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WARHAMMER 40,000

KINGSBLADE

ANDY CLARK

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WARHAMMER 40,000

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

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

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

THE NOBLE HOUSES OF ADRASTAPOL

HOUSE DRACONIS

High King Tolwyn Tan Draconis – *Fyreheart*
Kingsward Danial Tan Draconis – *Oath of Flame*
Gatekeeper Jennika Tan Draconis – *Fire Defiant*
Herald Markos Dar Draconis – *Honourblaze*
Sire Olric Dar Draconis – *Draconsflame*
Sire Daeved Dar Draconis – *Pyrefang*
Sire Garath Dar Draconis – *Iron Drake*
Sire Sylvest Dar Draconis – *Blazeclaw*
Lady Suset Dar Draconis – *Embersword*
Sire Percivane Dar Draconis – *Firestorm*

HOUSE CHIMAEROS

Viscount Gerraint Tan Chimaeros – *Therianthros*
Sire Luk Tan Chimaeros – *Sword of Heroes*
Sire Hectour Dar Manticos – *Blade Aggressor*
Alicia Kar Manticos (Consort to the Viscount Tan Chimaeros)

HOUSE WYVORN

Archduke Dunkan Tan Wyvorn – *Iron God*

HOUSE PEGASSON

Marchioness Lauret Tan Pegasson – *Oracle*
Lady Eleanat Dar Pegasson – *Sagasitus*
Lady Tamsane Dar Pegasson – *Saggitaire*

HOUSE MINOTOS

Grandmarshal Gustev Tan Minotos – *Thunderhymn*
Sire Federich Dar Minotos – *Song of Strength*

Sire Jeremial Dar Minotos – *Thunderclap*
Sire Wilhorm Dar Minotos – *Merciless*

INTRODUCTORY NOTE ON TITLES OF ADRASTAPOLIAN NOBLE HOUSES

'Proudly do the Knightly Households of Adrastapol uphold their customs, codes and forms of address. Though the value of such sacred traditions is beyond question, their labyrinthine complexities can lead to a degree of difficulty when integrating with other Imperial institutions.

At its most basic, the Adrastapolian form of address prefixes the surname (that of the Noble House) with an honorific that denotes status. Though unusual or localised prefixes proliferate, three key terms should be quickly learned and understood by outsiders wishing to comprehend the station of our Knights at war.

***Tan** – This prefix is reserved for those of direct royal descent. The master of each Noble House has the privilege of using the Tan prefix, as does their immediate family. Examples include High King Tolwyn Tan Draconis, and Viscount Gerraint Tan Chimaeros.*

***Dar** – The most common Knightly prefix. This term translates most simply to 'of House' or 'belonging to House'. Any Knight who has successfully Become earns the right to this form of address. For example, if squire Willem of House Minotos survives his Becoming ritual, he will be formally recognised thenceforth as Willem Dar Minotos.*

***Kar** – An altogether rarer and less salubrious title, the Kar prefix is applied only to those who have lost their original Noble House. Whether the House itself has been destroyed as an institution, or the Knight or other noble has been exiled from it (see Appendix VII for a full examination of Freeblades and their role in Adrastapolian society), the Kar prefix permanently replaces whatever honorific came before.*

Rarely is this a mark of anything but shame.

– Extracted from the writings of Sendraghorst,

Sage Strategic of Adrastapol, vol III,
A Treatise on the Noble Houses of Adrastapol
and Militaristic Imperial Integration.

ACT ONE
FIRE FROM THE SKIES

PROLOGUE

In a chamber lit by a single candle, a figure knelt in shadow.

They were not alone. Something malevolent circled, whispering from the shadows. It spoke words of prophecy. Words of blood.

‘A world of fire and slaughter,
A bond of trust betrayed,
The questing soul is broken,
And broken is the blade,
In blackened tower’s shadow,
The dracon there shall die,
And from its scattered ashes,
A queen, instead, shall rise…’

The figure bowed low, touching its forehead to the cold stone floor.

‘So has it been spoken,’ they murmured reverently. ‘And so it shall be.’

Pentakhost burned. The southern districts of the peninsula port danced with hungry flames. The crystalflex windows of hab-stacks and warehouses blackened and cracked. Heavy iron doors blew out with dull booms, leaving ragged, empty doorways that vomited smoke. Charred bodies and scorched vehicles packed the rubble-strewn streets. Most of the dead had been killed days before the fires came, but only now were they afforded the dignity of cremation. Cadaverous plasteel cargo cranes melted in the intense heat, toppling with agonised groans into the polluted waters of the Raerkesh Ocean. Searing bolts of energy had stabbed down from the clouds to annihilate the promethium refinery on the headland. So the wildfires had started, with las light and a flash-flood of blazing fuel that set the wharf-slums burning and chewed its way north from there.

Once a grubby industrial trade terminus, Pentakhost had been transformed first into a heretic fortress, and now a raging inferno. Despite the intensity of the firestorm sweeping the port, dark figures still crouched upon rooftops and flitted between weathered hab-blocks, staying ahead of the flames. Some were stooped and twisted creatures, swaddled in rags that did little to hide their mutations. Others – the

majority – were garbed either as labourers, or as planetary defence militia. Their faces smeared with markings of ash and blood, armour defaced with foul slogans, these traitors screamed their defiance to the skies.

To their great misfortune, the skies answered.

– Extracted from the writings of Sendraghorst,
Sage Strategic of Adrastapol,
vol XVII *'The Donatos Uprising'*

Danial Tan Draconis, kingsward of House Draconis and heir to the throne of Adrastapol, willed himself not to throw up. He was strapped firmly into his throne mechanicum at the heart of his Knight Errant, *Oath of Flame.* His throne's neural jacks were plugged into his cranial augmetics and its armaplas webbing cradled his body tight. The Knight itself – a forty-foot-tall, roughly humanoid war machine – was mag-locked within its armature, one of a dozen looming metal giants dominating the debarkation deck of the drop keep. Still, Danial was shaken like a ragdoll. The turbulence of the combat drop was savage, the pressure of gravity scarcely less so. And then there was the disorienting sensation of the ghosts within his throne. It was a little like standing alone with his back to a curtain, knowing that just beyond it crowded dozens of whispering strangers who might at any moment reach through to grab his shoulder. There again, it was like staring into a mirror and feeling his reflection looking back through his own eyes. Then it felt like embracing myriad thoughts and dreams, only to endure the jarring dislocation of realising that not one of those mental fragments was his. It was like all those things, but not them. Every effort he made to rationalise the sensation only added to his nausea. Danial battled the sickness with the grim desperation of a drowning man clinging to his last spar of driftwood. If he couldn't even win the fight with his own biological failings, or master his throne before his first true engagement, how was he to win a real battle on the glorious field of war? Besides, he wasn't about to give Markos the satisfaction of seeing him fail.

'A bracing plunge, isn't it, Da?' Luk's voice crackled over the vox-net. Exhilarated. Of course he was. Nothing fazed Luk Tan Chimaeros. At least nothing Danial had seen yet.

'It is,' he managed, biting out the words.

'Hah! That a little drop sickness I hear in your voice, Da?'

‘Not at all,’ Danial replied, before pressing one gloved fist to his lips in desperation. His Knight’s machine-spirit responded with a sympathetic churning of internal gears, a slight shudder running through its hull-plates.

‘Honoured ward of House Chimaeros,’ came a firm, female voice over the vox. ‘We are about to enter a live warzone. I would ask that you refrain from any further squiresyard banter at my brother’s expense.’

‘Apologies, lady’ responded Luk, only slightly mollified. His Knight, *Sword of Heroes*, inclined its helm with a whine of servomotors. ‘You’re right, Jen. No distractions.’

‘Her title,’ came a heavy, gravelly voice over the vox, ‘is Jennika Tan Draconis, Gatekeeper of the Exalted Court. When in panoply I would remind you to address her as such, lad.’ Danial grimaced at the curtness of the exchange. Markos Dar Draconis, herald of the Exalted Court and his father’s first Knight. Not one for tact, or bandied words. Danial knew his friend like a brother; Luk would take that reprimand badly.

Danial’s train of thought was interrupted as the soft emerald light within his Knight’s cockpit flashed an angry red. A dolorous chime rang through the debarkation deck of the drop keep, carried to the ears of each Knight by the audio-pickups on their warsuits’ hulls. Danial gritted his teeth as the drop keep’s landing thrusters fired in sequence, increasing the pressure further. Ingrained training kicked in, and he began final checks, floods of information flowing through his neural jacks as he communed with *Oath of Flame*. Runes scrolled across his retinas, and his vision expanded to take in everything that the Knight’s external sensorium arrays could see. To an untrained mind it would have been a violently overwhelming experience, a pseudo-sentient and maddening mechanical violation. For Danial it was a sort of ascension. Adrenaline surged, then focused to a bright point. Nausea fled, along with the feeling of the webbing and straps that encased him. Danial’s body became plasteel and ceramite. His heart beat as a thundering plasma furnace. His senses became auspex readouts and inload shunts. In that moment Danial Tan Draconis became one with his Knight, and knew its hunger for battle.

The drop keep hit bedrock with a titanic boom, sending a shockwave through Danial’s metal body. Ahead, behind and to both sides, his fellow Knights disengaged the plasteel cages of their armatures. Gas vented in hissing streams and runelocks flashed from amber to green as the huge bipedal war machines shook off their fetters and prepared for war. From the shadows edging the

cavernous deck, electrobraziers lit with roaring flames. Muffled by the thick plates of the drop keep's outer hull, Danial heard an automated fanfare blaring, throaty and glorious. It was accompanied by a staccato thunder that he realised must be the keep's weapon batteries opening fire. They were shooting at enemy targets, just outside. In moments he would face the foe himself. His heart thumped and threatened to shake his focus, but with an effort of will the young warrior held steady.

'Knights of Adrastapol,' a regal voice rolled through the vox network, filling Danial with fierce pride. His father, High King Tolwyn Tan Draconis, addressed the assembled hosts. 'Noble sires of Houses Draconis, Chimaeros, Minotos, Wyvorn and Pegasson. Honoured allies of the Astra Militarum, of Tanhollis and Mubraxis and Cadia. Today we do the Emperor's bidding. Today, we are the cleansing flame. This world of Donatos has known the insidious touch of the mutant. The heretic. The traitor.' The High King spat the words with such disgust that Danial's own hatred for the enemy burned hot. 'But no more! Today the Knights of Adrastapol will march forth and show these turncoats what becomes of those who shun the light of the Imperium. Honoured sires, for Adrastapol and the Emperor. Let them know no mercy, only death!'

'Only death!' roared the assembled Knights, their voices carrying across the vox from the debarkation decks of twenty separate drop keeps. Danial's voice was joined with those of the warriors around him, and he felt stronger in that moment than he ever had before. The ceramite portcullis at the front of the drop keep rattled upwards. The thunder of battle washed over Danial's Knight. Infernal light spilled inwards, accompanied by a scattered hail of las-bolts and bullets that ricocheted from the red and black armour of his comrades' steeds.

'In Excelsium Furore,' cried Sire Tolwyn to his House Draconis comrades.

'Wield the fires within,' they shouted back, the ancient battle cry of their Knightly House. With that, they willed their machines forward to war.

Danial watched the Knights in front of him engage their motive systems and advance. Hydraulic tendons flexed. Gears whirred to speed. Spumes of smoke and incense boiled from exhaust vents atop armoured carapaces, filling the debarkation deck with churning fumes. The Knights' helm-lumens shone in the gloom, and Danial was reminded of the mythic dracon that gave their house its name. Suddenly the way before him was clear, Sires Daeved and Garath smoothly walking their Knights forward into battle ahead of him. Danial felt a moment of panic as every lesson he had ever learned fled his mind. For a second

his Knight hesitated, shuddering on the spot. Angrily, the young kingsward thrust the feeling aside and engaged his motive actuators. *Oath of Flame* took a long stride, and then another that carried it to the edge of the assault drawbridge. Another, and he was out into the fiery light of a strange world. A fierce grin spread across his face as he stomped down the drawbridge and into the maelstrom of battle.

Danial drank in the data feeds and imaging returns of his auspex. The drop keep had landed right on target, demolishing a guildhall as it slammed down amidst the northern commerce district of Pentakhost. Others like it had crashed down to the east and west. They had unfurled their house banners, begun their rolling fanfares and unshrouded their servitor gun-towers, forming a line of towering fortifications that choked off the neck of the peninsula. The traitor foe was trapped between the wildfires and the Knights, just as King Tolwyn and Viscount Gerraint had planned. As *Oath of Flame* ventured onto the cracked plaza before the guildhall, Danial saw a jumbled skyline silhouetted against the inferno. Smoke rose in thick black pillars that seemed to hold up the lowering clouds like titanic columns.

Over his Knight's head fluttered flights of servo-cherubim, the grotesque little creatures winging their way into the sky on grav-impellers and rotor-wings. Released from each drop keep, the cherubs would form a low-altitude sensor-web that would greatly enhance the auspex acuity of the Knights below. The Sacristans called them the Heavenly Host, and were clearly proud of their macabre progeny. The infant servitors made Danial uncomfortable, and sad somehow.

Ash fell like snow, coating the grubby buildings that crowded in around the plaza and swarmed with enemy contacts, revealed by Danial's pinging auspex runes. From his high vantage they were tiny, insects scurrying from one ineffectual scrap of cover to the next. Some waved tattered banners bearing unclean sigils, and many were visibly mutated.

'They're like rock-roaches,' said Luk over the vox, his Errant moving up alongside Danial's as they both lit their ion shields and searched for targets. The contempt in the young Knight's voice was clear, and Danial found it hard to argue. The sense of power rushing through his body was immense. The foe seemed small and weak by comparison. Already their comrades were engaging, tilting their ion shields expertly to absorb the hail of small arms fire that stuttered from broken windows and vehicle wrecks.

To Danial's right, Sire Olric's Crusader-pattern *Draconsflame* opened up with

all guns. The scream of his avenger gatling cannon was deafening, its torrent of shells chewing along the front of a refectorum and leaving rubble and bloody corpses in its wake.

To the left, Sire Daeved's Knight Gallant, *Pyrefang*, advanced through hails of autogun fire. His reaper chainsword carved out the front of a building to send rubble thundering down on the screaming cultists below.

'Why are they even trying to fight?' Danial said aloud. 'Guns like that can't harm Knights.'

'Hate? Panic? Desperation?' came his sister's voice in reply, Jennika's *Fire Defiant* striding past Danial's flank. 'Don't try to fathom the motives of heretics, little brother. Just kill them. And don't underestimate them either.' As if to underpin her words, a missile streaked out from a nearby rooftop and exploded against Jennika's ion shield. The energy field flashed blue as the warhead's force dissipated harmlessly, and a second later *Fire Defiant*'s battle cannon boomed twice. The rooftop erupted in flame and shrapnel, obliterating the luckless heretics and their tank-busting weapon.

'Kingsward,' said Sire Markos across the vox, 'form lance on Lady Jennika. Take Tan Chimaeros with you. Both of you try to learn something, and keep your damned shields up. I'll not be the one to explain to either of your fathers why a rabble like this managed to unseat their precious sons.'

Danial obeyed swiftly, feeding power to his servomotors and feeling acceleration as his steed strode forward. The ground shook beneath his tread, and targeting data filled his thoughts as his thermal cannon powered up. Luk's Knight followed, the green and grey of House Chimaeros incongruous amongst the crimson and black heraldry of his Draconis comrades.

'You know you're both Exalted Court, yes?' said Luk resentfully over a private channel. 'He's no authority over you, Da.'

'But he's a veteran of a dozen wars and more,' replied Danial, lengthening his stride to keep up with his sister. 'This is our first. We don't know what we're doing yet, not really.'

'Maybe you don't,' Luk answered, a moment before a massive heat bloom lit Danial's auspex. For a second he panicked that his oldest friend had somehow been hit and killed, then he realised that the flare was Luk's thermal cannon discharging. The searing blast of superheated energy bored through the façade of a nearby building, and a handful of traitor runes blinked out as the entire structure collapsed upon itself.

'Good shot,' said Jennika. 'Now, form column. We're pushing down the Tetrae

Processional as far as mark seven-oh-seven-two, and there's only room enough to go single file.'

