking an enemy soldier, or even an animal; instead, he kept his eyes as locked on the horizon as much he could manage, glancing down at the monitoring sensoria every so often.

'Kid,' he said, 'this is driving me crazy. Talk to me about something before this storm drives me mad.'

In the seat beside him, Cordell Sark shrugged. 'Sure. What about?'

'Anything. Except nothing about mining.'

Sark frowned. 'Well, I remember that there was this big storm, about three years ago. If you think it's bad out there, you ought to–'

Lao looked away, disgusted. 'And no storms, either. Hey…' He pointed to a screen on the dashboard. Slowly, a shadow was creeping over the edges of the picture, as if smoke were seeping into the workings. 'What the hell is that?' he said, and he looked back out the window.

The army broke from the horizon as though forming out of it. Suddenly, there was a row of dark shapes in the distance, like the ruins of a massive wall, a mirage. The specks grew, becoming larger and more solid as they approached. Towers and spires rose from the horde, and below them were vehicles so closely packed that their armoured hulls looked like the roofs of a mobile town.

Lao felt fear swell within him. He suddenly wanted to be anywhere other than

in this armoured can – except outside, in the storm. He looked from left to right, from one side of the army to the other, and tried to work out how wide apart they were. Two kilometres, three? It was like a tide coming in.

'Call it in,' he said. 'They're coming.'

Sark opened the vox. 'This is Watch-point One,' he said, 'Come in.'

'Reading you, Watch.'

Lao leaned close to the comm-link. 'We have orks sighted on the horizon. We're looking at a big force here. It's a whole army coming our way. I'm seeing a lot of armour. I think...' He checked the sensoria, hardly daring to take his eyes off the approaching army. 'They'll reach the city in just over an hour.'

'I hear you. Can you give any further details? How many do you estimate?'

'I don't know – the whole lot! Listen, this is it, I'm telling you. For the Emperor's sake–'

'I believe you. Get back, Watch-point One. I'll pass it on.'

Sark had fished out the magnoculars. 'Emperor protect us.' He passed them over. 'Look!'

The army was closing, but not quickly. They could not be doing much more than thirty kilometres per hour, Lao realised, and as he turned up the image enhancement, he saw why. The front row of the army was packed with tanks and battlewagons, painted a range of garish colours and trailing banners and flags. But they were dwarfed by the enormous creature that lumbered between them. It was easily twenty-five metres to the shoulder, coated with sheet metal bolted to scales that were already iron hard, an enormous green beast larger than a super-heavy tank. It loped along, head low to the ground, its great jaws open, the teeth reinforced with metal. The mouth was like the entrance ramp to a drop-ship.

Lao lowered the magnoculars. Even Catachan couldn't provide a beast that big. A monster like that could crush a battle tank under its foot and hardly notice it.

Outside, the wind was low. 'Back this wagon up,' Lao said. 'We're getting out of here.'

Straken listened to the vox. 'All right,' he said after a while. 'Seal up the back entrance. Leave a skeleton crew there and send them down here to reinforce the line. We need every man we can get.'

He hung up. Halda stood before him, holding the rolled standard of the Catachan Second. The sergeant looked at Straken for a moment, waiting for orders. Against the overgrown foliage of the Triumphal Gardens, his thick beard

and banner pole made him look like a savage from a feral world, holding a spear and ready to hunt.

Straken thought, *So this is it. They're coming, just like I thought.* He felt something that was either anticipation or fear. *And they'll get here before the fleet. Typical.*

'Sir?' Halda said.

'The orks are coming,' Straken replied. 'Scouts say that there are thousands of them – tanks, troop carriers, the lot. They're bringing some huge animal with them. It sounds like a squiggoth.' He stood up. 'Listen! People, we have one hour, maybe less. Halda, you unfurl that banner when I say, and not before. Understand?'

'Loud and clear.'

'Vox-team, call up the gatehouse and get those doors open. I want Killzkar to walk right in. Relay the information to the other teams. Keep the tanks back out of sight. Fire only on my orders.'

He watched as his orders spread. The news ran through the men around him, was shouted by their sergeants and lieutenants, spread by vox to the other units of the army. Straken fought down the urge to check his weapons again.

The Great Gates rolled apart. For the first time in almost a year, the soldiers looked out at natural light. It flooded the streets of Excelsis City the way the Emperor's presence was said to, washing over the buildings, trees and vehicles and the men who hid around them.

They waited. Someone passed a flask of water around. Straken refused it. He wondered how Tanner was, and then how much of an effect Lavant's traps would have on the incoming horde. He checked the teams off in his mind, unit by unit. *Come on,* he thought. *The door's open – what more do you want?*

Then he wondered whether he had been wrong. What if Killzkar didn't decide to march in? What if the warboss tried to starve them out, or just hurled bombs through the gates instead of descending into Excelsis City in person? He shoved the thoughts down. Iron Hand Straken didn't think like that.

Distantly, he heard the rumble of engines.

Men around him heard as well. They looked at the gates and the light streaming through, and then at the cavern roof. Killzkar's army was above them.

In the light streaming through the gates, a huge shadow appeared.

The squiggoth was first to approach the gates. If the ramp had not been solid rock, it would have fallen apart under the weight of the beast: each of its feet

was the size of a bunker, and every footstep boomed through the cavern. Two ork Dreadnoughts walked beside it, children next to a warhorse. The squiggoth carried an iron fortress strapped to its back, from which jutted dozens of gun barrels. On the monster's head was an enormous steel crown, its spines forming walls in their own right, and in the centre of it sat a colossal ork.

The squiggoth stopped, lowered its head and dropped to its knees with a ground-shaking *boom*. A drawbridge flopped down from the fortress on its head, lying along the monster's snout like the nosepiece of an ancient helmet. The hulking figure on the throne stood up.

Only an ork, Straken thought, *could be that crazy – or that arrogant.*

Even if he hadn't been able to see its face, he would have known that it was Killzkar. The warlord wore a suit of bright yellow armour, some of it striped with black warning marks, and a blue banner as a loincloth that still displayed the omega symbol of Ultramar. Straken boosted his vision and saw the ork's face, exactly as the briefing had described it long ago: crossed by two huge, livid scars as if it were stitched together from four separate pieces, the lines gleaming with metal sutures.

Vehicles swarmed behind Killzkar's squiggoth, crawling respectfully after their master. There were too many to make out clearly, packed together axle to axle. Straken saw high-sided tanks, armoured wagons crammed with ork soldiers, small castles on tracks, even great rolling machines looted from industrial worlds.

Warboss Killzkar looked around at his city. He smiled, not knowing that several dozen crosshairs were centred on his patchwork face.

'Kill him,' Straken said.

20.

Gunfire roared out of the Catachan positions. Lascannons, heavy bolters and missile launchers threw up a strobing wall of light. Tanks rolled into place in the avenues, covers and camouflage were thrown aside, and mortars hurled their bombs over the heads of the enemy to land in their packed ranks.

Blue light flickered around the squiggoth, as if the shots fired at it were hitting a glass dome. A few shots slipped through the field to burst on the creature's armour or hide. The beast lurched upright, turned aside and lumbered into – and through – Excelsis City's concert hall. It lowered its head, trying to shake the concussion away, while the guns on its flanks began to return fire.

Killzkar kicked one of the panels on the squiggoth's head aside and jumped. As he dropped, his troops rushed forward to join him. Several shots had not been deflected by the field, and Killzkar's armour was ripped and dented from the salvo. Blood ran from a hole in his scalp that would have killed a human being. The warboss paused, chuckled and ran ahead, bellowing. Behind him, the ork lines came alive. Aliens swarmed out of trucks, scrambled out of the squiggoth's howdah like pirates boarding an enemy ship and rushed towards the Imperial line.