Danial moved up, manoeuvring his striding war suit in behind Jennika's and matching her pace. Luk pressed close behind, his eagerness for battle clear in the swift, aggressive motions of his steed. As they advanced onto the processional, the enemy fire petered out for a moment. In place of its idiot din, the Knights heard the mournful crunch and grind of their ironshod footfalls crushing rubble barricades and wrecked vehicles. The towering buildings of Pentakhost closed in around them like mountains, muffling the sounds of their comrades' continued battle on the plaza and making Danial feel suddenly isolated. The Knights were huge machines, but these buildings were bigger still, grim slabs of ferrocrete and iron that stood hundreds of feet high. The kingsward took in their grubby, soot-stained walls, their grimy windows and ash-blackened statuary. Tangles of razor-wire hung from looming gargoyles, strung with the macabre remains of those who had resisted the rebellion.

'This place is nothing like home,' he murmured. For a moment, the whispers of his throne surged, the words hovering tantalisingly close to the edge of audibility. Images flashed unbidden across Danial's mind's eye; a wind-whipped tundra dominated by looming spires of ice; a sucking quagmire of mud and tangled razor-wire where warriors brawled like animals amidst the filth; a bone-hued desert, the sun beating down upon glittering silver cities. He understood in that moment that his ancestors were showing him places where they had fought, perhaps even died, and that the galaxy was a far vaster and stranger place than Danial Tan Draconis yet knew.

He was brought back to the present by a collision alarm, and he swore as he felt *Oath'*s left shoulder guard clip a towering hab-block.

'Watch where you're walking, Da,' cried Luk as falling rubble fizzed against his ion shield.

'Sorry,' said Danial, correcting course. He made obeisance to his Knight's machine-spirit, and felt a surge of reassurance in response. His steed was undamaged.

'Your throne?' Jennika's tone implied she already knew the answer to her question.

'Yes,' admitted Danial, swivelling his Knight at the hip as they crossed an intersection littered with corpses. No life signs showed on his auspex. This part of Pentakhost seemed already dead.

'Stay focused,' his sister told him, her tone sharp but not unkind. 'Our thrones

are a great source of strength and wisdom, but it takes time to master them. The Becoming is only the start, and while your link to your ancestors is still incoherent any mental slip you make is dangerous. And this plan was never the safest to begin with.'

Danial nodded, his interface translating the gesture into a pip of acknowledgement across the vox.

The processional gently sloped downhill between the towering buildings. A flight of Imperial Navy Thunderbolts swept low overhead, the roar of their ramjets echoing down the canyon-like street. Their weapons flashed, spitting las-fire at some distant target, and Luk growled in frustration.

'Seems safe enough to me, Jen. Where are all the traitors? Wasn't the fire supposed to herd them onto our guns?'

'We're out near the flank of the advance, Luk. Widen your auspex for a moment and look. Danial, you too.'

Danial willed his perception to broaden, his subconscious directing his steed while he took a moment to inspect the broader strategic situation. As the highest ranking noble of the invasion force, it had fallen to High King Tolwyn to martial not only the strengths of the Knightly Houses, but also those of the Astra Militarum and space-faring Imperial Navy that accompanied them. His plan had been typically audacious. The naval lance strikes had set a wildfire that drove the dug-in traitors out of their nests and into the Knights' guns. Yet to sit back and wait for the enemy would be ignoble, not to mention time-consuming. The High King had decreed that, with a world to win back, the Imperial forces could ill afford to dither in securing their beachhead. Instead, he had ordered his attendant regiments of Imperial Guard to land their forces in reserve and hold the line around the drop keeps, ensuring that no traitors slipped through. The Knights would then advance into the burning city and shatter the largest concentrations of resistance. In this way the enemy could be quickly exterminated, while at the same time any danger of a concerted heretic breakout was neutralised. Taking in the strategic overlay and runic force dispositions that hovered on his retinas, Danial could see that it was working.

'You see there?' asked Jennika, highlighting several key runes so that they flashed upon her comrades' retinal displays. 'Markos has relieved the besiegement of the Arbites Precinct. And there, the greatest concentration of the foe is pushing straight up the centre.'

'And they're dying in droves,' said Luk with relish.

'There, Jen, converging on our target coordinates,' said Danial, fingers

twitching unconsciously as he highlighted runes of his own. His cockpit shook and swayed with every great stride his steed took, but the information stood out clear as day to him. ‘We’ve enemies ahead.’

‘Well spotted, brother,’ said Jennika. ‘You’ll get your fight, Luk. But be careful, both of you. I read armour amongst that rabble. Shields fore, weapons ready, lengthen stride. Let’s get to the next intersection before they do.’

Danial followed his sister’s commands instantly, seeing the wisdom in her words. The foe was moving up the Tetrae Processional from the south with their armour at the fore, and whoever reached the intersection first would be able to bottleneck their enemies between the Pentakhostan hab-blocks. The kingsward returned his attention to the immediate combat, but left the wider strategic map underlying his perceptions. It intrigued him to see where their fight slotted into the broader tapestry of the battle, and even as he focused his mind upon the task at hand he continued to watch the swarming runes flow across the wider stage.

The first enemy fire whipped in at them just as *Fire Defiant* surged from between the towering hab-blocks and out into the open space of the crossroads. Shells and las-fire splashed from Jennika’s ion shield as she trampled over heaps of wrecked administratum groundcars. As his sister slowed to a stop at the centre of the intersection, Danial guided his steed onto her right flank and registered Luk doing the same to her left. With booming footfalls, the three Knights came to a halt, drawn up in a shield wall to meet the onrushing foe.

Planetary militia tanks were roaring as fast as they could up the processional – mostly infantry transports, with a few battle-tanks churning along in their midst. Crude slogans had been daubed across the defiled machines, while ragged banners flapped above. They bore twisted symbols, icons whose precise meaning Danial did not need to know to recognise them as evil. From a few dangled the wire-wrapped corpses of those who had presumably refused to turn traitor along with their comrades. Behind this armoured fist, the auspex read the runes of an infantry rabble, a couple of hundred foes at least. Danial felt his throne’s ghosts stir, and with an effort he pushed them back.

‘*Not. Now*,’ he hissed, focusing on targeting solutions and the firepower hammering against his shield.

‘Knights Draconis and Chimaeros,’ intoned Jennika solemnly. ‘Fire at will.’

The power in Danial’s thermal cannon surged as his will became fire. Clenching one haptic gauntlet, he punched it forward to loose his first shot. The killing heat leapt outward, spearing from Danial’s fist to tear through the enemy tanks. A traitor Leman Russ took the main brunt of the blast, its armour flashing

from grey to red to white hot in an instant before vaporising into scalding, superheated mist. Other renegade tanks around it caught the edge of the blast, their tracks melting as they slewed out of control. Armour plates buckled and ran like wax. Engines and ammunition stores exploded, while exposed crewmen didn't even have time to scream before they burst like blisters. So great was the thermal cannon's fury that it gouged a great crater into the road, leaving a vitrified ditch into which two more traitor tanks skidded. They crunched to a stop, smoke rising from their engines. Between vehicle wreckage and the still-glowing crater left by Danial's shot, the processional was as good as blocked.

Danial's ears rang and his mind was numbed with shock. He had done that. He had killed, for the first time, extinguishing the lives of a slew of heretics as easily as he might crush worms beneath his boot. The surge of exhilaration was overwhelming. The kingsward was jolted back to reality as a cannon-round punched through his shield and exploded against his Knight's chest, staggering it. Sparks drizzled from several cockpit systems, and *Oath of Flame* gave a rumble of mechanical protest.

'Shield, brother!' barked Jennika, hammering battle cannon rounds into the stalled enemy tanks with precision. Danial hurriedly adjusted his ion shield to protect his steed. Despite the jarring impact, he was grinning like a lunatic. He could hear Luk laughing.

'What a shot,' crowed his friend as he let fly with his own thermal cannon into the remaining enemy tanks, 'Danial Tan Draconis, master marksman and slayer of heretics.'

More traitor vehicles exploded, trapping the enemy infantry between the flaming wrecks to their fore and the hungry wildfires now sweeping up the street behind them. Enemy runes scattered on Danial's auspex as traitors smashed through shop fronts and hab windows in their desperation to find safety.

'Don't let them disperse,' said Jennika.

'Understood,' responded Danial, striding forward to get a view over the top of the blazing traitor tanks. His heavy stubber kicked to life, hosing high calibre bullets into the ragged traitors still caught in the street. At the same time his thermal cannon flashed again, burning through the front of the nearest building and annihilating the infantry trying to escape through its corridors and chambers. Rebar supports melted, masonry evaporated, and a great slab of the hab-block's frontage sheared away to crash down upon the processional like an avalanche. Danial's auspex showed Jennika and Luk wreaking equal havoc, as enemy runes snuffed out like candles in a high wind.

Danial's strategic overlay showed that the story was the same all along the battlefront. The renegade rabble of Pentakhost were no match for the Knights of Adrastapol, and were dying by the thousand. A handful of Knights showed minor battle damage on their manifolds, but it was nothing that the Sacristans would not soon fix. Tertiary vox data flashed back and forth amongst the Astra Militarum as they prepared to deploy their artillery batteries and blast a firebreak through the middle of the city. The wildfires had done their job, and now the Imperial forces would preserve what they could of Pentakhost for their own use.

As the last localised enemy runes blinked out, Danial slowly backed *Oath of Flame* into the intersection to survey the annihilation that he and his comrades had wrought.

'Is this what it means to be a Knight?' he breathed in awe.

'It means victory,' replied Luk, burning with pride and excitement. 'It means death to our enemies.'

'It means duty,' said Jennika, though Danial could hear the exhilaration in his sister's voice also. No one could wield power like this and not feel something. His heart was hammering in his chest. The whispers of his ancestors had grown to a clamour, still indistinct but surely congratulatory and full of bloodthirsty excitement. Danial wanted to fight again, to feel the godlike power at his fingertips. But the battle was won and the flames closing in.

'We should return to the keep,' said Jennika, her voice steady again. Danial pipped his vox in acknowledgement and turned his steed. They had claimed victory here, but as his natural pragmatism beat out the newfound flames of battle-lust Danial remembered that this was just the beginning. They had their beachhead, but there was a world out there yet to be re-conquered.

High King Tolwyn Tan Draconis strode along the colonnade with purpose, his booted footfalls echoing from the vaulted ceiling. The High King of Adrastapol was tall and rangy, his wiry strength and irrepressible energy belying his advanced years. His neatly trimmed beard and moustache were both silver-hued and waxed to fine points. Tolwyn's long hair was a similar shade, his golden circlet standing out proud against it. Five elaborately worked servo-skulls hovered along above his head, each hand-crafted to resemble the heads of mythic beasts – the pegassus, the chimaer, the minot, the wyvornne and, of course, the dracon. The High King had remained in the armoured bodysuit of a Knight at war, his only concession to tradition being the rich crimson-and-black quartered tabard his servants had draped over his shoulders and belted at his waist. Tolwyn had not even taken the time to wipe the sweat from his brow, nor the dust from his boots, and for good reason. He marched to a council of war. This would be a gathering of martial men and seasoned warriors. He must establish himself as one of their number, rather than appearing to set himself above them. The High King knew his own worth as a warrior and tactician, but as with any courtly matter, appearances were important. He might not have a taste for politicking, but one did not reach the station that Tolwyn Tan Draconis

had without knowing the steps of the courtly dance.

Though he was about to tend to matters of state, the High King was in fine spirits. His bold opening strategy for the war had run like clockwork.

'And the casualty reports?' he asked the burly warrior who kept pace at his side.

Markos Dar Draconis glanced at his ornate data-slate. Everything about the herald, from his scarred, bald head to his pugnacious manner spoke of a lifelong warrior. The data-slate seemed gaudy in his hands, thought Tolwyn with amusement.

'None, my liege,' grunted Markos, 'unless you count the Guard, I suppose.'

Tolwyn frowned.

'I do, old friend. I must. And so should you. These are our valued allies, soldiers of the Imperium every one. They might not have our grandeur, or nobility…'

'…but their purpose is every bit as just,' finished Markos grudgingly. 'So you always say, my liege.'

'And so I always shall. Until we're so old and shrivelled that the closest we come to war is hunching over the regicide table and squinting at the pieces,' chuckled the king.

Markos laughed.

'Hah, let us both die bloody in battle before we suffer such ignominy.'

'Indeed, old friend,' nodded the High King, 'but come now, what of our allies' casualties?'

'Blessedly light,' said Markos after glancing at his slate. 'Two platoons of Tanhollis Highlanders took a mauling when the traitors tried to push up the western flank, but they held. Lost four Cadian tanks to lucky shots. Nothing in orbit, the enemy's star ships have stayed well clear of ours and vice versa. Seems a pissing contest's likely to leave both sides with wet shins.'

The High King snorted.

'Pray never become a diplomat, Markos.'

'Pray never make me, your highness,' replied the grizzled herald.

'And what of my son?' asked Tolwyn as they approached a set of heavy brass doors. The Cadian veterans guarding the door snapped to attention, saluting crisply and slamming their las-rifle butts against the marble floor.

'Your son still lives,' replied Markos after a pause, 'and for that alone I'm thankful.'

'Come now,' replied the High King, stopping beside his old friend. 'That seems a touch uncharitable. I have it from several sources that he performed admirably

for his first engagement, as did young Luk.'

Markos shifted, clearly uncomfortable.

'Well, if that's what you've heard, my liege…'

'Markos,' pressed the High King, 'we're better blade-brothers than that. Aren't we? I'd know what *you* think.'

Markos Dar Draconis sighed and nodded.

'Very well, my liege. I don't think either one of them is ready. Nor, for that matter, are Sylvest Dar Draconis or Suset Dar Draconis. All four faced their Becoming a matter of weeks before we took ship…'

'You yourself first piloted a Knight in anger on the very morning after your Becoming, old friend,' said the High King with a smile.

'Aye, but that was necessity, sire. I'd have asked politely, but the orks didn't seem inclined to wait while I finished my training.' Both Knights laughed, and the High King noticed the Cadians' mouths quirked a little at the corners. Markos became serious again as he continued.

'The Chimaeros ward suffers from an overabundance of youthful arrogance, and a surfeit of common sense. He'll be a fine blade given time, but for now he's dangerously untempered. As for your lad… Danial's never been a brawler, Tolwyn. You know his taste for books eclipses his want for fisticuffs, wenches and wine. He hesitated off the drop. He stood overlong once clear, and only got himself into the fight after Lady Jennika gave him a boot up the backside. Even then he followed her to battle like a lost puppy.'

The High King raised an eyebrow at such harsh assessment, but the smile still had not quite left his face.

'I asked for honesty, I suppose. Markos, my oldest friend, I fear sometimes that you simply do not see Danial's inner strength. Just because he is a little different to most lads his age…'

'A little different?' the herald cried. 'My liege, he's eighteen winters whelped and hasn't even taken a woman! He…' Tolwyn held up a gloved hand, suddenly serious.

'Enough. There is honesty, and there is disparagement. We will continue this discussion in a more private setting. For now, please remember that he is my son, and the heir to the throne. If you are so sure that Danial is not ready for his responsibilities, then I would appreciate your every effort in preparing him for his mantle, rather than declaring him unfit.'

Markos' face coloured. He swiftly knelt before the High King, and bowed his head.

‘Apologies, my liege. I shall do penance for my outburst.’ Tolwyn reached down and took his herald by the shoulders, urging the heavily muscled warrior to stand once more.

‘Your contrition is enough, along with your solemn oath to help my son take his rightful place.’

Markos nodded.

‘Of course, my liege. I swear it on my throne.’

‘Good enough,’ said Tolwyn, a smile creasing the corners of his piercing green eyes. Dracon’s eyes, they called them, an inheritance common to all those of true House Draconis blood. ‘Now, the war council awaits.’

Turning, the High King made an expansive gesture at which one of the Cadians waved a key-wand and the huge brass doors swung ponderously open. Taking a deep breath, the king adjusted his smile to one of war-weathered confidence, and advanced as though to battle.

The chamber into which the High King led his herald was vast, so much so that a Warlord Titan might have stood at its centre. Before the war, it had been the grand dictatorium of the Pentakhost Administratum. Now it had become Tolwyn’s strategium. The domed, frescoed ceiling was all but lost in shadow, despite the grey daylight that streamed through the arched windows of one wall. Electrosconces were set at intervals, between dour portraits of robed worthies. The floor of the enormous circular space bore a huge icon of an aquila picked out in tawdry looking gilt. Yes, thought the High King, this place is as vast and soulless as the organisation it aggrandises.