The orks advanced in a screaming wave of fangs, green muscle, filthy clothes and greased metal. Killzkar lumbered along at their head, but in a second the mob around him had outpaced him.

A great wall of gunfire hissed and rattled from the park. The Catachans opened fire and cut down the front rank of the enemy in a heartbeat. Straken gritted his teeth as the orks came into range. When they were twenty-five metres away, he fired.

Tanks fired down the long, straight avenues. Straken saw shells burst in the packed mass of aliens, throwing flesh and ork blood high into the air. Chaos broke out in the ork ranks as vehicles and waves of foot troops surged forward, and each rolled over the other. A creaking battlewagon ploughed into the back of

the ork line even as its occupants jumped out, the driver too crazed or too injured to turn aside. A moment later it exploded, and spinning lumps of armour added to the carnage. The roar of gunfire almost drowned out the bellows from Killzkar's soldiers.

But the orks did not stop. The slaughter seemed to intoxicate them, like fumes. They trampled their wounded and scrambled over the remains of their vehicles. The squiggoth, dazed by the gunfire, dipped its head and scooped up a dozen ork soldiers in its enormous maw.

Mortars hurled shells over the buildings and the orks sent out their elite troops. Xenos equipped with copters and jump packs flew out of the horde. Many smashed into the cavern roof, popping in blossoms of fire above the battlefield. Others were gunned down and dropped onto their comrades. But some got through.

Thirty metres away from Straken, an ork bounced into the air and swooped down on the Catachan line. It misjudged its landing and the jump pack it wore caught light – the explosion blew it and six Guardsmen apart. A primitive teleporter flickered on the back of the squiggoth and suddenly a pack of shrieking gretchin was loose in the woods.

From the rows of trapped vehicles and bellowing foot soldiers, massive figures waddled forth, waving pincer-arms. The ork tanks might be stuck, but their Dreadnoughts were comparatively nimble. They climbed onto broken vehicles or simply tossed them aside. 'Walkers!' Straken bellowed. 'Vox, get the tanks on them. Bring them down!'

It was impossible to tell how many orks had died – they had fallen in the thousands already. One of the smaller Dreadnoughts waded through its fallen comrades as if through glue. On the far left, nearest the gate, the ork line finally reached the trees, and the gunfight turned to wild close combat. A Sentinel was brought down by sheer force of numbers, its outline lost under thrashing alien bodies. An ork warlord got to work on the hull with a power claw.

No, Straken thought, *surely not.* Slowly, with terrible losses, the orks were overwhelming his men. The aliens were dying at a rate of ten, maybe twenty to every Catachan, but without help, it was only a matter of time.

'Give me that,' he snarled, grabbing the comm-link.

A Leman Russ's battle cannon boomed two metres from Morrell's head. He felt the shot as much as heard it, and the tank rocked and clanked as the next shell loaded. It detonated in a screaming, thrashing mob of orks as they scrambled out

of their truck. A moment later the truck itself caught light and blew apart in a shower of metal. Morrell bared his teeth at the destruction: half smile, half snarl.

'Keep firing!' he yelled into his comm-link, and his voice boomed out of the speakers on top of the command Chimera. Militia stood around the vehicles, using them as cover, blazing away with laslocks and autoguns. They were a ragged-looking crew, the commissar thought as he limped down the line, but by the Emperor they were keen. Perhaps there was truth in what he'd heard from the more daring officers of the Guard: for fierce fighting, there was no incentive like revenge.

A Griffon mortar, formerly in the possession of the orks and now crewed by rescued Selvian Dragoons, hurled a low-velocity shell in a high arc. It burst by the squiggoth's foot, knocking a gang of armoured alien leaders down like skittles. The squiggoth's defensive field flickered. Dozens of cannons roared from the fort on its back, as if from the portholes of a galleon.

Behind it, the ork armour rolled forwards. Much of it had once belonged to humans. The crew on the Griffon slammed another shell into the breech, and a second later it arced over the battleline.

Something boomed to the left: an explosion, not a gun. A soldier tore out of an alleyway and ran over. 'Commissar! They've put one of our Russes out!'

Morrell put a hand over his ear and yelled, 'So?'

'We need to pull it back.'

'Can you make repairs?'

'I think so, commissar.'

'You've got five minutes. If it's not working by then, get the crew out and use your lasguns. Nobody leaves the line without good reason, understand?'

'Sir, yes!'

Morrell turned back to the line. The xenos were closer now – they were dying, yes, but not fast enough. Vehicles slowly rolled towards the Catachan lines, past the confused squiggoth and the mounds of dead. Each wagon had a massive metal ram at the front, like a curved snowplough, and small arms fire rang uselessly off their armour. Morrell glimpsed green bodies packed in tight behind the shielding.

'Mortars,' he cried, 'take 'em out!' He wasn't sure they heard him, and he grabbed a soldier who had braced his heavy stubber on a tank's sponson and yelled at him. The man stared back, turned and scrambled onto the Griffon.

He squinted at the Catachans in the Triumphal Gardens a hundred metres away. The orks were now among the trees, and the fight had become wild and

close. Despite the carnage around the gates, Straken had failed to stop the orks from getting in.

Idiot, he thought. If it became hopeless, he'd order the men to fire their mortars into the trees. 'Keep firing, damn you!' Morrell bellowed over his shoulder. Half a dozen tanks boomed in response; in the streets running parallel to their position, others followed suit. He gritted his teeth. More than likely, the orks would reach his own line soon. But he was damned if he'd give up. In a way, this was what he had been waiting for all his life.

'Kill them all!' Morrell shouted. 'No surrender!'

Suddenly there were orks among the trees. A goggled trooper bounced up in front of Straken as if in zero gravity, belching fire from its back. A volley of las-shots punched through its jump pack, and on its next bounce it exploded. The pipes of promethium at the edge of the park caught light, and flames burst out among the orks as they charged off the road. Someone screamed on Straken's right. A foul rubbery smell rose from the burning mushroom trees.

'Ah, great,' Straken growled. More orks followed; even the withering gunfire from the Catachan positions wasn't killing the enemy fast enough. In the back of Straken's mind a tiny, treacherous voice began to whisper that this was it, that they were going to be overwhelmed.

Well, if he was going to be overrun, he wouldn't stand here and wait for it. 'Catachans!' he bellowed. 'Do I have to do everything myself? Follow me!'

He rushed forward, towards the mob of howling greenskins at the edge of the park, and his men followed.

The orks didn't expect to be counter-charged. Straken ran straight in, smashed the butt of his shotgun into a huge brute's ragged ear and blew the brains out of another alien's dented head. A hiss and a rush of heat shot past him, and he saw Sergeant Pharranis lower his plasma gun. An armoured warlord toppled back like a felled tree, his head turned to steam. Then Straken's soldiers were around him, jabbing with knives and bayonets.

'Straken!'

He looked round. Tanner ran over, his round face covered in sweat. Mortars boomed behind him, and something big caught light in the ork ranks. Copters streaked across the cavern roof, frantic as midges.

'We need to fall back over there.' He pointed towards the gunline. 'Those orks're breaking through.'

'Right.' Straken saw a huge ork grab one of his soldiers from behind. He

rushed forward and punched his metal hand into the creature's back, mangling its spine. It fell, howling, and the soldier scrambled on top to finish the alien off, machete in hand.

'They'll be on the tanks in a minute,' Tanner yelled. He stopped to fire a burst into a pack of gretchin clustered around a wheeled gun. 'We need to pull back to the next line.'

Straken looked at the chaos, at the great carpet of foot soldiers pouring down the slope between the gates, and said, 'Damn it! You're right, Tanner. Where the hell's Lavant?'

'I don't know. He was with the miners – Straken, look out!'