A large group of men and women were gathered around a massive holo-projector table. As Tolwyn made his entrance, the buzz of conversation that echoed around the room petered out and all eyes turned to him and Markos. In response, Tolwyn’s attendant servo-skulls blared a sudden, static-laced fanfare into the cavernous chamber.

‘His majesty, High King Tolwyn Tan Draconis,’ said Markos, the herald’s voice booming into the hollow vastness. ‘Ruler of Adrastapol, master of House Draconis, liege-lord of the five houses and shield of the Majestis System. Make obeisance.’ As one, the Knights amongst the assembled worthies dropped to one knee, their heads bowed. The rest, Astra Militarum officers, Adeptus Mechanicus representatives and assorted planetary functionaries, all responded with their own gestures of respect.

The High King waved his servo-skulls away with apparent irritation. All part of

the act, of course.

'Such ceremony,' he exclaimed, sweeping a wry grin across the assembled war council. 'Hardly appropriate at a time of war. Please, as you were, my friends.'

Tolwyn covered the distance to the holo-table while the Knights rose to their feet, taking in the gathered officers and aides as he did so. There were the rulers of the other Adrastapolian Houses; Grandmarshal Gustev Tan Minotos, huge in his archaic battle-armour, his spectacular facial hair waxed into eccentric patterns; Archduke Dunkan Tan Wyvorn, with his hard face and a jocular grin that never quite reached his eyes; Marchioness Lauret Tan Pegasson, a coldly handsome woman clad in a half-armoured gown, her ice-white hair hanging in a cable-threaded braid down her back. And of course, Viscount Gerraint Tan Chimaeros, handsome and charismatic despite the scars that laced the left side of his face, and the hissing mechanical brace that encased his left arm and leg. Each of the nobles had their own retinues, their respective Exalted Courts along with favoured retainers, partners and the like. Tolwyn made brief eye contact with Viscount Gerraint's raven-haired consort, the Lady Alicia Kar Manticos, and she favoured him with a warm smile.

The Knightly retinues brought the numbers around the table to nearly fifty. Then there was the delegation of Sacristans, massed from the mechanist fraternities of each House. Robed half in their Houses' colours and half in Martian red, the strange, cybernetically altered artificers were led by High Sacristan Polluxis Dar Mechanicus. These were the secretive figures who kept the Knights of Adrastapol operational, and the High King made sure to direct a nod of appropriate respect in Polluxis' direction. The High Sacristan inclined his own cowled head in response, clustered eye-lenses glowing like coals beneath his hood.

Alongside the leaders of Adrastapol stood the variously appointed commanders of the Cadian, Mubraxis and Tanhollis regiments. Each was attired in the ceremonial dress uniform of their world. Each made for a striking spectacle with their attendant throngs of senior officers, aides du camps, servitors, bannermen, astropaths and – in the case of the Mubraxian Sheik Halna'sir – a trio of lean canid-looking beasts on chain leashes.

There was also a huddled gaggle of officials from Donatos' Administratum, struggling to look at home amidst such a gathering of warriors. On the far side of the table hovered the corpulent Bishop of Donatos, Sacred Pulcifan, his robed bulk held aloft upon a suspensor throne. Next to him stood the High Justice of Donatos, master of the planet's Adeptus Arbites. Commander Korgh of the

planet's defence militia looked pale and exhausted in a crumpled uniform with a stone of penance heavy around his neck. Captain Vostrie of the Imperial Navy had ferried the invasion to this war-torn world and acted as representative for the fleet. The list went on, a total of several hundred names and faces. With his mnemetic augmetics and attention to detail, High King Tolwyn had been sure to learn them all. One never knew when such information might prove useful.

Tolwyn stopped before the holo-table and rested his palms upon it.

'My lords and ladies, commanding officers and worthy adepts. Welcome to the beginning of Donatos' redemption.' Tolwyn paused for a moment, allowing a wave of applause and table thumping to pass through the gathering. 'Our initial assault drop was a complete success. Our beachhead on Donatos Primus is secured. Congratulations are in order, as are thanks to those brave soldiers of the Cadian and Tanhollis regiments who gave their lives to make it thus.' Another round of applause, this one louder. Tolwyn received the appreciative nods of the Cadian and Tanhollis commanders, and returned them in kind. As the applause died away, the leader of the Administratum delegation raised his stave of office. Tolwyn paused in his prepared address, making a gracious gesture to the administrator to proceed. Tall and spare, the robed man cleared his throat and bowed low.

'Before you proceed, High King, I would say, on behalf of all of Donatos' surviving loyal rulers, just how eternally grateful we are for your most efficacious rescue of ourselves. Truly did we believe that the turncoat hordes would tear us limb from limb, that they would soon overrun the barricades of the Pentakhost Arbites fortress and end our lives in their wickedness. For our salvation, we give thanks to the Emperor, and to you.'

The High Justice's scowl deepened at these words, while militia Commander Korgh flinched as though awaiting a kick. That wouldn't do, Tolwyn thought.

'First Administrator Hullis, isn't it?' asked Tolwyn. The Administratum man nodded, clearly pleased to be properly acknowledged by such an august personage as a Knightly High King.

'My warriors and I appreciate your thanks,' smiled Tolwyn graciously, 'and I am glad that we were able to break the besiegement around the Arbites precinct fortress. It is good that so many of this world's rulers could be saved, even if Governor Gnossul could not. But also I must express my own thanks. No, I must give my heartfelt congratulations. To all the brave men and women of the Donatosian Adeptus Arbites, and to the loyalist soldiery of the Donatosian planetary militia. You have my thanks, and the Emperor's.'

From across the table, the High Justice and Commander Korgh both made the sign of the aquila. Korgh, in particular, stood a little taller at Tolwyn's words. The High King was well aware that the man had been derelict in his duties, for the pernicious corruption of Chaos had spread through the ranks of his soldiers under his very nose. No doubt Commander Korgh would face execution for his failures. But for now he was needed. Twelve regiments of loyal Donatosian militia were still in the field, according to initial reports. Still fighting to prove their loyalty against their fallen former comrades. Morale was likely to be dismal. They needed their commander to stay strong.

'Perhaps,' gurgled Bishop Pulcifan with a scowl, 'the Emperor would thank them better if they had not allowed this world to fall.'

Tolwyn felt a flash of irritation. The interruption was counter-productive, a distraction, and from one who looked like he had never seen a battlefield in his life.

'Pray tell us, your holiness,' replied the High King frostily, 'what is it that lies at the heart of this insurrection?'

The bishop peered at Tolwyn for a moment, nonplussed by the question.

'Why, that much is surely apparent,' he blustered, fluid trickling down the tubes that jutted from his neck. 'Corruption. Heresy! A paucity of piety that these men allowed to spread unchecked, that rendered the common man of this world so ungrateful to his Emperor's blessings that he rebelled in great number.'

Tolwyn nodded for a moment, then glanced around the table.

'Viscount Gerraint Tan Chimaeros,' he addressed the tall, battle-scarred Knight. 'Who is it that administers to the spiritual wellbeing of the people of Adrastapol? Who bolsters the faith of our common flock?'

Gerraint raised one eyebrow, seeming to consider before replying in his rich, deep voice.

'Why, my liege, that would be the priests of the Ministorum.'

'The priests of the Ministorum,' said Tolwyn, nodding reflectively.

'My lord High King…' began Pulcifan, but Tolwyn raised a hand.

'Colonel Brost. Amongst the men of the Cadian regiments, is it your officer classes who see to the spiritual wellbeing of the common soldiery?'

Brost, a whip-thin soldier with hard, patrician features, shook his head.

'No, sir, it is not. That duty falls to our regimental priests. Bloody heroes the lot of them, if I may say so, sir.'

'You may indeed, colonel,' replied the High King, 'you may indeed.'

'High King, I must protest…' said the bishop again. Tolwyn cut him off with a

sharp gesture.

‘Your protests, Bishop Pulcifan, are of no interest to me. Nor, one suspects, do they interest the Emperor. When a farmer’s herds are devoured by wulfdenkyne, or wander witless into a ravine, does he blame his fellow farmers? Perhaps the beasts themselves? Or does he accept that it was he who allowed his animal pens to fall into disrepair, and labour to fix them before more livestock are lost? Look to your own affairs, Sacred Pulcifan, before you level blame against the brave soldiery who have fought so hard to keep your holy personage safe. You have as much a duty to restore morale and spiritual cleanliness upon this world as any, and shoulder much of the blame for your flock’s failings. I would thank you to speak no further in this council unless it is to add something useful, pertinent or positive.’

The bishop had turned white by the time Tolwyn finished dressing him down, and was barely able to stammer a suitably contrite reply. The High King ignored it. He had shown he could be kind, fair and a friend. He had shown he could be hard, and would not suffer fools. Pulcifan had helped him in that at least. The council was ready. They could begin the real work of the day.

‘We have wasted enough time on blame,’ said Tolwyn, hands spread in a conciliatory gesture. ‘We’ve foes enough outside these walls. I would have a strategic summation, please, that we may proceed with laying our plans for war.’

At this, two robed figures moved forward. One was a tech-priest from Donatos’ Mechanicus priesthood. The other was a representative from the Sacristans of Adrastapol. Between them, the machine priests performed the rites of awakening, and the holo-table hummed to life. Its surface flared with light, and from it leapt a green, static-tinged image of the world of Donatos and its immediate orbital envelope. The two continental landmasses, Donatos Primus and Secundus, could be seen as the globe slowly revolved, dotted with icons denoting combat zones and sites of strategic importance.

As the High King’s herald, it fell to Sire Markos to lead the briefing. Tolwyn made the appropriate gesture of permission, and Markos stepped forward with data-slate in hand. He accepted a control wand from the metal claw of the Donatosian tech-priest, nodding his thanks before clearing his throat and addressing the room.

‘As you know, Donatos is a class two industrial world, with strong ties to the Adeptus Mechanicus, and a duty to provide materiel to the Ryza warzone. Continent Primus is a rich industrial super-hive, a conurbation thousands of miles across, dotted with zones of rocky wasteland and spoilscape. Continent

Secundus is an irradiated dumping ground that plays host to a handful of heavily shielded, fully automated recyc plants, and little else. As of ten months and six days ago, sidereal reckoning, an armed insurrection began on Donatos Primus. Manifesting initially as worker riots and spoil-gang violence in the nordindustriala hive sprawl, the situation worsened when militia squads sent to quell the rioters instead joined them. The situation spiralled out of control after heretical cult elements were revealed to be catalysing the violence, and within the first few weeks the nordindustriala and neighbouring manufactorii grandii fell into traitor hands.'

'Why didn't they just bomb the whole bloody lot of 'em?' called Grandmarshal Gustev Tan Minotos indignantly. 'No tolerance for dashed traitors!'

'Not every problem can be solved with ordnance, grandmarshal,' responded the Marchioness Tan Pegasson coolly. 'A castle is of little use if it is nought but rubble.'

'Milady is correct,' said Markos, gesturing with the control wand to zoom the holo-map in upon the initial seat of the insurrection. 'This entire region is of high value to Donatos' war production output. Even had the militia been able to call upon sufficient artillery, air or orbital support to properly saturate the area, the collateral damage would have been deemed too great.'

'And so the rebellion was allowed to spread,' observed Gerraint Tan Chimaeros. 'The lives of this world's people were judged to be worth less than that of its machines.'

'Assuredly yes,' responded First Administrator Hullis. 'Why, a single square mile of the manufactorii grandii has a net worth to the Imperium comparative to that of over five hundred thousand menial lives. The materials alone…' the administrator's querulous tones petered out as he caught sight of the thunderous expression on Tan Chimaeros' face. The viscount drew breath to respond, but his consort laid a hand gently on his arm. Gerraint Tan Chimaeros subsided, settling for scowling in anger at the slowly revolving holo-map.

'Whatever the case,' said Sire Markos, picking up the thread of his briefing, 'the rebellion spread rapidly through the northern sectors of Donatos Primus. The militia made efforts to stem the spreading tide, but, unsure of his soldiers' loyalties, Commander Korgh deployed his men sparingly. He assumed, not unreasonably, that the Adamant Citadels would stop the rebellion.'

'Elaboration, if you would, Sire Markos?' requested the Mubraxian sheik. Markos in turn gestured to High Sacristan Polluxis. The High Sacristan stepped forward, a mechadendrite snaking from beneath his heavy robes to mate with a

data-port on the holo-table's flank. This honour should, by protocol, have been given to a representative of the local Mechanicus. That they ceded the duty to Polluxis said much for the Donatosians' capitulation to their rescuers.

The holographic image fuzzed for a moment, before being replaced with a cycling series of schematics. Massive, armoured redoubts flicked past, mingled with servitor batteries, automated silos and bulky generatorum bunkers.

'The Adamant Citadels,' began Polluxis, his voice a flat digital emission, 'are a bespoke defensive measure implemented upon Donatos by the Adeptus Mechanicus. Spread across the primary continent according to a sacred algorithm, these fortifications are servitor crewed, and maintained by the priests of the Donatosian Mechanicus. Though each complex varies in precise form and function, they dominate many of the continent's strategically valuable sites and were intended as an incorruptible defence for the planet against just such human failings as were displayed by this insurrection.'

A few officers around the table stirred uncomfortably at this notion, but Polluxis seemed unaware.

'So what happened?' asked the High King, though he already knew the answer.

'It was at this point that the real enemy revealed themselves upon Donatos,' replied the High Sacristan. The image on the hololith flickered again, and Tolwyn heard gasps of shock at the figure now displayed. One of the Adeptus Astartes, the Emperor's own Space Marines, rendered tall and terrifying even in hololithic facsimile. Yet this figure was no exemplar of piety, no champion of the Emperor's light. Strange sigils had been scrawled across the Space Marine's armour. Spikes and hooks jutted from it, and upon its shoulder guards was a screaming daemonic visage. The figure's face was the most shocking aspect of its appearance – its flesh was pale, webbed with black veins, and its deep-sunk eyes glowed with inner light. From the abomination's forehead jutted a pair of long, curling horns.

'A Chaos Space Marine, sworn to the dark forces who oppose our beloved Imperium.' Sire Markos pronounced the words with distaste. 'Some of you may never have heard of such a thing. Some may be about to voice protests that such an abomination could not exist, perhaps even that it is heresy to suggest it. *Don't*. You have all been cleared, as of this moment, to view the crimson level data-scrolls exloaded to your briefing slates. Read them. Absorb them. Believe and fear them. Seek spiritual counsel if you need it. This is a traitor Space Marine, of the excommunicate-diabolus Word Bearers, and it is the face of our enemy.'

The chamber erupted in a hubbub of oaths, muttered conversations, cries of

horror and fervent prayer. The High King allowed it to continue for a moment, before raising his voice to restore order.

'Friends, decorum! This briefing is not concluded. Yes, this is shocking news to those who were not aware, but I would ask you to proceed with faith and courage. We shall be victorious here. Now, High Sacristan, if you would, how came these abominations to undermine the Adamant Citadels?'

All eyes turned back to Polluxis, whose augmetics clicked and whirred in the sudden silence.

'It is… unclear to us at this time, my liege.' Tolwyn gestured sharply to cut off any sudden resurgence of panic, allowing the High Sacristan to continue. 'The Donatosian Mechanicus recorded some form of hostile machine-spirit emanation. They describe it as a haunting, a form of diabolic scrapcode set loose by members of the Word Bearers against the shield installations. Whatever they did was… highly effective. Within days, the enemy had turned the Adamant Citadels to their cause.'

'The rest is depressingly predictable,' continued Markos, cutting across another swell of muttering and prayer. 'With the Adamant Citadels as their rallying points, and the leadership of an unknown number of these traitor Adeptus Astartes, the heretics swept the Donatosian militia aside. Every attempt by the militia to slow the enemy advance, or to retake territory, resulted in costly defeat. Finally, the loyalist forces were driven back to sheltered enclaves outside the range of the Adamant Citadels' missile silos and plasma bombards. Besieged, scattered and outnumbered, it appeared only a matter of time before the remaining loyalist forces were overwhelmed.'