A copter swung down from above, lining itself up. Straken threw himself down, Tanner beside him. Bullets and energy bolts cut the air. The ground burst around them. More orks were chopped down, along with several Guardsmen. The copter banked, engines spluttering, and Straken hauled himself upright.

Tanner spat out dirt. 'We've not got long!'

'I know. Get Morrell to move the tanks back to point two, and get them firing. Now.'

'What if he doesn't?'

'Make him. And if he won't go, you know what to do. I won't have some leash making my people into his last stand!'

'Right,' Tanner said with a kind of grim satisfaction. 'I'll make sure.'

I bet you will, Straken thought, and for a second he wondered whether Tanner was about to settle his old grudge with the commissar. Then he saw more orks scrambling forward, shoving their way through the thick vegetation, and knew that he had bigger things to worry about. 'Come on!' he roared at his men. 'Bring those green sons of bitches down!'

They fought wildly, but it was not enough. Even with the bottleneck of wrecked vehicles around the gates, the orks kept on coming. They dismounted and scrambled forwards on foot, slowed by the wreckage. Ork Dreadnoughts struggled to haul the damaged armour aside, while Morrell's artillery tossed mortar shells and punched tank rounds into the enemy walkers, adding huge metal bodies to the heap. But although the defenders might slow the tide, they could not halt it.

Morrell walked down the line of guns as if on parade, glowering, his bolt pistol raised to shoulder height. The gunners were a motley but potent mix, and they churned out shells at a fearsome rate, but there was no denying that the

xenos were gaining ground. Massed firepower poured into the horde, turning the gates into a wall of sound that rang with the howls and bellows of the enemy.

A missile corkscrewed out of an ork buggy and into the corner of an apartment block fifteen metres away. A sniper was blown to pieces: he simply seemed to turn to red smoke. Dust and bricks sailed out, bounced off the hulls of tanks, knocked the brains out of one militiaman and broke another's arm. Someone shouted for a medic.

To his left, Jocasta Ferrens leaped up on the wreckage of a mining truck, banner in hand. She swung it like an axe, crying out to the militia around her. White hair streaming, the old senator looked magnificent – and a moment later she was hit in the stomach, fell backward and vanished among the tanks.

One of the locals stopped manning his mortar. He stood up and yelled something, pointing behind him. Morrell couldn't make the words out over the boom and crackle of the guns, but he had seen men make that gesture many times before – and punished them for it. He fired his pistol in the air, and the roar of the bolt was almost lost in the chaos around him.

They're going to break, he thought. *Useless rabble. I'll have to make an example–*

'Morrell!'

He turned, and looked into the face of Hal-Do Tanner.

The commissar froze. For a fraction of a second he felt almost guilty, caught red-handed, as though thinking of field execution had summoned Tanner here like an angry ghost. Then his confidence, and his anger, rushed back as the Leman Russ battle tanks fired again.

'Pull your men back,' Tanner shouted over the guns. 'That's an order.'

'From you?'

'From Straken. I'm here to make sure you do it.'

One of the ork foot soldiers let rip with an enormous stubber. The perforated barrel roared with flame. The range was bad and most of the bullets missed, but three men fell at one of the autocannon emplacements. Bullets sprayed the Sentinel *Simple Pleasures* and sent it staggering in a cloud of sparks. They sounded like hammers on its armour.

'Morrell! I said pull back!' Tanner waved his arm. 'Everyone, fall back by squads to the second rank!' He leaned close, and his voice was a growl. Morrell suddenly was aware of how large, and how near, the captain was. 'Tell them, commissar.'

The commissar looked back to the men. He felt a weird pang. A voice in his

head, so calm and clear that it hardly seemed like his own thoughts at all: *You're getting soft.*

'You heard the captain!' he screamed. 'Pull back, damn you!'

The loudspeakers squealed and the command rang out. A shell screamed overhead and landed somewhere in the cavern far behind.

Tanner turned away to help direct the falling back, and only then did Morrell see the vicious little knife in his hand. Tanner looked back, caught Morrell's eye, and they both understood what the captain had been ready to do. Then the tanks rumbled into life around them, stinking fumes coughing from shivering exhausts, and the fight raged on.

Morrell strode back, shouting out commands, and gasped. A shot of pain flicked up his leg, like an explosion from deep inside. Morrell stopped and looked down, the yelling of men and the rumble of tanks around him. His leg seemed fine. He leaned over and rubbed his knee cautiously. The pain did not return. *Nothing to worry about,* he thought. *Time to get going.*

One of the men cried out beside him. He looked round. The fellow, a local, pointed to the middle of the ork horde, yelling and shouting. A Catachan, bare chested and filthy, stopped still and stared, following the man's pointing finger.

'Fall back, damn it,' Morrell snarled, and then he too saw what they'd spotted and froze.

A huge metal cone was rising from the centre of the horde. It looked like a spear-tip, but it was spinning. It rose three metres high, six, and orks fell around it.

What the hell was that? For a moment Morrell couldn't take in the sheer weirdness of the sight. *Where was it coming from?* And then he saw the mining guild emblem on the side, and realised that it had drilled up from underground.

Ork soldiers leaped on the drilling machine, beating with their knives and cleavers, and then discovered that the nose cone was red hot. The driller cleared the hole and flopped onto its side. Doors burst open in its flanks. Men rushed out of the machine, their flamers hosing the orks down by the dozen. The horde paused, faltered and turned to the new enemy in its midst.

Morrell fired his pistol in the air. The Catachans glared at him; several locals flinched away. 'Cancel that order!' Morrell shouted, pointing at the drilling machine. A second plasteel cone broke the ground – Lavant's detachment had arrived in force. 'I repeat, remain at your posts! Give those men some covering fire!'

An ork officer in a massive suit of chequered armour charged towards Straken. He rushed in from the side, ducked its servo-assisted claws and ripped the chestplate out in a burst of sparks. He drove his metal fist into its face, fingers out, and the ork bellowed in pain. Sergeant Pharranis rushed in with five others, and the ork went down in a hail of las and plasma fire.

From the left, a second massive brute lumbered forwards. Straken sidestepped and raised his gun – but, quick as a snake, a human arm slipped around the ork's throat from behind. Straken saw the edge of a blackened knife pass gently across the ork's throat – and suddenly it fell shuddering to the ground. Its killer glared at Straken for a moment, and he recognised Marbo. The soldier turned and slipped back into the melee.

Straken paused, trying to take in the situation. He wanted to keep fighting, to plough on through the orks, hacking and tearing at them – but that would only get him killed. They'd tear him down sooner or later, like a pack of dogs. No, much as he wanted to sink his fang-knife into ork flesh, he was the commander, and it was his duty to lead.

Then the first of the drilling machines broke the surface, overturning an ork wagon and a dozen thuggish soldiers like a wave, and he knew exactly what to do.

'Catachans!' Straken bellowed. 'You want to see how it's done? Follow me!'

He advanced, his men around him, cutting a path towards the drills.

Lavant looked out across the battlefield. As the motors in the drilling machines fell silent, the sheer chaos outside hit him like a blow to the ears. The orks were pouring through the gates from above, but they had stalled, and the ordnance fire was murdering them.

Around him, men scrambled out of the hatches and got to work. Flamers cleared out the nearest orks, and heavy weapons teams slapped tripods down and slotted guns into place on top of them. In a few moments bolter and stubber fire cut down the surprised greenskins; half a dozen autocannon shells hit an ork Dreadnought from behind and its magazines detonated.

For a moment Lavant wondered where Straken was, but a glance at the mayhem around him showed how hopeless it was to try to pick anybody out. The battlelines were now a swirling, close-ranged brawl, where shotguns and knives were as useful as heavy weapons. Orks and men fired at each other at twenty-five metres, and those who broke through the gunfire were hacked down at arm's length. Lavant raised his lasgun, pulled the stock in tight to his shoulder

and put his eye to the sights.

An ork boss ran towards him, shoving its troopers aside. Lavant's first shot caught its knee, causing the brute to stagger. His second blew out its brain. Next to die was a gretchin carrying a box of spare ammunition. Lavant hit the bearer in the chest, flicked his gun to auto and sprayed the ammo box until it burst into a crackle of wild shots. Orks threw themselves down around it, but the explosion still tore half a dozen of them apart.

Lavant reloaded. As he slapped a new power pack into place, a third drilling machine broke the surface, half collapsing an Administratum building in a cascade of brick and plasteel. A huge shape lumbered in from the right, bellowing. The squiggoth hit the emerging drill, and suddenly was rooting at the ground with its tusks while the orks in its howdah fired wildly. The monster made Lavant think of a grox digging out a poisonous groundsnake, only a thousand times larger. It stamped on the drill, buckling it. A few men struggled out as the machine caught light. *No way to die,* Lavant thought.

'Lavant!'

He turned. Straken ran in from the side, bare chested, his knife and metal arm slick with ork blood. The colonel was panting, and a vein had burst in his one eye. He looked hardly less savage than the orks.

'Sir! How the hell do we kill that thing?' Lavant shouted, pointing to the squiggoth.

'I'm working on it,' Straken called back. A rocket burst against the beast's flank, and one of the turrets on the howdah collapsed, pitching six orks onto the ground. 'We had it stunned.'

'Where's Killzkar?'

'I don't know.' Straken glanced round, his face set in a snarl. 'Listen – regroup your people and head south to join up with Morrell. Tanner's in the trees. I've voxed him to fall back.' Straken looked around, and said, 'There's still too many, Lavant. We have to get Killzkar!'

Lavant nodded. As soon as Straken said it, the truth was obvious: with their warlord still alive to drive them on, the orks would win by sheer force of numbers. *Hell of a last stand,* Lavant thought.

'Look!' A shotgunner to Lavant's right threw up his arm and pointed.

A huge figure rose to its feet at the nape of the squiggoth's neck, half hidden by the beast's metal crown. Killzkar shouted into a comm-link, and his voice howled out of speakers mounted on the squiggoth's flanks. The warboss threw his arms up and his head back, and let out a roar of rage and hatred. Like some

backwoods preacher, Killzkar hollered and ranted at the sky, and beneath him, his followers pressed their attack in a frenzy. Even the squiggoth, nearly concussed by the original barrage, blinked and stirred. Shells and rockets crashed against the monster's fields; they did nothing to either Killzkar or his mount, and for a horrible moment Lavant wondered whether the ork gods really were protecting their champion.

'We've got to kill that thing,' Straken shouted.

Bullets rang off the hull of the drilling machine. An ork howled and moaned. 'What about Tanner?' Lavant replied.

'He can handle himself. Priority one is Killzkar. He's mine.' Straken pointed. 'We'll get into those buildings, near the squiggoth, and work our way up.'

Lavant whistled and whirled his arm. 'Move up north-westerly and take cover in the ruins. Go!'

In the three minutes since he had climbed out of the driller, Larn Tarricus had notched up three kills – not bad for a miner with a bald head and sore knees. He was furious, angrier and more determined than he had ever thought possible, but quick and precise too, the way he'd been taught to be. He flicked his autogun from one green face to the next, putting a burst into each ork as they swarmed towards the drilling machine.

There were more of them than he had thought possible – killing them was like shooting drops of water in a tidal wave. Seeing the screaming horde, he understood why Father Sarr had turned against the Imperium in despair. This, he realised, was the end of Excelsis City. In the back of his mind he knew that he would almost certainly die. But by the Holy Throne, he'd make sure these xenos scum remembered him.

Tarricus shouted every curse he knew and sprayed the enemy. He saw people he recognised torn down and killed: old Merro from the guild canteen, bitten in the throat by a squig; Calli Montara pulled back from the front line by medics, missing half of her left arm. Tarricus slapped a new magazine into his autogun and thought about his lost friends. Then he started shooting again.

Straken led the way, barking out orders over the gunfire. They hurried over rubble, past the wreckage of ork war machines. 'First squad, hold this point,' he shouted. 'Give us covering fire.' He pointed to the cracked dome of the Senate House. 'Demo team, with me.'

The first squad quickly took up position in the wreckage. A pack of orks

surged forwards and was promptly shot down. ‘We can hold here,’ Sergeant Carrow called. ‘Just come back for us when you’re done!’

Straken looked at Lavant. The captain checked his gun. ‘Let’s get Killzkar,’ Lavant said.

They ducked low and ran between the once-opulent buildings. Behind them, the battle roared on. Straken saw tattered scarlet curtains hanging out of a looted hotel. Half of a saint remained in a stained glass window: robes without a body. The twenty men went quickly, watching windows and roofs.

Something the size of a fist dropped among them, bounced on the cracked pavement with a loud metal *tink* and burst.

The grenade threw men onto the ground and into walls. Two died instantly. Smoke poured out, and in it Straken saw brutish bodies. Ropes dropped from the rooftops, and orks slid down them. Many wore gas masks and goggles – all had red paint smeared on their scalps.

Straken flicked to image enhance. Silhouettes dodged and struck in the smoke. The orks made the demolitions men look slight. He raised his shotgun and blasted a huge alien in the side, then saw an ork wrestling with one of his soldiers against the wall, ran up and threw it off the man. The trooper immediately lunged, and the alien dropped to the floor, moaning and croaking.

‘Back!’ Lavant shouted. ‘Fall back and regroup with first team!’

Straken whirled. The captain still looked absurdly neat, despite the fang-knife in his hand and a gout of ork blood that ran diagonally down his front, like a sash. ‘We have to fall back,’ Lavant said. ‘There’s too many of them.’

‘Damn you,’ Straken snarled, ‘I’m getting Killzkar.’ He pulled his shotgun up and fired from the hip. An ork careened into the side of the building, roaring and tearing at its gas mask. ‘Whether you like it or not.’

Lavant aimed carefully through the smoke and fired. His aim was perfect; an ork gunner’s head exploded. ‘We will,’ Lavant replied. ‘Both of us.’

Straken looked at the captain who smiled fiercely. ‘Good plan. Let’s–’

‘Straken, look out!’

Lavant jumped forward. Straken turned, sensing the huge form behind him as much as seeing it, and an ork bellowed like a wounded bull. Lavant grappled with a huge beast almost two metres tall, driving his knife down into its thick neck, stabbing like a maniac. The ork screamed, and Straken saw the mass of lenses on its face, the dog tags wrapped around its arms.

‘Snikrot!’ He rushed forward, but the alien shoved Lavant aside. The captain staggered into Straken, and the ork was away, clutching its neck, alien blood

pouring between thick fingers.

Got you, Straken thought, and as he lined up a killing shot, Lavant fell onto him.

Straken caught him. Blood covered Lavant's midriff. As he had stabbed Snikrot, the ork had driven a blade into the captain's gut.

Grunting, Straken dragged Lavant back from the fight. As the men retreated, the orks pursuing them, he heaved Lavant into a side entrance to the Senate House. The captain sagged against a pillar.

'I'm done,' he gasped, clutching himself. 'Leave me.'

'I don't leave people behind,' Straken replied. 'Come on.'

In the street, dead men and greenskins lay scattered as though they had fallen from the cavern roof.

Lavant pointed. 'There,' he whispered.

Straken saw only a corpse, and then noticed the canvas bag slung across the man's chest. A medic. Still taking Lavant's weight, he guided the captain over to the body. Lavant dropped down, teeth gritted.

Straken covered him. Lavant tore the medical pack open and rummaged around. He gasped, and for a second Straken thought the captain was going to drop dead. The battle roared around them, deafening and yet distant, as if they were creeping through some enormous machine.