'However,' said Tolwyn, taking up the briefing from his herald, 'the valiant loyalists were not entirely without success. First and foremost, they were able to defend the astropathic sanctum in the spire capitalis long enough for a distress call to be sent. It was heard by segmentum command, and a response was orchestrated. As the closest militarised world to Donatos, Adrastapol and her Knights were tasked with leading the invasion to retake this vital world. And so. We. Shall!'

The chamber echoed to the sounds of applause, and shouted oaths of vengeance.

'But that is not the only success of this world's brave militia,' said Tolwyn. 'Before being forced to fall back to Pentakhost, a regiment of Commander Korgh's brave loyalists succeeded in an act of sabotage that may bring us swift victory in this war. Commander?'

Korgh's eyes widened as he found himself the sudden centre of attention. The commander straightened his neck despite the heavy stone that hung around it. He stepped forward, accepting the proffered control wand from Sire Markos and taking a moment to familiarise himself with its workings. Hesitantly, Korgh gestured at the holographic image and, after a couple of tries, managed to bring back the map of Donatos Primus. The commander scrolled the image until it showed a region to the north of the peninsula beachhead, a break in the industrial sprawl that appeared to be mostly vast, blackened craters.

'According to intelligence provided by the Mechanicus,' began Korgh, his voice a harsh rasp that grew in confidence, 'the Adamant Citadels have – had – two primary sources of power. One in the continental south at the peninsulum manufactorii, and the other located in the valle electrum just north of the equator.'

'And your boys blew one sky high!' barked Grandmarshal Tan Minotos with fierce approval.

'Um… yes, sire,' replied Korgh. 'The valle electrum is sited amidst a range of armoured hab-mountains, reachable only through heavily fortified canyons cut into the continental bedrock, and protected from above by a double layer of void shielding projected from the mountaintops. Even had we been fighting at full strength, we could not have assailed such a place once its Adamant Citadel was turned against us. However, through sheer good fortune a couple of troopers in the Nineteenth Regiment had been… uh… well, they had been making a few credits on the side through elicit trading in the peninsulum manufactorii before the war broke out.' Tolwyn sighed quietly to himself as Korgh pressed on. Not a bad officer, thought the High King, but criminally lax. No wonder the rot had spread so fast.

'Those men knew of tunnels, decommissioned waste pipes that led for miles beneath the peninsulum manufactorii and right in under the primary plasma generatorums. A regiment went in, the entire Nineteenth, carrying every explosive charge and melta weapon we could scrape together. Not a man of them made it back.' Korgh faltered, his eyes haunted. 'They succeeded in their mission,' he continued. 'They blew the peninsulum manufactorii generators sky high.' The commander's expression was a mix of sorrow and pride as he concluded his account. His shoulders sagged as though delivering his tale had exhausted what small reserves he possessed.

Sire Markos nodded his thanks to Korgh, his face neutral as he took back the control wand.

‘The results of the detonation were immediate,’ he said, zooming the map out to show the continent as a whole. ‘With one site destroyed, the burden of powering the Adamant Citadels fell entirely upon the site at the valle electrum. It wasn’t equal to the task. Though our auspex sweeps show the valle electrum site to be still fully operational, the enemy seem to have been forced to sacrifice some of their outlying defences to avoid losing them all. Moreover, surging power destroyed the Adamant Citadels closest to the peninsulum manufactorii site. In a matter of hours, the enemy lost their advantage south of the equator.’

‘And that,’ announced the High King, ‘is our good fortune. It is for this reason that our initial drop point was chosen. With our beachhead secured, we shall push north and drive the foe before us. Shorn of their Adamant Citadels, many of those we face are little better than rabble. Fanatical, certainly, but no match for Knights and trained, faithful Imperial Guardsmen.’

‘A straight lance-thrust to the throat,’ said Viscount Gerraint, stroking his scarred chin and nodding. ‘While the enemy’s defences remain weak, we march upon the valle electrum and destroy that too.’

‘Just so, old friend,’ said the High King, grinning. ‘With the Adamant Citadels eliminated, our enemies will have no answer to massed lances of Knights. Their air defences will be all but eliminated at a stroke, as will their anti-orbital capabilities. Even with these traitor Space Marines in attendance, we will overwhelm our foes, link up with those loyalist forces remaining in the northern hemisphere, and crush the rebellion utterly.’

‘A bold plan, my liege,’ said Lauret Tan Pegasson.

‘A simple and effective one,’ added Archduke Dunkan Tan Wyvorn, his tone eager. ‘It sounds glorious. One hopes only that our allies will be able to keep pace.’

The Astra Militarum officers bristled at the implied insult. Not for the first time, High King Tolwyn found himself exasperated by Wyvorn’s lack of tact.

‘I assure you, sire, that the men of Cadia are left in nobody’s wake,’ replied Colonel Brost coolly.

‘Nor the men of Tanhollis or Mubraxis,’ finished Alicia Kar Manticos smoothly, surprising the men around her who had almost forgotten her presence. ‘But there will be specifics to discuss. Logistics. Preparatory strikes to plan and routes to plot. I believe I speak for all these fine and noble Knights of Adrastapol when I say that the counsel of the Astra Militarum, the Imperial Navy and all local leaders will be invaluable in planning this attack.’

Tolwyn smiled gratefully at Gerraint and his consort. He truly understood how

his old comrade could be so completely in love with that exceptionally capable woman.

'Just so, my lady. But that, my friends, is why we are here. So that all of us, together, can plan the war that will deliver Donatos back into the Emperor's grace. Captain Vostrie, why don't you begin by giving us the Imperial Navy's perspective on matters of planetary strategy, and then we can proceed from there…?'

The High King smiled as the Navy captain stepped forward and began his own report. They had accepted his plan with a gratifying absence of dissension, and now the re-conquest could begin just as he had planned it. Let them discuss the specifics, and feel as though all had taken an equal part in orchestrating the war to come – Tolwyn understood the necessity for a commander to massage the egos of his subordinates and allies. Donatos would be his victory, and he would win it in the Emperor's name.

Greatness was close. His fingertips brushed against it. It was a hot breath on the back of his neck, a buzzing headache pressing behind his blood red eyes. Varakh'Lorr felt the favour of the Octed burning about him like phantom fires, whose heat was but a tingle, whose smoke was but a faint tang upon the air. Yet the threat of immolation was real enough. Succeed, and those flames would flow into him and remake his mortal flesh into something as divine as themselves. Fail, and the fires would consume him utterly.

If he was honest with himself, the Dark Apostle found the danger intoxicating. He could feel the veil thinning around him, see the warp pressing in on all sides. He stood upon a cliff edge, and dared the drop to take him. Power tainted every breath he took into his lungs, potential curdled every exhalation. How the mewling sheep of the Imperium lived with their dull, unexceptional lives he had no notion. Idiocy, perhaps. Inadequacy.

The question was beneath him and the Dark Gods' work was still incomplete. Irritated by his moment of distraction, Varakh'Lorr shook himself from his reverie.

'It is happening more frequently,' rumbled Gothro'Gol. 'Your mind leaves us. It must return.'

Varakh'Lorr scowled at his bodyguard, but the Terminator's expressionless helm gave nothing back. The Dark Apostle's visage reflected in his bodyguard's eye-lenses. A mask of stitched human flesh, the Red Veil, pieced together out of strips of flesh taken from eight separate planetary governors. Fierce, bloodshot eyes staring through the stolen sockets of eight screaming victims. A trio of barbed horns rising like a crown from amongst the nest of cables that covered his scalp. Many would already have called this the face of a daemon, but Varakh'Lorr knew better. And he knew that his bodyguard was not wrong.

'The blessings of the Octed,' he responded. 'They press close upon my mind. But I shall not lose focus. I am the master of this power.'

Gothro'Gol said nothing in return. He merely loomed, a silent immensity of tusked, spike-studded ceramite and plasteel. The hum of his armour's power plant filled the ransacked chamber in which they stood. His bulk was so great that his shoulder-guards nearly scraped the ceiling. Fully armoured, Varakh'Lorr's bodyguard was nearly twice the size of the Dark Apostle. He made any space seem small.

Not that this place had been huge to begin with. Just some menial chamber, for some menial human administrator who thought himself important. Its former occupant was still present, in fact. His component parts hung from the chamber's electrosconces by tangles of razor-wire, while his blood had been used days earlier to daub the eight pointed star upon the chamber's floor. He had been the one in charge of this generatorum complex. Pathetic though he was, the butchered administrator had been the worthiest offering the Word Bearers could find.

'I won't fail now, Gothro'Gol,' said the Dark Apostle, almost to himself. 'I won't feed the Dark Gods scraps such as this. They desire the ninth feast, and I must deliver or be damned.'

'Yes,' Gol replied, his voice so deep that it rattled the shards of glass scattered across the floor.

For a moment longer, Varakh'Lorr lingered in the administrator's chamber, marshalling his thoughts and shutting out the insistent clamour of the warp. Every day was a struggle now, but he was its equal. And his army awaited its master.

Sweeping back his cloak of rune-scrawled parchments, the Dark Apostle pushed through the aquila doors of the office and strode out onto the balcony beyond. The sky opened suddenly above him, a vaulted maelstrom of churning cloud and crackling, red-tinged lightning. Before him, the valle electrum spread

out like some vast machine. So grand and complex was the sight that even one as jaded as Varakh'Lorr had to acknowledge its magnificence. Macrotemples and forge-works sprawled away in all directions, interspersed with coolant towers, exchanger-shrines and electro-hazed pylons. A neat grid of ferrocrete transitways cut through them, dividing the industrio-urban enormity into neat blocks. The ordered, confined minds of the Mechanicus were much in evidence here. Behind Varakh'Lorr loomed the thrumming enormity of generatorum block two. Its twins – generatorums one and three – flanked it at a distance of precisely one mile to each side. Each was a breathtaking immensity of pipework, gothic venting towers, capacitor-shrines and sweeping, armoured flanks. Varakh'Lorr could feel the power washing off them, and hear the steady whine as they fought to maintain the Adamant Citadels across the continent. Dark Mechanicum servitors crawled like arachnids across the huge generatorums, labouring tirelessly to keep the overtaxed machineries working.

The entire city, from its pounding industrial heart to the decaying worker-habs that ringed its outer districts, was cradled within a vast stone fist. The mountains rose all around it, towering, gale-swept stone and jagged crags studded with the glowing lights of tunnel-habs and defence complexes. Atop the northernmost mountain – known locally as Ironpeak – squatted the Adamant Citadel, its macrocannons and missile batteries flickering with dark corposant. The other mountaintops, five in all, played host to the void shield generators that maintained an invisible barrier high above Varakh'Lorr's head. This might be a glorified power-plant, but it made little effort to hide its true nature. It was a fortress, and a formidable one at that.

Even the greatest fortress was useless without an army to defend it, of course. The Dark Apostle paced to the shattered edge of the balcony, and looked down upon his. Hundreds of feet below him, packing out the mile-wide Plaza of Unrelenting Toil from edge to edge, were the turncoat hordes of Donatos. Thousands upon thousands of planetary defence troopers, labour-gang serfs, mutant underhabbers and wild-eyed cultists gazed up at their master from below and screamed their desperate adoration to the skies. The sound rose like a wave, threatening to overwhelm even Varakh'Lorr's resilient senses. More worshippers surrounded the plaza on all sides, he knew, clustering at manufactorum windows and packing out the streets in the hope of catching a glimpse of their saviour. The thought dragged a fang-filled leer across his face, and the remains of his eight most powerful victims leered helplessly with him. Yes. Greatness was close.

Varakh'Lorr raised his arms to the tortured skies, and activated the vox-amplifier built into his armour's gorget.

'People of Donatos,' he boomed, his voice godlike as it cut through the mindless roar of the crowd. 'Seekers after redemption. Victims of the false Emperor. I bring you word of this galaxy's true gods, and I tell you to rejoice!'

The din from below became even more deafening at his words. Crude icons waved. Firearms were discharged into the sky, las-bolts flickering upwards in thin streamers. The faithful scrambled atop one another in their desperation to be closer to their saviour, and Varakh'Lorr's contempt for them grew. They were barely even human, livestock fit only for the slaughter. Yet even pitiful beasts such as these could serve a purpose.

'You,' he shouted, his voice echoing from the high buildings that edged the plaza, 'you have risen up. You have raised yourselves from perdition and taken the freedom you deserve. You have pleased the gods greatly!'

Screams of adulation and hysteria washed over him at these words. They redoubled as huge, armoured doors swung open at the front of the generatorum building. Tainted fume spilled out, mauve clouds of psychotropic incense billowing over the ragged edge of the crowd. Those engulfed went into paroxysms, flailing and shrieking as they vanished from sight amidst the swirling vapours. From out of the doorway emerged the Word Bearers. Varakh'Lorr's faithful, his true warriors, enacting his will as they had since the very beginning.

Tattered streamers of mauve smog trailed the Chaos Space Marines as they strode down the building's steps and out into the surging crowds. There were only thirty-two of the crimson warriors, half of his brotherhood. The others were spread across Donatos Primus, leading the traitor hordes as they battled to exterminate remaining pockets of loyalist resistance. It didn't matter. Even a single Word Bearer would have stood out like a beacon amidst the churning mass of humanity below. Thirty-two of them seemed, by their sheer presence, to outnumber the thousands that surrounded them. Those among the crowd who laid eyes upon the Word Bearers prostrated themselves, or fell to their knees in frantic worship. Many were trampled by the press of zealots surging from behind to catch a glimpse of their supposed saviours. Bone cracked, and blood slicked the ground. Pitiful screams were lost amid the idiot howl of the masses. With his heightened senses, Varakh'Lorr heard every one, and they stretched his cruel grin wider.

'The worthy shall be chosen!' roared the Dark Apostle. At his words, the Chaos

Space Marines began to forge through the crowd. They swatted aside those too slow to clear their path, and bones broke with every callous swipe. Horned helms and twisted, battle-scarred faces turned left and right as the Word Bearers made a show of seeking some ineffable quality amidst the hordes. First to pick, as always, was Daksha. Over-eager, thought Varakh'Lorr scornfully. The anticipation, the mob violence, the ecstasy and terror that went with the choosing was part of the ritual. It should not be rushed. Yet Daksha craved bloodshed, for the grip of the red lord was strong upon his soul, and patience became ever less his virtue.

Armour festooned with bloody meat-hooks, Daksha reached into the crowd and gripped a militia soldier by the front of his tattered uniform. The Word Bearer lifted the man effortlessly from amongst the masses, holding him up like some strange trophy. The chosen one wept with terror and joy, utterly overcome by emotions so strong that he shook like a rag doll.

'The first!' announced Varakh'Lorr. 'Who else shall be found worthy? Who else amongst you is blessed in the sight of the gods? Who has earned their gifts?' The crowd went wild with beseeching cries and frantic declarations of worthiness. Some turned upon one another, thinking to offer some violent proof there and then. Whole sections of the tight-packed herd descended into mob violence, people screaming and attempting to shield themselves while fists and feet lashed all around. The Word Bearers ignored the savage scuffles, plucking their chosen candidates from amongst the crowd. Men and women were lifted high, while all around them those not chosen wailed and rent their clothing in anguish. Varakh'Lorr laughed aloud as he saw one of the chosen grabbed by several other members of the crowd, who jealously attempted to drag him from his captor's grip. The Word Bearer in question, Kashor'Kol, hoisted his prize away from the grasping hands and casually backhanded the nearest of those who had interfered. The woman's neck broke at the force of the blow, and her lifeless body was sent flailing over the heads of the crowd. Varakh'Lorr heard it all as though he stood amidst the press, felt as his own the disdain of Kashor'Kol. No more attempts were made to interrupt the choosing.

'So do the warriors of the gods see the worthiest amongst you!' cried Varakh'Lorr, pointing one taloned finger at the crowd. 'So are the ascendant borne to a greater fate!'

At this, the Word Bearers turned as one and forged a path back towards the towering doors of the generatorum. As they vanished into the coiling mauve fumes, each warrior bore a Donatosian with them. The horde surged at their

backs, spilling up against the doors with painful force. The Dark Apostle allowed bedlam to reign for a few moments, then roared out a single word.

'Silence!'

The quiet that followed was broken only by the agonised moans of those too insensible or pained to obey. It fell so suddenly it seemed supernatural. Thousands upon thousands of faces stared up at Varakh'Lorr, expressions beseeching, or fearful, or both.