Lavant jabbed himself with a syringe. A moment later he let out a slow sigh and said, 'Yes… that's good stuff.' He fumbled with the cast spray, pulled his shirt open and hosed down the wound. Straken frowned; it was the wrong treatment.

'You need to bandage that,' he said. 'Use the wound tape.'

'I'll be fine,' Lavant replied. 'Go on ahead. I'll catch up.'

'What? You need a medic.'

'I'm Catachan, for the Emperor's sake. The last thing I need,' Lavant said, giving Straken a broad, painless smile, 'is to go down in history as the man who stopped Iron Hand getting the job done.'

'Nobody's going down in history. I'll make sure you get back.'

The captain nodded. 'Do it.' The morphia had done its work. If anything, he looked too relaxed.

A shower of grey brick slid down the side of a luxury hab-block as the squiggoth brushed against it. The monster was starting to move.

There was no time to waste. Straken ran into the Senate House.

Shadows fell over him like a curtain. The inside of the Senate House was cool and bad smelling. Dust swirled lazily in the air. Straken stood in an entrance hall, next to a shattered vid-screen. The desiccated upper half of a corpse lay across the reception desk. A massive brass aquila on the opposite wall had been riddled with bullet holes.

Grimacing with pain, Straken boosted his vision and checked for booby traps. He saw nothing. Besides, there wasn't enough time to stop and make sure. Delay meant failure now. He strode across the room.

A body lay beside the doors, curled into a ball. It was so dusty that he barely noticed it. Straken opened the doors.

He was under a huge dome. Seats lined the walls in rows, as though in an amphitheatre. A podium had stood in the centre, but now lay on its side. Light streamed in from above, through a hole in the domed roof; it looked like the egg of a gigantic bird that had flown the nest.

Ropes hung from the ceiling, almost all of them frayed where the weight of the bodies they had supported had been too much. The floor was covered in corpses. A couple of senators, slow to decay, still dangled from the rafters where the orks had strung them up.

Straken ran between the bodies, towards the stairs. He bounded up the steps three at a time, slowing to check the signs on the walls before rushing upwards.

The building rumbled. The squiggoth was moving. Straken quickened his pace, his muscles starting to ache from the strain.

Panting, he reached a landing. He'd run out of stairs. A corridor stretched off into some sort of offices. Banks of cogitators stood unused. A deactivated servitor hung its head sadly.

How the hell did you get onto the roof? Straken glanced around, trying not to let his fury rise. Gunfire flickered outside the window. A cannon boomed. There had to be a way out of this damned place.

He ran into the maintenance room, past a row of dead-eyed servitors locked against the wall, to a sign with the Mechanicus cog sigil at the top. Yes – this was it. There were rungs against the wall, leading to a trapdoor. He climbed.

Straken punched the lock out of the trapdoor and scrambled onto the roof. Suddenly, he was on top of the building, surrounded by the empty vastness of the cavern. The battle spread out below him, the soldiers as small as insects. Tanks the size of matchboxes rolled to and fro. He gazed down, hypnotised by the sheer scale of it all, as though toys had taken life before him.

The air stirred at his back.

Straken whipped round and saw a massive, bare-chested shape. He glimpsed a cluster of lenses in place of eyes, a snarling mouth below them, and a huge knife slashed down. Straken darted aside, nearly slipping on the subtle curve of the roof, and Snikrot's blade flashed past. The ork laughed, jumped forward – and Straken dropped to his knees.

He swung the shotgun like a club into Snikrot's kneecap. The ork howled, Straken leaped upright, pushed the barrel of his gun into the alien's back and fired.

Snikrot's midriff seemed to burst. He lurched forward in a flurry of alien blood, slipped and fell. And then the ork was rolling, clutching at the roof, flailing wildly as he slid towards the edge, faster and faster...

He dropped off the edge of the dome. Snikrot fell, bellowing, seeming to twist and shrink in mid-air as though shrivelling in a flame. And then he fell into the chaos below, and was lost to view.

Straken found that he was panting for breath. *It must've followed me up. Almost,* he thought. *You almost had me there. I was lucky.*

The ground shivered under his boots. The squiggoth's footsteps cracked the road, dislodging slews of brick from the weakened buildings around it. Slowly, the great metal howdah appeared around the edge of the dome, as vast and serene as a galleon. The red armour was dented and singed. Several armour plates dangled off like broken limbs; black smoke poured from an immense howitzer.

But Killzkar still rode it. He stood at the front, metal arms lifted up, ranting and bellowing at his legions below. He was not just the commander but the soul of his army, like one of the ork gods made flesh, and while he lived the orks could not retreat.

Now or never. Straken took a deep breath, ran to the edge and jumped.

Twenty-five metres in, Lavant wondered whether he had given himself too big a dose of painkillers. He felt disconnected from the battle; it went on around him, but he was somehow not in it. Screams and gunfire filtered through his ears as if he were underwater. Lavant moved down the street, his legs numb, feeling as if he was being propelled on rails, like a cart. He could do this. He was Catachan.

But you didn't take a gut wound like his and laugh it off, no matter what planet you'd had the misfortune to grow up on. He had to keep going, no matter what. Straken was right: if you wanted something done, you did it yourself. That was how wars got won.

He turned a corner and was in a firefight. A ragged squad of Catachans, backed up by local militia, were battling a squad of ork commandos. From the looks of the red markings on their heads, the aliens were Snikrot's troops. 'Cover me,' Lavant said, not knowing whether they heard, and limped on. Nobody paid him much notice – they probably thought he was as good as dead already.

The cast spray was hardening. He seemed to be wearing a plaster corset around his waist. It didn't matter, so long as he could move.

Fifteen metres further on, he passed a heap of ork soldiers in an alleyway. A figure moved out of the shadows as he approached, knife in hand. Lavant recognised the man as Guardsman Marbo, and waved him away. The man stepped back and disappeared.

Lavant staggered on. The great statue loomed up before him, carved out of the pillar supporting the roof. Saint Helena held her pick over one stone shoulder, lantern raised to ward off the dark. He steered towards her.

A sudden jolt of pain shot through his leg. His knee gave way and he fell, the saint tilting in his vision. A pair of gretchin scurried out to get to work on him, screeching with glee. Lavant pulled his pistol and blew the first alien's head to mush. The second shrieked and ran. The captain struggled upright, pain sparking deep inside him despite the drugs, and lurched onwards.

For a long, long second Straken felt as if he were hanging suspended mid-jump, the air rushing around him – then he crashed down onto the deck of the howdah. Rows of artillery stretched away on either side. Generators throbbed and crackled. Alien gun crews laboured around him. A gretchin saw Straken as it reached for a shell, pointed and squealed.

Straken blasted it with the shotgun, turned to see an ork with a peg leg lurching towards him and brained it with the butt of his gun. The gretchin cringed and drew back, hiding behind the artillery pieces, and Straken looked down the length of the howdah at Killzkar's back.

The warlord had not noticed him. Killzkar was still ranting at his minions, pausing every few moments to bash the squiggoth's head with his power claw. Clearly the beast was still half concussed. Pistons worked furiously in the warlord's armour, and between them Straken glimpsed fat, snaking cables.

Tear those out, and Killzkar would be a prisoner in his own armour.

An ork slaver leaped out from behind a howitzer. It grabbed Straken's metal arm with its left hand and swung a cleaver down in its right. Its drooling mantrap of a face lunged forward, trying to bite Straken's throat.

For a moment they were locked together. Straken yanked the ork close and stamped into its shin. It was not enough to wound the brute, but the distraction was sufficient. The ork flinched for half a second – all the time Straken needed to twist aside and shove the barrel of his shotgun under its chin.

As the ork slaver fell to the ground, Killzkar turned and looked back down the length of the squiggoth. He saw Straken, and a strange sort of understanding came into the warlord's little eyes.