'The worthy have been chosen,' uttered the Dark Apostle. 'But all of you have the strength within you to be chosen as well. You need only prove yourselves to the gods. Do you wish to throw off your mortal shackles?'

Varakh'Lorr sprang to the very edge of the broken balcony, perching upon its bullet-scarred lip like some daemonic gargoyle. His parchment cloak fell about his shoulders like wings. Below him, his frantic congregation bellowed out their answer, a monster roaring, in a single voice.

Yes.

'Do you wish to rise up from the filth? And the misery? And the servitude of mortality?'

Yes, they howled, knowing not what it was they desired. **Yes**.

'Will you do what you must to earn the gods' favour?'

Yes, they screamed, and Varakh'Lorr savoured his power over the mindless masses. Below, in the bowels of the generatorum, the chosen would be getting readied for their fate. Out here, countless fools bleated their desire to join them. They would do anything to earn the reward that he offered. Yes, greatness was close.

'Then fight!' cried Varakh'Lorr. 'Fight for your new gods. Fight to show your devotion, your worth. Even now the dogs of the False Emperor are loose upon this world and they seek to take away your newfound freedom.'

Screams of outrage at this. Howls of anger. All the madness and fury of the pit. The Dark Apostle drank it in like bloody wine, and felt his nerves sing.

'They have come to this world because they will do anything to take your hope from you. Anything, to place their boots upon your backs. Anything, to force your faces down into the filth once more.' Small chance of that, thought Varakh'Lorr with cruel amusement. The Imperial invaders would want nothing from these traitors but their blood. Still, his words were having the desired effect. Anger burned through the mob like a firestorm. Their outrage and fear were incandescent as newborn stars.

'Already, the enemy have taken Pentakhost from those who were too weak to

stop them!' Varakh'Lorr was careful to load his voice with just the right blend of scorn, disappointment and anger. The crowd felt the emotions as their own, and bellowed their need for vengeance.

'Shall they march on unopposed?'

No, roared the crowd.

'Shall they defeat the faithful warriors I see before me?'

No, they roared again.

'Shall you allow the False Emperor to claim back this world, and to steal the true gods' due?'

No, they howled, and Varakh'Lorr relished his flock's devotion and stupidity.

'Then go!' he cried. 'Go! Spread the word to all you meet! The slaves of the Imperium shall be turned back, no matter the cost. So shall you prove your worth. So shall you be chosen!'

Varakh'Lorr turned his back upon his worshippers and left them to fight their way back out of the plaza. Preachers and officers amongst their number would harness their fervour and direct their strengths. He had lost interest in them already. Below, in his sanctum, there awaited more important matters. The Dark Apostle vanished back into the bloody shadows of the generatorum, Gothro'Gol's monstrous footsteps thumping behind him.

Deep within the violated generatorum, past enginariums, pipe-conduit-congregati and incomprehensible tangles of machinery the size of super-heavy tanks, lay Varakh'Lorr's sanctum. The Word Bearers had transformed the building's primary shrine to the Omnissiah, hurling down the tech-idols and raising in their place statues and icons of the Dark Gods. Chaotic runes crawled upon every surface. Servitors had been ripped from their work stations and strung up cruciform within hideous cradles of razor-wire. Occasionally, they still writhed and moaned as flickers of unholy life passed through them. Electrosconces and brazier-pits burned with black flame from which the billowing mauve fumes arose, and from the ceiling hung a vast, eight pointed star.

The chosen ones were already present as Varakh'Lorr entered the sanctum. They stood, white faced and shaking, in a perfectly spaced circle beneath the eight pointed star. None of them could have missed the old blood trails that led from where they stood to the broad, brass bowl set in the chamber's floor. Behind each chosen stood a Word Bearer, firmly gripping his charge's shoulders and ensuring they didn't have second thoughts. The Dark Apostle's entrance

caused a shudder of wonderment and terror to pass through the chosen ones. Most had never seen their deliverers up close. At least some of them had to be questioning the wisdom of rebellion by now. Those who could think straight with the daemonic incense filling their lungs, at least. A shame for them that it was far, far too late to recant their sins.

'Chosen ones,' said Varakh'Lorr with a warm grin, ignoring the daemonic visages he could see flickering in the periphery of his vision. 'You are the worthiest of all. You are fit for the gods' consideration. And for their table.' At these cruel words, real panic appeared on the faces of his most alert victims. The rest stared in blank wonderment, or else wept or laughed hysterically at whatever it was the clouds of incense showed them. It didn't matter. None of them was going anywhere.

At a signal from the Dark Apostle, thirty-two Word Bearers unsheathed sacrificial blades and raised them high. As they did so, Varakh'Lorr strode to the centre of the circle, leaving Gothro'Gol looming at its edge. The Dark Apostle began a chant, a dark, jagged mantra that caused the light in the sanctum to wane and the shadows to leap and crawl. He stopped before the brass dish and raised his blade, dragging it across his armoured palm. It had been long years since Varakh'Lorr and his armour were truly separate entities, and at his blade's kiss the armoured palm split open. Black blood dribbled out, sizzling like acid as it spattered into the sacrificial font.

'Sh'zech Thossil K'zakh'hzahn,' cried Varakh'Lorr, and reality shivered at the words. His followers repeated the chant, voices menacing and monstrous, cold and cruel. As they did so, they swung their blades outward and, with terrible inevitability, dragged their serrated edges across thirty-two human throats. A few of the sacrifices managed pitiful screams before their windpipes were sawed through. Blood jetted, pattering into the brass font like storm rain. It gushed in streams, drenching the twitching, clawing sacrifices as the Word Bearers held them firm. It flowed into the unholy dish where it mingled with the Dark Apostle's own. There, as Varakh'Lorr continued his Chaotic chant, it began to swirl.

The blood spun slowly to begin with, washing around the font like wine swirled in a balloon glass. As more flooded the bowl, and the Dark Apostle's chant grew in vehemence and volume, the rotation increased its pace. As it spun it rose into a whirling column. As the sacrifices bled white and twitched their last, spectral fire leapt in the font, coiling itself around the blood spire. Varakh'Lorr's dark chant rang around the chamber as the ghost-flames roared and the shadows

danced madly. One by one the braziers and sconces went out as though snuffed, leaving the Word Bearers standing upon the edge of darkness, the only illumination the column of fire and blood.

With a final exhortation, Varakh'Lorr's chant ended. The base of the column lifted free of the font, as fire and blood spun up into the air. They melded into one, fiery heat and intense cold pouring off them, before, with a final implosive bang, they stabilised as a glowing hole in reality.

From that terrible rent blew a sour and reeking wind, bearing with it the stench of the unknowable void. Fire danced around the hole's periphery, and though it hung vertically in the air like a tunnel entrance, blood dripped slowly into the rent as though into some terrible, depthless well.

Varakh'Lorr knelt, and all of his brethren followed suit, save only Gothro'Gol. The Dark Apostle felt the terrible regard of the thing that dwelt in those endless shadows, the entity that lurked beyond the veil like some fairy tale ogre in its cave. Yet this monster was all too real, and though he was mighty, Varakh'Lorr dreaded the thought of that thing crawling from its cave more than anything he had ever known. The Word Bearers trafficked with many daemons, but few were as terrifying as That Which Dwells in Darkness.

The silence stretched long, becoming ever more unbearable.

'Hear me, oh daemon,' said Varakh'Lorr at last, realising the entity waited to be addressed.

'Varakh'Lorrrrrrr…' The thing's voice spilled from the pit, a slithering death rattle of a sound, and the Dark Apostle grimaced as the words brushed gossamer and wet across his flesh.

'I bring you an offering, in the old way, as it has always been done,' intoned Varakh'Lorr. 'Blood of traitors. Blood of innocents. Blood taken unwillingly, and given beneath the Octed's eye.'

For a moment, nothing manifested but that sluggish, ice-cold breeze. Far away across the sanctum, in what had once been the choristrium-pit, a huge shadow stirred and gave a thrumming rumble of discontent. Varakh'Lorr ignored it, keeping his attention fixed solely upon the hole that spun in reality. To look away would be to show disrespect to That Which Dwells in Darkness, and to do that was to invoke its terrible curse. At last, the daemon's voice squirmed forth.

'It is goooood…'

'This pleases me,' replied Varakh'Lorr, fighting to keep the relief from his voice. One must never show even a shred of weakness before a daemon. Old comrades had lost their souls for less.

‘What do you wishhhhhh….?’

The question came loaded with unspoken menace, and Varakh’Lorr’s hearts beat faster as he thought he saw something glint like an eye amidst the darkness. It took all his strength to hold his gaze upon the warp tear as he answered.

‘I seek communion with the one who lies,’ he said, ignoring the black blood that had begun to trickle from one of his nostrils. ‘I seek to learn our enemies’ plans.’

For a long moment, silence reigned. Varakh’Lorr felt something horrible squirming across his skin, and the muscles beneath one eye twitched as he realised that scrabbling, insectile things were wriggling their way busily out of the joints of his armour. He fought not to retch as one of them clambered up his throat and tumbled out across his tongue, all scrabbling legs and blindly flailing antennae. Finally, just as he thought he could stand no more, the daemon answered.

‘Yesssssss….’

Relief filled Varakh’Lorr as the insect-presences vanished, and the terror within the rift receded into darkness. Seconds dripped slow as tar, and the bulky shape in the choristrium-pit stirred again. Then, a voice filtered from the darkness. Asexual, echoing, barely a whisper. Yet it carried to Varakh’Lorr’s heightened senses clear as daylight, and his confidence returned at the sound.

‘To whom do I speak?’ came the voice.

‘You address Varakh’Lorr, Dark Apostle of the Word Bearers, Master of the Scribed Blade, lord of Chaos upon this world.’

‘Well met, Lord Varakh’Lorr,’ said the distant whisperer.

‘And what of you?’ demanded the Dark Apostle. ‘Once before you spoke to me through this daemon. To beg favour from That Which Dwells in Darkness you must have the gods’ regard, yet you claim to stand amongst the forces of the Imperium on this world. How?’

The icy breath of the void crawled across him. Spectral firelight flickered, and the menace of the daemon hung like a pall over all. At last, an answer came.

‘I am your ally, lord,’ replied the voice. ‘Who I am is unimportant. It is what I can tell you that matters. The Imperial crusade has come to this world and it is mighty. But I was in their midst as they drew up their plans of conquest. I can tell you everything you need to defeat them, and, as I promised before, I bring you the weapons to make your victory complete. If you will honour our bargain?’

‘I shall aid you in your quest for power,’ replied Varakh’Lorr, ‘providing you

aid me in mine. But know that a daemonic compact is not broken lightly. Should you play me false, ally, I will burn your soul from your body and feed it to the furies.'

'I understand, my lord,' came the whispering voice. 'I am your loyal servant. You have nothing to fear from me.'

'No,' sneered Varakh'Lorr, licking his black tongue across his fangs. 'I don't. Now, tell me all that you know.'

'As you command,' came the whisper. 'The crusade that has landed its forces upon Donatos is led by High King Tolwyn Tan Draconis, lord of House Draconis and regent of the Knight World of Adrastapol…'

Slowly, amidst the darkness of the Word Bearers sanctum, the secrets of the Imperial force were laid bare. Varakh'Lorr committed every detail to memory, and together with his traitorous ally, he plotted the downfall of his foes.

During the early stages of the campaign on Donatos, it was necessary for the Knights of Adrastapol and their allies to push north from the bottleneck of the peninsula. A foe contained is a foe defeated, as the saying goes. King Tolwyn despatched several dozen lances, each accompanying reconnaissance groups of Astra Militarum soldiery. Their mission was simple – they were to pave the way for the big push against the valle electrum by scouting enemy positions, securing transit routes and ensuring a safe corridor of advance for the bulk of the Imperial forces. As locations ideal for rally points, retreat-rendezvous and secondary fortifications were cleared, they were auspex-marked with glowing runes. While this was far from glorious battle, it was necessary and rewarding work, the Knights advancing in full panoply, their steeds striding nobly through the desolation.

Our own, fair Adrastapol is a world of rugged landscapes, including a great many sweeping plains and craggy oceans of grassland. Donatos had never been thus, transformed from the first into an industrial sprawl by the hand of mankind. Now, further deformed by that of the traitor, it must have seemed truly hellish to those brave Knights who were used to

the austere beauty and vast, blue skies of their home world. Donatos was a mauled industrial tangle that never seemed to end. Its grey, industrio-urban sprawl was crisscrossed by cracked ferrocrete highways, each one wide enough for six Knights abreast. Around those arterial transit routes rose refinery complexes, generatorum shrines, manufactora, servitor-workshops, weaponshops, tank factories, munitions conveyors, worker habs and a thousand other sorts of metal-and-stone monstrosities that grew together like a literal urban jungle. In places the structures towered to such cyclopean heights that even the Knights must have felt small and insignificant in their shadows. Narrow road-grids, alleyways and pipelines interspersed the structures like capillaries. Many of the buildings boasted grim statuary, huge skull-and-cog icons of the Mechanicus, industrial incense burners and other grim, gothic flourishes. Eye-witness accounts tell us that much of that decoration had been battle-damaged or defaced by the rebels, festooned with designs and banners proclaiming the might of the Ruinous Powers. Statues of the Omnissiah lay shattered in the roadways where they had been toppled. Corpses dangled from towering buildings like macabre fruit, the rotting remains of those who had refused to join their fellows' heresy.

It is written that young Danial Tan Draconis took part in that probing advance, marching as part of a lance led by the herald Markos Dar Draconis and accompanied by his squirehood friend, Luk Tan Chimaeros. Escorted by the Cadian soldiery of one Major Lenyrd Kovash, their route took them along the eastern coastline of Donatos Primus, with no allies for many miles except the vague promise of Imperial Navy air cover…

– Extracted from the writings of Sendraghorst,
Sage Strategic of Adrastapol,
vol XVII *'The Donatos Uprising'*

Luk Tan Chimaeros swung his ion shield, realigning it with haptic twitches of his left hand. The translucent energy field flared as las-rounds struck it, flickering and splashing harmlessly in mid-air.

'Tan Chimaeros, stop wasting your time. Those cultists are firing lasguns, lad, not las*cannons*.'

The son of Viscount Gerraint scowled as Markos Dar Draconis barked orders at him over the vox.

‘I know that now, Sire Markos, but I wasn’t sure of their armaments. I was following your direct command to exercise caution in–’

‘I don’t need you to repeat my own words back to me, boy,’ interrupted Markos gruffly. ‘I said exercise caution in enemy territory, not cower behind your shield every time someone shines a lumen your way. If I’m to be saddled with you and Danial as my lancemates for this advance, I’ll not have you jumping at every shadow and making me look a fool.’

Luk fought down the angry urge to defend himself. He’d known Markos Dar Draconis a long while. In that time, he had learned that talking back to the herald only made things worse. Markos was absolutely positive that he knew better than ‘wet behind the ears squirelings’ on every matter from war to courtly protocol, wine and wenches. On that last point, at least, Luk flattered himself that he might have a few things to teach the scarred old war dog. His smirk faltered as his Knight bucked around him. Impact alarms sang out, and several green lights flicked to amber on his control-board.

‘By the fire!’ exclaimed Markos in exasperation, ‘he’s hiding like a scullsmaid from an arachnid one minute, and standing around letting them shoot him the next.’

Angry, Luk checked his auspex. Ahead loomed contested hab-blocks, to his flanks little but an empty expanse of ferrocrete. It was not hard to spot his assailant, a crudely modified groundcar that had gotten around his shield and was throwing high calibre fire his way. With a snarl echoed by the ghosts of his throne, the young Knight turned his steed. *Sword of Heroes* responded smoothly to his commands, revolving at its waist gimbal and taking a single, ground-shaking step. The Errant’s heavy stubber howled as Luk let fly, sawing the improvised gun wagon in half with a stabbing line of shots. The vehicle’s engine exploded, and Luk watched in satisfaction through his sensoria as it burned.

‘There. Dead.’ Luk hated how petulant he sounded even as he said it, but Markos Dar Draconis had always had a way of getting under his skin.

‘Valiant,’ snorted Markos in response, and Luk snarled as he mowed down the few cultists to escape from the groundcar’s wreck.