It recognises me, Straken thought.

'Killzkar!' he called. 'You know who I am? Then you know I'm going to kill you!'

He rushed at the ork. Killzkar braced his legs and swung up his left arm. It ended in a mass of rockets and gun barrels, like a caricature of heavy weaponry.

Straken threw himself aside. The sound of half a dozen weapons letting rip almost deafened him. Bullets tore through the air. Gretchin screamed as one of the ammunition stores caught light above the squiggoth's tail. The beast let out a bellow and jolted into life, sending the howdah lurching to the side. Killzkar staggered. Straken sprang to his feet and rushed in.

He rammed his knife into a wad of cables on Killzkar's flank. The warboss swung his huge arm down, and Straken darted out of range, pulled his shotgun up and blasted the ork in the head. Killzkar stumbled back, towards the edge of the howdah. He stopped, his face covered in small, oozing wounds.

The warboss spat and came at Straken with both fists flailing. He was like a Dreadnought gone wild, a construction machine possessed by daemons. Snapping claws cut the air, and the colonel darted left, right, then back from the huge arms and the snarling, bleeding head between them.

Straken felt his back hit the edge of the howdah, and Killzkar let out a burbling laugh. He threw an arcing punch, and Straken sidestepped, rolled on his metal shoulder and came up as the ork's fist smashed the side of the howdah apart.

Tank shells struck the squiggoth's flank and it lurched forward. Fire raged in the rear of the howdah. In the back of his mind, Straken realised that the force field was down. The beast lumbered into the ork ranks.

The howdah listed like a ship in a hurricane. Killzkar stumbled, almost overbalancing. Straken leaped onto the warboss's back.

He drove his knife into Killzkar's neck. The warboss howled, and, as if to answer him, a stash of ammunition exploded on the squiggoth's spine. Armour, guns and gretchin burst into the air, and the squiggoth slammed its flank into a building.

A cascade of bricks dropped onto the howdah. Killzkar staggered backwards and Straken twisted the knife. The ork twisted, leaned, leaned too far, and the squiggoth, maddened with pain, tossed its head.

Straken felt the world spinning away from him, felt the knife torn out of his grip, and suddenly Killzkar was falling, and he was falling after him.

The ground dealt Straken a tremendous blow. Pain shot down his chest as if his bionics were being wrenched out of his body. He groaned and rolled over.

His metal arm was twisted back at an impossible angle. The fingers twitched open and closed. Cursing, he heaved himself onto all fours.

Killzkar lay two metres away. The ork rose up clumsily, limb by limb. Pistons whining, he clambered upright.

The squiggoth turned to look at the tiny figures before it. Its armour was askew; a single mean eye peered down at Straken as he climbed to his feet. The beast could have swallowed a tank.

Killzkar picked Straken's shotgun off the ground. He closed his hand around it, and the steel claws scissored the gun into bits. The warboss watched the pieces drop to the ground, and his patchwork face broke into a grin.

'Come on,' Straken muttered. His metal eye was dead; his damaged vision swam.

Killzkar licked his lips.

'Come on!' Straken yelled. 'Over here! We're over here, you dumb alien!'

Killzkar strode forward, towards the human commander. The little man was, for some reason, shouting at a point over and behind Killzkar's head.

The warlord stopped just short of his enemy, and reached out with his claw.

A great shadow fell over them both. Straken shouted and beckoned, and Killzkar's eyes widened as he realised that Straken was not addressing him.

The squiggoth stamped on Killzkar's head. One moment the warlord was there, and suddenly he had disappeared. The squiggoth paused, glaring at the battle zone. Then it lifted its foot and walked forward. Its great shadow passed over Straken, and then it was gone.

Straken stood beside the ruin that had been Killzkar. Blood and oil leaked from the crushed yellow armour. The metal had been wrenched into scrap. The flesh was pulped.

Dead, Straken thought, and the world around him lurched.

He felt his legs buckle. His metal side hit the ground, but it didn't hurt. The squiggoth's footsteps were like muffled explosions around him. Orks bellowed,

not just with rage but panic too. It was all so far away, growing further and dimmer by the moment.

Lavant stumbled through the door at the base of the column. Inside was a shop, where visitors could buy maps and tacky images of local saints. The orks had left it alone, as he had expected: too insignificant to loot.

It was pure luck that he had made it here at all – no, not luck, he told himself. The Emperor's will, expressed through the patron saint of Dulma'lin. He had shot four greenskins to get here, but it had been good fortune that most of the xenos were busy elsewhere, driven to the thickest fighting. Without their masters, the gretchin stayed back – an injured man was good prey for them, but not one with a sharp knife and a loaded gun.

Lavant shoved the door closed behind him. It seemed very heavy. He glanced down, and saw that the cast spray covering his midriff was sticky with fresh blood. It had seeped through, partially dissolving the spray, turning it into a gluey mess.

It didn't much matter now. The captain looked around like a pilgrim at the end of his journey, past shelves full of prayer scrolls and plaster saints. None of that mattered either. The real substance of importance was packed against the main joists, heaped in piles like packets of cement. Mining explosives, the one weapon on Dulma'lin of which there had never been a shortage.

Cables ran from the main cache into a dozen other stockpiles secreted at other key points. Lavant knew that the whole lot would go once the circuit was connected.

He dragged a chair back – the effort of doing so made him feel faint – and sat down beside the main detonator. Two wires, a set of circuit breakers and fail-safes, and a little switch in the middle of it. He pulled the detonator panel onto his bloody lap and thought about the Emperor.

Somewhere, far away, a battle was raging. The orks would be clearing a path through their wrecked vehicles, struggling to bring more armour into the fight.

Lavant knew that he had done some good things for the Guard, and made a few errors, too. All of his successes and mistakes seemed as far away as the ork horde. As he checked the switches one last time, he wondered whether what he was about to do would be enough to blot out his sins.

He deactivated the fail-safes and put his gloved hand on the switch. One turn, and that would be it. He had installed the bomb personally, and he didn't make mistakes.

The explosion was so loud that it jerked Straken awake. The sound rang his skull like a bell, and for a moment he thought that the squiggoth had trampled him, crushing his head. Then Straken opened his eye and saw rock above him, moving. Guns rattled somewhere far away. He realised that he was lying on his back, and that people were carrying him.

'Straken?' A round face looked down, streaked with dirt. A slow, loud, rumbling sound crept in under the gunfire. It sounded like rock cracking. 'Colonel?'

'Tanner,' he managed. A second man was helping. Straken recognised him as Marbo. 'I've got to–'

'You're pretty messed up,' Tanner said. 'We've got to get out of here.'

'The orks...'

'Forget the orks. Look!'

They pulled him up. Tanner pointed. On the far side of the vault, the great sculpted pillar was falling apart. Rocks the size of houses fell down from Saint Helena's face like tears, dropping into the aliens below. Her body was cracking open. With every second her outline lost more definition.

The roof fell in around the gates. Sunlight burst into the cavern like an orbital laser. A shelf of granite dropped onto the horde, crushing orks by the thousand. Even with his bionics smashed, his senses ruined, Straken felt the force of the impact, and its sound made his ears ring.

'Truck,' Marbo said.

Straken heard a motor close behind, sensed more people around him. A woman cried, 'Put him on the back, quick!'

The hole in the roof widened, and an avalanche of rock fell onto the enemy below. Ork troopers, tanks, wagons and Dreadnoughts vanished under a steady, continuous flow of stone. Explosions flashed on the cavern floor, and in the middle of the carnage, the squiggoth ran in a blind panic, ploughing through the orks as it struggled towards the gates.

21.

Three days later, the relief troops rolled in. Commissar Morrell was there to greet them, alongside Captain Tanner. The Catachans ignored the commissar; Morrell knew that he would never be forgiven for executing Zandro. Toleration was the best he could hope for.