Determined not to make another mistake, Luk expanded his auspex range with a thought. The runes swam before his eyes, and he took several moments to fully absorb the information scrolling across his retinas. His and Markos’ Knights were standing on a huge industrial lot, a ferrocrete plain fifty miles across that had once served as a storage space for countless Chimera chassis. The tanks were gone now, pressed into service by traitors or loyalists, and they’d left

nothing but grey desolation and puddles of oil in their wake. In the Knights' twinned shadow idled a bulky Sacristan Crawler, an ornately decorated vehicle that sat on eight armoured balloon tyres and was almost the size of a super-heavy battle tank. The Crawler's armature rig was extended, its repair booms swarming with Sacristans and servitors as they effected minor repairs to Markos' Knight.

'Danial,' voxed Markos. 'Have you finished with those traitor tanks yet, lad?'

Danial's Knight Errant was a little way ahead, guarding the gap between the towering hab-blocks that overlooked the lot.

'Yes, Sire Markos,' he replied. 'All destroyed.'

'Good work,' grunted Markos, and Luk heard him switching channels. 'Major Kovash, did you hear that? No more heretics to join the ball.'

'I did, Sire Markos,' the Cadian officer's voice crackled back over their joint frequency. 'Please pass on our thanks to Sire Danial. Almost clear, here.'

Luk was impressed. Kovash's Cadians had gone into the hab-blocks twenty minutes earlier, three hundred against a suspected force of over one thousand traitors.

'Do you require any artillery support, Major Kovash?' voxed Luk, eager to assist with the battle if he could.

'Careful, Tan Chimaeros,' chuckled Markos. 'You'll offend the man.'

Luk's question was answered as the top three floors of the western block lit up with a string of thunderous explosions. Windows blew out in staccato sequence. Glass fell like twinkling hail, burning corpses tumbling with it. A Cadian voice sounded over the channel against a background of crackling flames.

'Habs clear. Pulling out.' He might have been reporting that his rations were satisfactory, he sounded so calm. Already the Guardsmen's Taurox were rolling into position, the pugnacious vehicles taking position near the block entrances where the retreating Cadians could quickly re-embark.

'Sniper teams Voetchek, Kastance, Drael,' came Kovash's voice, 'secure rooftop positions. Vox-intel and watch the approaches – you know the drill, gentlemen.'

Voices replied, Cadian soldiers confirming their orders.

'Signifier confirmed and sanctified,' buzzed a binharic voice on the Crawler's channel. 'Location secure, position exloaded.' A new rune lit up green on Luk's auspex, showing this location as secure and in loyalist hands. Overhead, a flock of cyber-cherubim circled briefly and blared auto-hymnals, before returning to their primary duties.

'Form up on me,' came Markos' voice in Luk's ear. 'We're moving out along

the forty-seventh arterial again, as far as point seven-seven-nine-one. Luk, I want you five strides back, covering the left. Danial, four strides to my fore, covering the right. Match pace, let the Cadians dictate. And no wandering off.'

'He's a mean old dog,' said Luk to Danial on a private channel.

'He's my father's herald,' came the serious reply, but Luk knew his friend well enough to hear the amusement hidden behind the propriety. 'Be careful throwing uncouthness around about him, even on private channels. He's duelled for less.'

'Hah,' grunted Luk, feeding power to his Knight's motive actuators and striding into formation. 'He'd be welcome to try me.'

'He'd ruin you,' chuckled Danial. 'Now be quiet and watch your auspex. We're in a warzone.'

Ahead of Luk, Sire Markos' looming Knight Warden strode into position. The Knight looked every bit as formidable as the man who piloted it, and beneath his bravado Luk felt privately glad that Markos was his ally, not his enemy. That still didn't mean he had to like the gruff old crank though.

'Come on, you giggling little consorts-in-waiting,' ordered the herald. 'Tighten up and be mindful of your thrones. The Cadians are moving out, and I won't have either of you bringing shame on our houses by not keeping up.'

'Yes, Sire Markos,' came Danial's dutiful response. Luk rolled his eyes and strode out behind his comrades as they guided their Knights between the habs. This was going to be a long day.

The minutes ticked by on Luk's chrono, slowly becoming hours as their lance pressed on along the coastal highway between towering, ravaged structures. His throne murmured, its ghosts still indistinct to him since his Becoming. The Cadians rumbled along in their Tauroxes around the Knights' pounding feet, weapons unshrouded and ready for battle, but the enemy did not present themselves.

Still, each new sight of desecration and cruelty made the young Knight hate the rebels more.

'How could anyone do this?' Luk asked, more to himself than his comrades.

'I don't know,' replied Danial, voice unsettled. 'It's horrible.'

'Fear,' growled Sire Markos. 'Despair. Weakness of one sort or another. Don't try to understand heretics, lads. Just kill them.'

'Sendraghorst writes that understanding your foe is the first step to defeating him,' replied Danial. 'I wish I could comprehend what sorrows or lies could lead good Imperial citizens to fall into such heresy.'

‘Books,’ spat Markos, suddenly angry, ‘are no substitute for cold steel and courage. You don’t need to comprehend their sorrows, boy. You need to scour them from the face of the galaxy like the heretic scum they are. We are Knights of House Draconis, not scriptorium scribblers.’

‘I only meant…’ Danial began, his tone defensive, but Markos cut him off.

‘I know what you meant, boy. The Sage Strategic isn’t without his merits but this is battle, not the Draconspire library! We’re not theorising about war at this moment, Danial, we’re in one, and the pair of you are as green as a highland meadow. So stop philosophising, and start watching your damned auspex before the heretics catch us with our thrones unplugged.’

Luk winced at the exchange, but swallowed the surge of protective anger he felt at his friend’s dressing down. Interceding now wouldn’t help. Besides, they were approaching a wide, arched bridge that leapt out over a petrochemical river. Even from some distance back, Luk could see that it was held against them.

‘Up ahead,’ said Luk, breaking the uncomfortable silence.

‘I see them, the wretches,’ replied Markos.

Halfway across the broad bridge, beneath a crumbling marble archway, the heretics had constructed a barricade. Wrecked civilian vehicles, battle-damaged defence force tanks, heavy ferrocrete blocks and whatever detritus the heretics could scrape together had been piled high and thick. Each section was reinforced with stolen metal rebar, while the barricade’s summit was a tangled mess of razor-wire and rotting heads on spikes.

Luk increased his auspex magnification, layering thermic scrying filters over his standard view.

‘They’re back there in numbers,’ he said. ‘Hundreds of them.’

Danial’s Knight had stopped at the head of the bridge to wait for its companions, but the kingsward made no reply. Instead, it was Major Kovash, the Cadians’ leader, who spoke over the vox.

‘Enemy concentration four hundred yards ahead, Lance *Honourblaze.* Advise please.’

The Cadian armoured vehicles fanned out to either side of the road as Luk and Markos halted beside *Oath of Flame*. There was a moment’s pause, during which smoke slowly drifted overhead from some distant fire, and crimson lightning split the clouds above. Luk could see movement at the barricades, like the frantic scurry of a rockrat nest.

‘Right then, lads,’ came Markos’ voice on the lance vox channel. ‘We charge. Shields fore, swift advance, steady suppressing fire. Whatever they’ve got back

there, we can soak it up. The Cadians can't. We take the heretic fire, breach their barricades, then the Cadians roll up and flush out the survivors.'

'Lance *Honourblaze*,' came Kovash's voice again. 'I repeat, advise please.'

This time, Sire Markos replied and outlined his strategy. As he finished, Danial spoke up, his first words in several minutes.

'Sire Markos, we are miles from any supporting elements, and the signal here is poor,' said Danial. 'The machine-spirits are unsettled by the proximity of the electrofane on the western bank. It's hard to see precisely what awaits us on the bridge, sire herald. Or anywhere within a mile of here.'

'If they had anything big enough to worry us over there, Danial, we'd be able to see it. Wars aren't won with caution.'

'Confirming our strategy,' came Kovash's voice. 'I'll attach three of my Tauroxes to your Crawler to provide the Sacristans with additional protection.'

In his excitement, Luk was only half listening. A proper charge. Glory to be seized in headlong assault. The thought made his heart thump with excitement. He started as he realised that some of that eagerness was coming through the neural link to his throne mechanicum. His ancestors relished combat. He could hear their whispers, for the first time, beginning to resolve into actual words.

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yourweaponupwatchtheflanksalwayspositionyourshieldtobestdeflectdonotbringdi

'Are you hearing this?' he voxed Danial privately, struggling to focus on the overlapping susurrus of words. The response took a moment in coming.

'The voices from the throne? Yes, mine have been whispering for a while. It's… distracting.'

'It feels like I'm going mad,' said Luk, a panicky edge to his voice.

'Don't concentrate on it,' replied Danial. 'Watch your instruments. Check your sensoria. Recite the Code Chivalric in your head, and think about what's real. I read that the less you consciously pay attention to the ghosts, the easier you'll find it to control and understand them.'

'Of course,' said Luk, taking a breath and running pre-combat checks on his cockpit systems. 'Don't concentrate on it. Concentrate on what's real.'

'And keep your wits about you, Luk,' added Danial ominously. 'I've been watching the strategic map, and the last orbital auspex sweeps suggested the enemy had some heavy armour out here.'

'You can see that from that mess of runes?' asked Luk.

'Yes,' said Danial, surprised. 'Can't you?'

'Gentlemen…' Sire Markos interrupted. 'May the draconsfire be in you. Ready

your weapons, keep your bloody shields up and make your ancestors proud. On my mark, we charge.'

Markos led the attack, with Luk striding at his left shoulder and Danial at his right. Luk fed power to his steed's motive actuators, feeling the urgent rush of excitement as *Sword of Heroes'* machine-spirit relished the fight to come. The bridge shook at their footfalls, chunks of masonry crumbling away from the marble arch above the enemy barricade. He swayed with his steed, thrilling at its acceleration and feeling the Knight Errant lean left and right with each giant stride it took. His steed's generator was growling, echoing his anticipation with its own. Behind, he was dimly aware of the Cadian Tauroxes advancing in a dispersed formation, but they meant little to him now. The pounding of his Knight's furnace heart, the wind whipping across its carapace, and the eager sting of its weapons ready to discharge had become his world. Ahead, the traitor barricades grew closer with every step.

Suddenly, as the Knights closed to within one hundred yards, the top of the barricades lit up like the Unity Day fireworks.

'Contact fore,' barked Markos, his steed charging headlong into the firestorm with the same bullish gait as its pilot. 'Ware your shields. Fire at will.'

Las-weapons flashed and strobed. Bursts of plasma spat from the glowing muzzles of man-portable firearms. Rockets rushed through the air on grey-black contrails as stolen militia weapons discharged. Luk recoiled instinctively at the sudden hail of fire, his Knight faltering in response. Explosions blossomed across his ion shield, a missile bursting harmlessly mere feet in front of the *Sword'*s helm.

'Throne!' he cried, as his ion shield absorbed the enemy shots. Danial had also hesitated as the first barrage struck them. Markos had not. The herald's Knight Warden was still pounding down the bridge at full tilt as he returned fire against the heretic positions. Gatling rounds chewed along the lip of the barricade, kicking great puffs of stone-dust, shrapnel and sparks into the air. Heretics were hurled back like rag dolls, or burst like blood-blisters with the impact-shock of the huge calibre bullets. Markos' Icarus cannons added their fury to the bombardment. Explosions bloomed as the rain of shots ripped through rubble and metal, and as the smoke cleared a yawning hole was revealed in the enemy barricade.

Luk was accelerating again now, determined not to be left in Markos' wake. Danial was doing the same, and Luk grinned as the two friends opened fire

almost as one. Heaped wreckage glowed white hot before exploding in clouds of shrapnel. Fallen masonry and defiled statues cracked and detonated. Dozens of heretics vanished as the two thermal cannon blasts tore through the enemy fortifications.

Traitor fire flashed back, taking its toll. A missile ricocheted off Danial's ion shield, skipping off the road surface to strike a Taurox head on. The Cadian vehicle lifted up on a roaring fireball, crashing down on its roof. Luk cried out in sympathetic pain as plasma seared through his shield and melted his steed's right knee-plate. A moment later, the shooter was obliterated as *Honourblaze'*s foot crashed down on him like a pile driver. The herald deftly leaned his Knight forward, its guns still hammering even as he swept his thunderstrike gauntlet along the top of the barricade and pulped a mass of enemies into a hideous blizzard of flesh.

Luk's eyes widened as he spotted a trio of rag-clad figures scrambling over the barricade and sprinting straight for Danial's Knight. All three figures clutched bulky objects to their chests. His auspex confirmed it a split-second later, flashing schematics onto his retinas and shunting alert-data directly into his cortex. Demolition charges. Thrown from close range, they could blow the leg from Danial's Knight, or worse.

Stubber. Lead your targets. Tight spread.

The words came unbidden to Luk's mind, flowing from his throne. His body responded without conscious thought, a twitch of haptic gauntlets. Shots sawed out from his heavy stubber, ripping through the charging cultists in a welter of blood. All three tumbled to the floor, no more than ten feet shy of *Oath of Flame*. Danial, pouring steady fire into the missile teams beyond the barricades, would never have had time to turn and engage. He had seen his peril though, and voxed a breathless thanks a moment later.

'Fine shooting, Tan Chimaeros,' said Sire Markos. 'We'll make a Knight of you yet.'

'I'm already a Knight,' muttered Luk. Still, he couldn't help but marvel at Markos' skill. *Honourblaze* strode the line of the barricade, trampling those few lucky enough to avoid its fire. Towards the western bank, several fuzzy auspex runes resolved into a squadron of traitor Leman Russes. Vanquisher pattern, Luk's databanks told him. Armour killers, and precisely the sort of threat Danial had been concerned about.

*Honourblaze'*s gatling cannon reduced two of the tanks to rolling fireballs. The third let fly, bucking on its tracks as its preposterously long main gun spat a shell

at Markos' Knight. Deftly, the Herald caught the shot on his ion shield and rode out the explosion as it billowed around him. In four swift strides he smashed through the marble archway and brought it thundering down on the heretics below. *Honourblaze* crushed the turret of a Vanquisher in the body of the tank with its gauntlet. Fire squirted out of the vehicle's sundered hull, before it exploded.

It wasn't that Danial had been wrong, realised Luk. And it wasn't that Markos had failed to recognise the potential peril, much as he might have seemed dismissive. It was just that Sire Markos Dar Draconis was so good at what he did, so at one with his Knight, that he was supremely confident in his ability.

Straightening up from the ruined carcass of the traitor tank, *Honourblaze* turned to face its compatriots, and the Cadians who even now were securing the barricades and bayoneting the last living heretics. The herald ran his Knight's auto-pennants up to full mast, and raised his gauntlet high.

'Honour and glory!' he bellowed, and the two younger Knights echoed him.

'Honour and glory!'

'The bridge is ours, and you both made it through alive,' said Markos, gruff but satisfied. 'Well done. Have the Sacristans get that battle-damage patched, then we press on. There's miles yet to go before nightfall, and precious little honour for those who fall behind…'

Days passed in fire and blood as the Imperial forces advanced from their southern beachhead. The Knights of all five Adrastapolian Houses acquitted themselves with honour, while the soldiers of the Astra Militarum and Imperial Navy proved their worth time and again. There is a lesson in this: never underestimate the aid given by the lesser arms of the Imperial war machine, for the Emperor made us all with strengths that we might turn to his cause.

One-by-one, the magna destros manufactii, the imperatos magnificat, the diocese promethean and the totalum hespraxii were all wrested from traitor hands. As High King Tolwyn's crusade pushed north, it continued to secure lines of supply and designate rune-marked fall-back positions. Though swift, the advance was thorough, methodical and expertly orchestrated. Several times the foe massed in numbers great enough to necessitate true and glorious battle. On each occasion the High King led his warriors into the fray in person, his ancient Paladin Fyreheart plying its relic laser-blade with humbling skill, while his inspiring words rang through the vox. Though he was many miles away, marching amongst the reconnaissance groups, it is said that Danial Tan Draconis listened in

remotely to his father's heroics, and did burn with fierce pride at their magnificence.