As the tanks rumbled past, followed by great tramping regiments in their crisp white armour, Morrell realised that he was filthy. His coat was ripped and spattered with blood, his trousers stitched where the medics had torn them to free his leg, his boots so ingrained with dirt that they would never scrub clean. The Purbech regiments seemed not just like men from another world, but a different sort of creature altogether.

Morrell was astonished not to be dead. He watched as the local medics handed Colonel Straken over to the medicae from the *Radix Malorum*, a tech-priest lurking behind them to deal with the colonel's bionics. They'd get him going again, one way or another, Morrell thought. The Guard was good at keeping the men it wanted alive, even if the rest could go to hell. He paused, surprised by his own cynicism, and a voice called, 'Commissar Morrell?'

He looked round, and saw another commissar. The man was thin, at least seventy, with beady eyes and a goatee beard smoothed to a point sharper than a woodpecker's beak. The commissar took off his cap and stuffed it under his arm, the way the instructors taught them to do. 'Eugene Semalken, Commissar Ordinary attached to the Third Purbech Rifles. Thought I'd come and see how you were faring.'

'How kind,' Morrell said, wondering whether he'd done something wrong.

'Not at all.' Behind Semalken, the medics slid Straken's stretcher into the back of a converted scout car. It pulled away, rumbling towards the temporary headquarters. 'You've done exceptionally well,' Semalken said. 'Even surviving here is an achievement. Victory, though – well, that's something else.' He leaned in slightly. 'Frankly, I don't know how you were able to take control of this

rabble. It must've been hard just to stop them looting the place.'

'Luckily, the orks got there first.'

'Luckily? Oh, I see, the looting. Yes. Well,' Semalken said, 'you can rest easy. The place is under proper control now. Your lot'll be lifted out in a day or two. You'll come out of this mess looking good, you know. The Commissariat will be impressed that you held it together. I take it you'll be submitting a report?'

'I've made notes,' Morrell replied. 'I need to write a final draft.'

'Of course.'

'If you'll excuse me,' Morrell said, and he limped past Semalken. He kept walking, to get away from something that he couldn't quite define.

He rubbed his hands together to warm them and walked on, past the smiling rows of Purbech troops, keen to be out of their sight.

Straken awoke in a cold, quiet room. The ceiling was vaulted. He sat up slowly and realised that he had been lying on a bed as if laid out in a chapel, waiting to be buried.

There were sensors on his chest. He disconnected them and stood upright, checked his metal arm and then his flesh one, and leaned against the side of the bed, remembering.

A tall man got up from a seat by the wall. He had been so still that Straken had hardly noticed him. As he approached, General Greiss smiled. 'Welcome back.'

'Sir.' Straken saluted. 'It's good to see you, general. Where am I?'

'The *Radix Malorum*. You took a bad hit.' The old general glanced around and slipped a flask out of his pocket. 'You need a drink? I brought some amasec.'

The battle came back to Straken in a jumble of images. He remembered leaping down into the squiggoth's howdah, seeing Killzkar's hideous face. 'The orks. Did we win?'

Greiss chuckled. 'You won all right. Killzkar's army is finished. Most of them are under about a million tonnes of rock. And yes, Killzkar's dead. It was a shambles by the time we made planetfall. The locals will have mopped up what was left. A textbook operation, you might say.'

Straken rubbed his good eye. Greiss was hiding something. He felt that bad news was about to break. The Imperial Guard only did textbook operations in its training manuals. 'What about my men?'

'I won't lie, Straken. You took hard casualties. You've lost a third. Almost as many are still getting stitched up. To be honest, you were lucky to take that few. Under another commander, that fight would have been a last stand.'

Straken felt tired – not sleepy, but exhausted, as if each of his muscles had been stretched beyond repair. He walked across the room and looked at one of the readout screens, not really taking it in. A third of his regiment was dead. 'We were lucky,' he said. 'When the roof caved in–'

'Luck's nothing to do with it,' Greiss said. His face soured. 'You did a damn good job down there. Not that anyone would know it.'

Straken frowned. 'How do you mean, sir?'

Greiss said bitterly, 'I had to take reinforcements at Purbech. Their High Praetor's claiming the victory as his own.'

'What?'

'I know. Half the army I came with was Purbech. They're still on Dulma'lin. Osh'Preen's put himself in as governor – to prevent unrest, apparently. Now we're on the way out, and they're covering themselves in victory honours. That fish-faced, conniving…' Greiss shook his head. 'I've seen some bad stuff, Straken, on the field and off. But it's things like this that make me sick.'

Straken folded his arms. He took a deep breath. 'And my people? All the things they did?'

'Written out of history.' Greiss noticed a spot of dirt on his uniform, and began to fuss with it. Straken knew that the general didn't want to look at him. 'Osh'Preen says that the Catachans spent the year hiding in the caves.'

'Son of a bitch.' He shook his head. 'Our own allies. You'd expect that from the xenos, but–'

'What you did there was fine work. The Imperial Guard is lucky to have you.'

'Screw the Guard. It's my men I want to know about. People died down there, and now what? Now you're saying they'll go down on record as what? Cowards? Or did they never exist at all?'

Another man might have shrunk back from Straken. Greiss simply licked his thin lips.

At the back of the room, Nork Deddog looked up and growled.

'It's all right, Nork,' Greiss replied. He turned back to Straken. 'I've forwarded a formal complaint to the warmaster's general staff.'

'Yes, and I know how much good that'll do.'

'That's not all. You weren't entirely forgotten. Commissar Morrell's put his final report through to the Commissariat three days ago. He deigned to send me a copy. Look.'

The general opened his jacket and took out a small data-slate. His twiglike fingers worked the controls. Straken took the slate. 'There,' said Greiss.

‘…while such methods may appear suggestive of dangerous individuality, not to mention deviation from sanctified dogma, I respectfully submit that the first duty of any Guardsman is to face and destroy the enemies of the Emperor. The kill-figures I have listed speak for themselves. Those seeming to require shows of elaborate propriety from regiments on extended duty would do well to recall that the Emperor’s light is not spread by the neatness of dress uniforms, but through the annihilation of heretics and aliens…’

As Straken read, Greiss took a sip from his flask. After a while, Straken handed him the data-slate.

‘I can see why they recalled him,’ Straken said. ‘Why the hell did he say that?’

‘I don’t know. Maybe he just felt it was the truth.’

‘He’ll never be a lord commissar,’ Straken said. It was the closest thing to a compliment he’d ever said about one of the Commissariat. ‘So, Ryza, then?’

Greiss glanced away. ‘No. The *Radix Malorum* has been diverted away from the main warzone. We’ve entered the Ulani system. You’ll be fully briefed when our shuttles rendezvous with a Naval delegation. You’re to have your men ready in six hours.’

Straken was neither pleased nor surprised. He nodded. He looked at Greiss, and realised that the general didn’t know what was happening either. *We’re the same, you and I,* he thought. *Two cogs in the same machine.*

He turned to go. Greiss said, ‘Straken? I’m sorry about how it all worked out.’

‘I’ll get the men ready,’ Straken said, and he left the room.

‘How very interesting,’ said the new governor of Dulma’lin, and he moved on to the next man in the line.

About thirty of the great and good of Excelsis City stood in a row before him. Their uniforms were patched and dirty, as much in need of repair as the buildings around them, If this was the best the planet could offer, Osh’Preen thought, Emperor help the rest of it. Above the little group stretched the ruins of the cathedral, like the decaying ribcage of a colossal beast. It had been declared safe, but Osh’Preen had no wish to linger.