Though the Chaos worshippers sent hordes of cultists, mutants and traitor militia into the fray, they could do little to slow the juggernaut of Imperial retribution. With gunfire and blades they were purged from their improvised strongpoints, the survivors fleeing north in terror of the iron gods marching at their heels. Imperial forces saw no sign of the traitor Space Marines who had supposedly marshalled the uprising on Donatos, and some – those who had not seen the traitors' craft in the void above, nor faced them in battle – began to whisper that perhaps they were just bogeymen, figures of phantasm invented to justify the horrors wrought on this world. Whatever the truth, the Knights and their allies pushed on with impressive speed.

Less than a month sidereal after the attack upon Pentakhost, they came within striking range of the valle electrum. There the Imperial invaders massed their forces amidst the city-sized ruin of a macrofactorum complex, and prepared for the attack that would end this war.

– Extracted from the writings of Sendraghorst,
Sage Strategic of Adrastapol,
vol XVII '*The Donatos Uprising*'

Danial stood atop a promontory of rocks and brass piping, amongst the great and the good, and tried to look like he belonged there. His tawny-blond hair was no longer shaved close to his skull in the squire's style, but it had not yet grown out enough to banish the ghost of his former incarnation. His physique was slight compared to some of the men around him, despite his half-armoured Knight's bodyglove, and he was shorter than many of them as well. At least, reflected Danial, he had the beginnings of a decent beard. Otherwise he would have felt even more a child amongst this company than he already did. Around Danial were gathered the senior officers of the invasion force – the lords and ladies of Adrastapol, each accompanied by the handful of Knights that made up their Exalted Courts. The commanders of the Imperial Guard were also present, their garb and ways strange to the kingsward as they stared through magnoculars, consulted the readings of their seers and muttered earnestly with their closest lieutenants. The worthy leaders of Donatos were there too, though they were much subdued – watching others reclaim that which they could not protect had

left some of the planet's leaders shame-faced and tired. Others, particularly the corpulent bishop, had become ever more venomous.

At the head of the war council, perched highest atop the rocks with his hair and cloak billowing in the wind, was Danial's father. Today, King Tolwyn had chosen to appear as the gallant regent, the inspiring hero who would bring his followers victory. His garb was regal, and a wreath of olidarne leaves – brought all the way from Adrastapol in stasis for such an occasion – sat upon his brow. His draconblade, *Drakesclaw,* was belted at his hip. The High King's servo-skulls hovered above him as he stared north towards the stronghold of the enemy.

Danial had always been in awe of his father, of the man's grandiose presence and the ease with which kingship came to him. Be it statecraft or war, High King Tolwyn was always strong, always sure and always beloved. Danial had no idea how he would ever live up to his father's example. One day though, he would have to. House Draconis might be progressive enough to accept women as Knights, but the laws of succession were clear. Only a male heir could take the throne, and Danial was his father's only son.

The kingsward noticed Jennika crooking an eyebrow at him. Taller than Danial by an inch or so, and older by three years, his sister looked every bit the seasoned Knight from her stern features and piercing eyes to her regal bearing. With her short-cropped hair and dracon tattoos, the Lady Tan Draconis had her mother's sharp-edged beauty. So others assured Danial, though he had been too young to remember when the High Queen passed.

'I know that look, Da,' murmured Jennika. 'Less thinking, more listening.'

Danial focused on the war council. Tolwyn turned to face his assembled war leaders, smiling confidently. Behind him, across a blasted plain of cracked bedrock and flattened ruins, the hab-mountains towered high over the line of defence bastions about their feet.

'There stands the stronghold of our enemy,' began Tolwyn. 'The entrance to the valle electrum. The power source that is keeping our foe's greatest weapons in operation. Already we have driven them from the south, pushed them back to the very gates of their final fastness. When we conquer this place – and we shall – the Adamant Citadels cease to function and the traitors' last hope is undone.'

The assembly gave a rousing cheer, applauding wildly. Some, Danial noticed, seemed less enthusiastic; while the Archduke Tan Wyvorn and Grandmarshal Tan Minotos reacted with bombastic cheer, the Marchioness Tan Pegasson and her Exalted Knights responded with polite reserve. High Sacristan Polluxis gave

little reaction, eye-lenses shining inscrutably from beneath his cowl. Danial supposed that was just the way of those who communed with the Omnissiah. Luk, brawny and raven haired, stood at his father's side. He was cheering and clapping along with the rest, and shot Danial a roguish wink that the kingsward couldn't help but smile at.

'One last obstacle remains to us, my friends,' said Tolwyn. 'We must advance across this plain and carry the mountain pass into the valle electrum. This will be no easy task, but we have a plan and we shall see it through. Gerraint, if you would?'

The Viscount Tan Chimaeros inclined his head with a hiss from his bionic brace. He squeezed his consort's hand, and clambered up a runged pipe to stand at Tolwyn's side. Danial watched Alicia's face as her lord stood tall alongside the High King. She really was beautiful, thought Danial wistfully. Dark and mysterious, somehow, with flecks of icy blue in her pale green eyes. One look at her expression and you could see the intensity of emotion she felt for the man she stared up at. It was almost hypnotic, and the kingsward tried to shake off the daydream of that man being him.

'We begin our advance at dawn tomorrow,' announced Gerraint. 'The hab mountains to the north are held against us, in force if our auguries are to be believed, as are the defensive structures you can see stretched across the pass. No doubt, the enemy also has forces that they will put into the field to try to stop us. As such, our advance must capitalise upon the full might that we wield together. It must be as swift and deadly as the Emperor's own judgement.'

More applause at this. Danial joined in, impatient to hear the actual meat of the plan. He had never understood those who could be satisfied with platitudes and pomp over actual strategic substance, but he supposed he saw their uses.

'We will commence with a full bombardment by the artillery companies of the Tanhollis Highlanders and Mubraxis Dustdogs. They, along with waves of airstrikes from the Imperial Navy, are going to soften up the enemy's batteries and spread fear and confusion amongst their ranks. With the foe suppressed, our Knightly lances will advance while the Cadian regiments provide supporting reserves.'

Danial saw no hint of displeasure on the face of Colonel Brost at this inglorious assignment. There was only duty and determination on the man's hawk-like features.

'The Marchioness Tan Pegasson and the Archduke Tan Wyvorn will lead their Knights upon the flanks, and commence ranged bombardment of the hab

mountains. Scans suggest those slopes are crawling with weapons emplacements and fortified battlements, so the role of eliminating these dangers will be crucial.'

Unlike the Cadian, Danial noticed that Tan Wyvorn's face darkened at his secondary role in the battle. There was little glory in bombarding castles from afar. The Lady Tan Pegasson's face stayed neutral, and the kingsward wondered what went on behind that icy veneer. He suddenly realised that Markos was glaring at him, and hurriedly returned his attention to Gerraint's speech.

'The main thrust of the attack,' said the viscount with relish, 'will be performed by Houses Minotos, Chimaeros and – of course – Draconis. The High King and his House will march at the lance's tip, while the Knights of Chimaeros march at their left shoulder and Minotos at their right. Our task will be to punch through the defences in the mountain pass, eliminate any enemy forces that may sally out to meet us and secure a route of ingress to this crucial traitor fortress.'

'Hah!' shouted Gustev Tan Minotos, 'we'll show 'em the Emperor's mercy eh, lads? And it ain't that blessed merciful!' The grandmarshal's Exalted Court rattled their heavy minotane hammers, slapped one another on the back, and made a show of twirling their ostentatious moustaches as they shouted oaths to slaughter the traitors in the Emperor's name. Danial saw some amongst the war council shoot wry glances at one another, but he'd seen House Minotos fight. Behind the bluster and preposterous showmanship lay a lethal military machine, and he didn't believe that the grandmarshal was as pompous a fool as he appeared.

'Thank you, Gustev,' smiled the High King, raising his hands for calm. 'You have all heard the plan. You all know your roles. Data-slates will be disseminated with specifics and chrono-marks. Read them. Understand them. If you have questions, be damn sure to ask them. We attack at dawn, ladies and gentlemen. Until then.'

As the war council broke apart and flowed back into the armed encampments below, the High King beckoned to Danial and Jennika.

'Come,' he said, beaming at them, 'we'll clamber back down together and share a bite to eat, eh? Last meal before the battle and all that?' Danial flushed with pleasure at his father's words. It was the right of the High King to feast with whomsoever he chose before a great battle like this. That he chose the quiet company of his children over the boisterous cheer of his Knights was a mark of great respect.

'We'd like that, father,' smiled Jennika. 'Very much.'

‘Excellent,’ Tolwyn clapped his hands. ‘My habitent then.’

The three of them clambered down the rocks and piping together, making their way back into the whirlwind bustle of a vast encampment on the eve of war. The ruins of the macrofactorum spread for many miles, bombed out sheds and fire-gutted workhouses looming like the carcasses of behemoths between cratered roadways and ruptured fuel bowsers. The Imperial forces had reclaimed every square foot of the place for their own purposes, from the Cadian and Mubraxis sentries who patrolled its outer edges to the ranks of Knights that loomed, silent and inert, at its heart. As the three Draconis nobles walked through the bustle and clamour of the camp, they saw Sacristan work teams clambering across the Knights’ hulls, many using the pneumo-rigs on their Crawlers to access upper carapace armour, or engine and weapon systems. Welders sparked. Holy incense billowed, and the smell of fresh paint misted the air as the Knights’ battle-scarred panoply was retouched to its full magnificence. They saw Knights in every panoply, from the ice blue and silver of House Pegasson and the orange and brass of Minotos to the sharp, acid green of House Wyvorn.

They stopped for a while to watch Magos Xedediah Dar Mechanicus and his Sacristans perform the Rites of Sanctity over the looming grey-and-green Knights of House Chimaeros. As the throne-checks and repair work were completed on each Knight, the Sacristans sent servo-skulls wobbling aloft with heavy tanks of unguent. The oily liquid was sprayed liberally across the armoured forms of the Knights, lending them a rainbow sheen that swiftly faded as Xedediah and his acolytes chanted in jagged binharic blurts.

‘Why do they do that to their Knights?’ asked Jennika. ‘The steeds of Draconis don’t need placating so.’

‘Danial?’ asked Tolwyn, knowing his son would have the answer.

‘It is a blessing peculiar to House Chimaeros, one that Wyvorn have adopted from them in recent years,’ explained Danial, hoping as always that he didn’t sound too pompous while dispensing the fruits of his long hours in the librarium. ‘House Chimaeros’ motto is *Fortis vo Modifactum*.’

‘Strength through adaptation. I know that, little brother. I like our motto better.’

‘But did you know the ritual is tied to their motto? This is the Baptism of Wisdom, during which the Sacristans beseech the Knights’ machine-spirits to take from their foes that which they can use, and turn it against them. I’ve never seen it performed before – Pollandrus of the Quill writes about them using incense rather than unguent, but I suppose that’s the problem with written accounts compared to the real thing.’

‘Only you could come out with something like that, Da,’ laughed Jennika.

‘Come on,’ Tolwyn urged the two of them, wrinkling his nose. ‘It might be a baptism of wisdom, but it smells like a baptism of raw eggs and grox dung.’

The three of them shared a scandalised laugh, and walked on through the evening gloom. They passed Astra Militarum troopers knelt in prayer, their regimental priests walking amongst them to give benediction. Servitor-loaders lumbered by, grotesques of flesh and metal burdened with huge crates of ammunition or tanks of promethium fuel. Armoured transports rumbled and roared. Smoke billowed and servo-forges flared. Warriors of the Knightly Houses practised their blade-work by the light of chem-stove fires, the real life swordsmanship a crucial aid to piloting their Knights in close quarters combat. Some wore hobbleframes, stylised harnesses that restricted the limbs and imitated the range of movement that most Knights could offer in battle.

Eventually, Tolwyn and his children reached the High King’s capacious habitent, a veritable pavilion of coloured plastek and ironwork blazoned with the colours of House Draconis. They passed the Knights who stood guard outside, Danial smiling at the towering Sire Daeved and receiving a slight, friendly nod in return. The other guard, Sire Garath, ignored Danial entirely in favour of turning a barely appropriate leer upon Lady Jennika. She, in her turn, ignored the lecherous old war dog, breezing into the habitent behind her father.

Inside, the structure was a mix of Imperial technology and old Adrastapolian grandeur. Beautiful furniture carved lovingly from olidarne-wood sat alongside a portable hololith and a massive, rune-dotted vox array. A rack of draconblades – the ritual swords of House Draconis – dominated part of one wall, beside a mechanical water purifier that was as ugly and functional as the swords were ornate. Chem-lamps hung from hooks on the habitent’s ceiling frame, casting a cold phosphor light that was softened by ornate dragon lanterns and candelabras. Tolwyn’s sleeping quarters were veiled behind heavy gas-curtains in one corner, while a hand-scribed map was spread across a wooden table that dominated the middle of the habitent. Hololithic figures and flags flickered across its surface, a lithocaster updating the campaign map constantly with projected troop strengths, military movements and up-to-the-hour orbital auspex data. Danial made straight for this map, while Jennika and her father went and sat in two of several ornate chairs near the habitent’s chem-hearth. The night had gotten cold, as they were wont to do on Donatos.

‘What does the map tell you, son?’ asked Tolwyn as he clapped his hands loudly. Liveried servants hurried in from the habitent’s service annex, carrying

carafes of Iyrnmount vintage, and platters of food brought all the way from home.

'It tells me that we're winning, father,' said Danial, smiling as he sat with his kin. 'It's good to see that our scouts have linked up with another of the Donatosian regiments.'

'Yes,' mused the king as he picked at the food in front of him. 'Poor, half-starved creatures. Makes you feel guilty for all this, eh?'

Danial paused with a glass of wine in hand, looking afresh at the luxuries his station afforded him. Jennika shook her head.

'No. It doesn't. They have endured hardships I can't readily imagine, but we have fought hard for this world, father. And tomorrow we fight for it again, harder than ever. I'll not reject that which gives me strength to win that fight.'

'Hah, well said, my daughter. Ever the pragmatist.' Tolwyn smiled at his two children, a contemplative expression that Danial found a little disconcerting.

'Both of you, now… Knights. Grown. Become. Fighting in full panoply from thrones of your own. Makes this old man proud, as it would have done your mother.'

'You make us proud, father,' said Danial immediately, feeling oddly defensive. 'It's from you we get our strength.'

'You do yourself and your sister a disservice, Danial,' replied Tolwyn. 'You are each of you strong and brave in your own ways. The draconsfire burns in you both. I see it brighter every day. Soon it'll eclipse mine, I think.'

Danial frowned, uncomfortable at his father's maudlin tone. He was glad when Jennika scoffed, breaking the mild tension.

'You, my heroic father, are the draconsfire incarnate. Emperor knows we'd have to set ourselves alight and go jump in a fuel dump to eclipse you.'

Tolwyn gave a horrified laugh.

'I pray you, daughter, don't try anything so drastic! Let us away from the gloomy and the macabre, eh? I have gifts for you, on the eve of this momentous battle.'

Tolwyn gestured to one of his servo-skulls, the chimaer, and the brass-chased drone hummed away. It returned, projecting a flickering grav field beneath it. In the shimmering white light hung two small objects, which the servo-skull deposited into Tolwyn's waiting hands. The High King stood, suddenly solemn, and bade his children do the same.

Tolwyn turned first to Jennika and reverently slid a finely worked gold claw-ring onto her right index finger.

‘This belonged to your mother. It is a digi-laser. Beautiful, but also deadly… just as she was. Much as you now are.’ Tolwyn smiled at Jennika, lost for a moment in contemplation.

‘Thank you, father.’ She smiled fiercely. Tolwyn nodded and turned to Danial.

‘And for you, my lad, who will one day wear the mantle of king,’ Tolwyn placed a fine gold chain around Danial’s neck, suspended from it a small, pentagonal medallion graven with the image of the dracon.

‘This belonged to your grandfather. He wore it when he fought in the Praxian Crusade. Said it always brought him luck.’

Danial’s heart swelled at being entrusted with such a precious relic of his house.

‘Thank you, father. I will be worthy of it, I swear.’

‘I don’t doubt you shall,’ said Tolwyn, solemnly. ‘But remember, both of you, that tomorrow will be a battle unlike anything either of you has faced. Yes, even you, Jennika. This will be a battle for the ages, a spectacle of unbridled martial fury. I want you both to come through it alive, is that understood? Both of you.’