The governor had spent as little time as possible in his new fiefdom. This was his first formal trip out of his own landing craft since his army had made planetfall two months ago. Apart from the obligatory speeches to his men, and the vid-cap of him standing beside the mangled corpse of Warboss Killzkar, he had stayed in his palatial quarters, hunting sharks imported from Purbech in a deck of his ship specially flooded for the purpose.

Hubrik Art'Aren gestured to the next man in the line. This fellow was balding and short. A long cut ran along his scalp, only recently healed.

'This is Larn Tarricus, Master Burgher of the Dulma'lin Mining Guild,' said Art'Aren, managing not to sound bored.

'Tarricus,' Osh'Preen said. 'I see. And what do you do here?'

'I run the guild, what's left of it,' the little man replied. 'I was in the battle against the orks.'

'The surviving guild members were forced into the rear caves,' Art'Aren explained. 'They carried out some scouting missions with the Catachan unit that got left behind.'

One of the soldiers in the security detail checked his comm-link. Purbech dress helmets interfered with reception in the caverns; irritably, the comms-trooper pulled his helmet off and muttered into the comm-link. Osh'Preen glanced around. There were still a few little groups of orks stalking the city, and they were proving annoyingly difficult to wipe out. Even using some of the locals as guides, the Purbech troops were still losing a few men a day. Worse, there were rumours that some of the orks had escaped the planet, somehow. Nonsense, of course, but subversive nonsense.

'We hid out in the tunnels, sir,' Tarricus said. 'The Catachans taught us how to fight the greenskins guerrilla-style.'

Art'Aren frowned. 'My lord,' he corrected.

'Sorry,' Tarricus replied. 'My lord.'

'Hmm,' Osh'Preen said. 'So, are you assisting with the repair work?'

'Yes, my lord. And the monument.'

Osh'Preen glanced at Art'Aren. The factotum said, 'A stone sculpture, to commemorate the fall of the orks. I understand that it's almost complete.'

The High Praetor rubbed his hands together. 'Well, that sounds interesting. I'm a great patron of the arts, Tarricus. Take us to it. It'll be nice to see something that's being put up, rather than something falling down,' he added, and his entourage chuckled politely.

Tarricus shrugged and led them to a hall at the rear of the cathedral. Two men worked with chisels at a huge lump of granite, six times their height and half hidden under scaffolding. To Osh'Preen's surprise, there were no servitors on the work; the sculptors used picks and lascutters like ancient masons.

'It's for the Triumphal Gardens,' Tarricus said.

The High Praetor squinted and rubbed his chin. The sculpture was stylised, so much that its main figure looked rather like an ork. It depicted an enormous man,

broad as well as tall, heavily muscled. The right arm, which was raised as if to punch the sky, had an angular quality, as though it were mechanical.

'And you call this what?' Osh'Preen demanded.

Tarricus drew himself to his full height. 'The Saviour of Dulma'lin,' he announced.

Osh'Preen nodded. He felt relieved that he would not be coming back here for a very long time. 'That will be all, Tarricus.'

As they walked back to the main hall, Osh'Preen shook his head. 'Saints,' he muttered, 'what an ugly thing.'

Art'Aren sighed. 'I've seen similar figures, my lord, made to celebrate the victory over the orks. I suppose the central figure has some local significance. That said, the style is somewhat naive.'

'Hideous is more the word,' the High Praetor replied. 'Strange, really. It doesn't look like me at all.'

Straken entered his cabin and unlocked the door. He took out the vox-phonograph and put on Guttman's *Elegy for Prandium*.

He thought of the Catachan Second, now almost halved in fighting strength. Men lost to orks, to Father Sarr's madness, even the drop-ship lost to Dulma'lin itself. He hoped the bodies left behind had been given the burial that they deserved, and knew that if Larn Tarricus still had any say in the place, they would be. He wondered what High Praetor Osh'Preen was like, and figured that he would be much the same as most high-ranking officers of the Guard.

Business as usual.

Then he thought about Morrell, and wondered why the commissar had felt the need to give the Catachans such a glowing report. Why jeopardise his own standing like that? Straken remembered Lavant, tormented by his own mistakes, on a self-imposed quest to redeem himself even if that meant death. They had been men who he couldn't begin to comprehend. For all his reputation as a leader, Straken found people hard to understand.

He turned the phonograph off and pushed it out of sight. Then he stood up and walked out.

He passed Lavant's tiny room. The captain had left a roll of tools on the shelf, neatly packed away next to a wooden box. Straken opened the box. Compact and deadly, a plasma pistol nestled against folded cloth. Lavant's initials had been engraved into the side, with immense care: P.L.

There was a grox-skin holster next to it. Straken clipped the holster onto his

belt and slid the pistol in. He wondered whether Lavant had been repairing it. Whatever the answer, Straken was sure that it would work perfectly.

He felt restless. It was time to make his presence known.

Straken walked down a narrow flight of steps and into the hold of the ship. He passed the great frieze of Lord Solar Macharius, and his men stopped and looked round. Slowly, they gathered to see him, word of his presence preceding him like the bow wave of a ship.

As he walked, he saw people he knew – old fighters like Halda and Pharranis. He recognised men from half a dozen campaigns, a few of them almost as riddled with bionics as he was. He noticed newer troopers who had come to his attention through their skill. Two snipers, Halski and Serradus, put their cards down and stood up to salute him, before he gestured for them to stay at ease. Serradus smiled as much as his mask would allow. And sitting on a bunk, rubbing grease into his gloves to keep the leather soft, was Marbo. He glanced up, nodded at Straken, and looked away.

Straken heard chatter, music from an ancient phonograph and the high whine of the tattoo needle as someone etched their last victory onto their skin. There was a blast of laughter, and a huge man with a round, friendly face left the conversation he'd been having and stepped out to greet him. Tanner held a battered cup in one hand, no doubt full of illicit liquor, and grinned. 'Welcome back!'

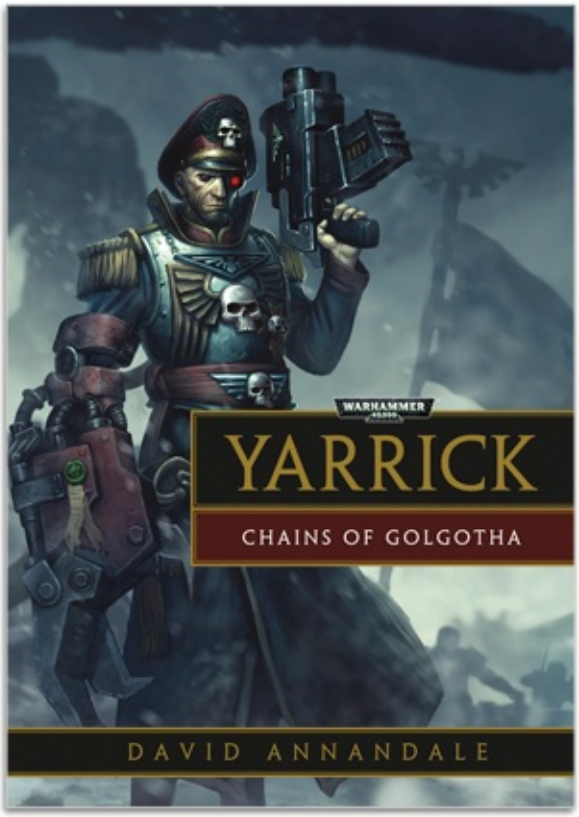
'Yeah,' Straken replied. 'I just couldn't keep away.'

Like the rest of his regiment, and perhaps the whole Imperial Guard, Straken had no real home, and would probably never know lasting peace. But, surrounded by his troops, he was at least back where he belonged.

'Catachans,' he called. 'Listen up!'

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

A trained legal professional, in his spare time TOBY FROST enjoys writing science fiction for Black Library and other publishers. *Straken* is his first novel set in the grim dark future of the 41st millennium.



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