Danial didn’t miss the subtle look that passed between his father and his sister at that moment, and felt the sting of shame at it. He would be worthy of the gift he had been given, he vowed. He would live up to his house and his name, and others would not have to spend their energies protecting him from harm.

‘Well,’ said Tolwyn brusquely, suddenly brightening, ‘that’s that. Now, a few glasses of wine before we fight tomorrow, and a few war stories I think. Tell me, both of you, I want to hear your exploits thus far. What glories have you earned?’

The nobles of House Draconis might have been less convivial had they known about the shadowed figure kneeling in a bloody octagram in a distant corner of the macrofactorum. Around it lay the bodies of eight dead guards. In the air before it hung a dark and terrible tear in reality, and from it echoed the whispering voice of something monstrous…

The next morning dawned hard and angry. The sky churned with petrochemical clouds and a hissing rain fell across the encampment as Danial climbed through the pilot’s hatch of *Oath of Flame* and down into his throne mechanicum. One by one the neural jacks mated, and he winced as data-ghosts streamed through his mind. *Welcome, young Knight,* they whispered. *Welcome, Danial Tan Draconis*. Runic displays scrolled across his retinas as he buckled his restraint harness and slid on the haptic gauntlets. The *Oath* rumbled and shivered as its power plant awoke, and the Knight’s machine-spirit growled its mechanical

greeting to its master. Danial smiled unconsciously, the worn leather and cold metal of his cockpit truly welcoming for the first time. His hands flickered across the runic panels surrounding him, engaging auspex feeds, regulating power streams, activating vox pickups. As he worked he muttered prayers of readiness and awakening, feeling his heart thump at the proximity of real, glorious war.

'Good morning, ladies,' barked Sire Markos over the vox.

'Just a couple of us out here, Markos,' replied Jennika without missing a beat, 'only Suset and I. Not forgetting your male comrades in your dotage, are you?'

'Just acknowledging the weaker sex like a good gentleman should, Lady Jennika,' replied Markos, and Danial couldn't help but grin as he pictured his sister's face.

'You're lucky I *am* a lady, Sire Markos, or I'd tell you precisely where you could insert your outdated notions of male supremacy,' she shot back. 'As it is, that's going to cost you on the duelling field later.'

'It'll be my honour to knock you on your arse, my lady,' said Sire Markos, his grin audible. 'Now, enough uncouthness. Knights of House Draconis, we are marching to war.'

A chorus of cheers and shouts rang over the vox, and Danial's voice was amongst them.

'This is going to be a fight they weave tapestries of, and tell about in tale and song for centuries to come,' said Sire Markos, now serious. 'We're going straight up the middle into death or glory, and making sure those songs are worth the listening!'

'*In Excelsium Furore!*' bellowed Sire Garath, and as Danial's sensorium expanded out through his auspex, he watched the big Knight's steed clash its thunderstrike gauntlet against its reaper chainsword. Sparks showered down amidst the hissing rain, and the rest of House Draconis cheered again.

'Wield the fires within!'

'May the draconsfire burn within you all,' cried Sire Markos, his Warden taking its first booming step away from its armature and raising its auto-pennants. Behind him, the Sacristans' armoured Crawlers engaged their engines with bass rumbles, and lit their beacons. 'Now, let's go and meet our king. We march!'

The Imperial encampment emptied like some vast hive of insects. Streaming columns of infantry and tanks massed into assault formations as officers and commissars barked orders. Entire households of Knights advanced into the

sheeting downpour, well over three hundred of the towering armoured demi-gods with their Sacristans' Crawlers following close behind. Brightly coloured pennants snapped and fluttered in the howling wind. Autoloaders cycled and safety runes turned from red to green. As one, the Knights of House Minotos engaged their vox amplifiers, the deafening orchestral din of their martial symphonies ringing across no-man's-land in a spectacular display of grandiloquence.

Flights of Imperial Navy aircraft roared overhead, wave after wave of Marauder Bombers and Thunderbolt Fighters etching grey contrails across the sky. On ridges overlooking the encampment, artillery tanks by the hundred cranked their barrels upward as tense crews waited for the order to open fire. As the first Imperial aircraft neared the hab-mountains, and the High King of House Draconis marched out onto the planes at the head of his Knights, the order was given.

Danial felt the reverberant shockwave as the Imperial batteries let fly. The skies above darkened with megatons of hurtling ordnance. Knights strode forward around him, dozens of them pounding through mud and stone and rainwater, making for the traitor stronghold. Yet at that moment the kingsward could not take his eyes off the hail of shells as they arced overhead, and fell like a second storm upon the hab-mountains. Rippling explosions marched across the slopes. Wreckage and rubble spumed into the air, enough to build a fresh city out of ruin. Again, the Imperial batteries fired, and again, finding their rhythm, lofting another barrage skyward as each struck home.

Danial saw flickers of light speckle the enemy defences, warning runes flashing up on his auspex as the enemy's gun emplacements returned fire. *Shield boy get your shield up ware overshoot watch forshrapneldonotfear…*

Danial shook the whispers from his mind as they blurred and became useless.

'Onward, my friends, onward,' cried Tolwyn as the Knights centred their ion shields. 'The Emperor is with us. Those who die today shall sit at his right hand, and those who live shall burn bright in his holy sight. Press the advance, punish the traitors and make the Emperor proud!'

Shells screamed down amongst the striding Knights. They exploded with bone-shaking force, showering the Imperial war engines with shrapnel. They slammed into ion shields, their force dissipating amid billows of flame and flickering blue energy. Danial heard cries of anger and pain as the Knights themselves were struck. A Knight of House Pegasson uttered a death scream, which cut out

amidst a sudden hiss of static.

The others advanced unbowed. Danial watched the strategic overlay as Houses Pegasson and Wyvorn peeled off and spread out on the flanks. His auspex filled with the flash of gun muzzles and rocket propellant as the Knights unleashed their weapons, their runes dropping behind on the strategic overlay as Chimaeros, Minotos and Draconis pressed the advantage.

'Here we go then, Da,' said Luk over a closed channel, 'glory at last.'

'Glory at last,' echoed Danial, his voice tight with fear and excitement. 'Don't get yourself killed, Tan Chimaeros.'

Enthroned at the heart of his Crawler, High Sacristan Polluxis drank in the data-feeds and monitored dozens of systems at once. Part of his mental processing power was consumed with the noospheric chatter between the Sacristan Crawlers and the global vox net. With the rest he kept watch upon the shield strength, hull integrity and system-operation of the House Draconis Knights. All of them. He watched as the lead Draconis Knights came into long weapons range of the enemy's bunkers, hammering battle cannon shells and stormspear missiles into the enemy positions. He saw the Chimaeros Knights adjust their headings slightly in order to move in behind House Draconis, a ritual mark of respect. He observed the Minotos Knights plough on forward, too eager for battle to show the same deference.

Monitoring the warscape was a herculean task of mental processing requiring Polluxis' full concentration, and so the High Sacristan felt a twitch of all-too-human irritation as a vox-inload request lit up in the corner of his vision. It was coming from another of the Draconis Crawlers, vehicle thirty-one at the rear of the formation. Polluxis dismissed the flickering rune with a mental shunt, but a moment later it returned, blinking insistently.

Tasking his Crawler's machine-spirits to collect data overspill from the noospheric loom, Polluxis rerouted enough of his psyche to accept the incoming vox. As he did so, a wayward enemy shell thumped down to their left, rocking the speeding Crawler with its explosion.

'Acolyte Haladexi, inload,' demanded Polluxis. 'Brisk, if you please, acolyte.'

The voice that returned was fuzzed with background static.

'*Omnissiah Regnum Dei*, High Sacristan Polluxis. Possible anomalies detected.'

Analysing the note of concern in the acolyte's tone, Polluxis transferred another two terabytes of mental data to the conversation.

‘Elaborate,’ he requested as shrapnel pattered off his Crawler’s topside.

‘Routine support diagnostic has revealed a… a ghost signal, High Sacristan. A recurring artefact in the noosphere over the battlefield. Its nature is unknown.’

Polluxis’ flesh-face remained impassive as he absorbed the information.

‘Liable cause and or function, acolyte?’ he asked. ‘Permission granted to calculate hypotheses’.

‘Unknown at this time, High Sacristan,’ came the response through a grumble of static. ‘But it is pervasive. High focus auspex analysis reveals that the artefact is underlying all battlefield vox and sensor traffic. Speculative: if it is something generated by the enemy…’

‘Then it may present a hazard,’ finished Polluxis.

‘Advise alert High King and House primaries, High Sacristan?’ the acolyte asked. Polluxis shook his head slightly, an unconsciously human gesture.

‘Not without more information and or analysis, Haladexi. Re-task all non-essentials to this labour. I wish to know what I am reporting to High King Tolwyn before I trouble him mid-battle.’

Even as Acolyte Haladexi’s rune winked out, another alert flashed in Polluxis’ peripheral, causing him to let out a blurt of binharic annoyance. The Heavenly Host skimmed above the Draconis advance, the cherubim servitors braving the storm to provide comprehensive auspex cover. Now, it seemed, the weather was having an adverse effect upon the small cyborgs. As Polluxis watched, first one, then another and yet another cherub reported sudden and catastrophic system failure. Polluxis’ eye lenses blinked and his mechadendrites twitched as he saw a pattern in the burnouts. The alerts were coming from those cherubim furthest out upon the flanks of the advance. That could not be right, thought Polluxis, processing the data and rerunning his analysis. Battle or storm damage would not be so selective.

Unless…

Sire Daeved swore as his auspex flickered, the pict feed lurching.

‘A great sum of use those bloody horrible cherub things are,’ he muttered to himself.

Explosions burst around his Knight, but Daeved kept moving. Another few minutes and they would break the traitor defences wide open.

He frowned as he saw the nearby Chimaeros Knights slowing and redressing their aim. Daeved blinked open a vox channel to request clarification, then cried out as it filled with a sudden, deafening scream. His cockpit lights flickered, his

auspex filled with insane, runic gibberish. Just before his external pict-feeds were swallowed by a blizzard of static, he saw the nearest Chimaeros Knights open fire.

At the Knights of House Draconis.

Danial gritted his teeth as a deafening howl reaped through the vox. The strategic overlay dissolved into static, and his auspex feed fizzed and flickered. His view of the battle became lurching and stilted, a series of still, static-furred images rather than a smooth flow of information. His Knight and throne writhed and growled at the touch of the corrupted scrapcode.

Danial felt *Oath of Flame* stagger, and wrestled frantically with his motive gyros to avoid a fall. His Errant tottered sideways, barely keeping its feet. Proximity detonation warnings lit Danial's vision red as a series of explosions tore apart the ground on which he had stood. He cried out, frantically trying to decipher where the threat was coming from. With his Knight's sensorium compromised, it took the kingsward several seconds to track the origin of the attack.

'No,' he said aloud, not liking the note of panic he heard in his voice. 'No, that can't be right?' Fire thundered and boomed on every side, and Danial yelled in horror as he saw Sire Daeved Dar Draconis' Knight staggered by multiple impacts. The images came at Danial in nightmarish, disorienting staccato, but the fact was inescapable – Daeved's Knight had been shot from behind.

Too much was happening at once. The *Oath'*s auspex was awash with data-

ghosts, static interference and partial target-lock warnings. Sire Daeved's Knight Gallant was trying to turn around, swinging its ion shield, but one of the *Pyrefang's* arms had been torn off, and there was smoke and flame belching from the ragged wound. Traitor shells were still raining down. The ghosts of Danial's throne were clamouring in anger, filling his mind with a jumbled susurrus of contradictory advice.

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'Stop it!' screamed Danial, desperately trying to silence his ancestors. Something exploded to his left, completely whiting out his autosenses for a moment. A Knight. That had been a slain steed. And now Danial's threat-alarms were howling again, louder than before.

'…Da?... can you he… me?'

Jennika's voice, cutting through the static.

Danial felt a surge of desperate relief at that sound.

'Jen,' he shouted, 'what's happening? Where is this coming from? What do I do?' In that moment, Danial Tan Draconis had never felt less like a Knight. Even through his panic, some part of him squirmed with shame at how young and helpless he sounded. His vox screamed, before Jennika's voice cut through again.

'….betrayed… House Chimaeros… Da, they're firin… at us! House Chimaeros… firing at us… all a trap… Move, fight back!'

Danial wanted to believe that the static had distorted his sister's taut words. House Chimaeros were firing on them.

Danial engaged his haptic controls and swung the *Oath of Flame* around, pivoting his shield as a salvo of battle cannon shells slammed into it. One shot punched through the shield, ringing from the *Oath's* torso armour and leaving a staved indent just feet from Danial's head. Reeling, the kingsward saw a House Chimaeros Knight coming at him from the front, chainsword raised and whirring. There were more on every side, revealed in snapshot images through washes of static. The Chimaeros Knights were driving hard at House Draconis, pounding fire into their former allies. Many House Draconis Knights were already damaged, or sprawled in burning wreckage on the ground. The rain hissed against their corpses, but still they burned with the fires of treachery.

With no time to charge his thermal cannon, Danial revved his reaper chainsword and frantically parried his enemy's first blow. The Chimaeros Knight pressed in close, the armour clad enormity of it suddenly terrifying. Hundreds of tons of servo-driven metal and fire slammed into him like a battering ram. The

Knights' chainswords met in a sparking clash of industrial cutting teeth, and Danial cried out at the haptic shock of the impact.

Sire Rosierre Dar Chimaeros, he thought incoherently as the chainblades swung apart then clashed again. He recognised the Knight's heraldry, emblazoned on the tilting shield of his assailant. A Knight he knew. Friendly, decent. He had presented Danial with a leather-bound volume of Pollandrus during a courtly visit when the kingsward was just twelve, and winked at him. Now the man was trying to kill him.

Suddenly, Danial wasn't panicked. Suddenly he was furious. He drove *Oath of Flame* forward, catching his opponent by surprise and slamming his shoulder guard into the enemy Knight's helm. Sire Rosierre's Knight staggered backwards, and Danial followed up with a roaring stab that was parried.

'Why are you doing this?' screamed Danial into the vox. 'You traitor!'

All he got back was moaning static that made him angrier still. Rosierre's Knight swung again, a vicious cut towards *Oath*'s legs. Danial wrenched on his controls, managing to step back from the blow amidst rumbles of protest from his Knight's machine-spirit. Whirring teeth struck sparks across *Oath of Flame*'s armoured shins, leaving deep gashes. Flexing his gauntlets and thrusting his arms forward, the kingsward cut his blade up in return, dragging its churning teeth through the breastplate of Rosierre's Knight and out through its helm.

Fire and billowing smoke exploded from the monstrous rent, and the House Chimaeros Knight staggered backwards. The war machine passed its tipping point, and toppled. It crashed down into the mud as secondary explosions wracked its body.

'I killed him,' whispered Danial, his anger draining away as quickly as it had come. 'I killed a fellow Knight.' Then, a worse thought struck him, so painful it left him breathless. 'Luk…'

High King Tolwyn could not believe what his hardened auspex was telling him. House Chimaeros had rebelled. His old friend and comrade, Gerraint Tan Chimaeros, had stabbed him in the back. That alone was enough to break the king's noble heart. Worse was that they had not done so alone. Patchy reports were filtering in across the vox, of betrayal on every front. The Knights of House Wyvorn had turned, as the terrible scrapcode howl began, and poured enfilading fire into the Knights of House Minotos. Half of Grandmarshal Gustev's Exalted Court were down already, and the Minotos Knights were in disarray, cut off from support, having charged in as per their usual bellicose tactics.

In the back lines, Sacristan Crawlers had begun to fire upon one another, with several of the stalwart vehicles already reduced to blazing wrecks. At the same time, macro cannon batteries had been unshrouded atop the peaks of each of the hab-mountains. How the enemy had hidden the immense weapons, Tolwyn was at a loss to say, but with firepower enough to destroy starships the vast batteries were taking a terrible toll upon the loyalist forces. Desperate screams and panicked vox-chatter suggested that the Marchioness Tan Pegasson had been obliterated by the opening salvo, and that her house were being systematically torn apart as they tried to fire back and avenge her death. Towering explosions marched through the distant Pegasson ranks, the blasts so titanic that they hurled Knights into the air, or ripped them apart where they stood.

Even in orbit, it seemed perfidy had taken place. A single snatch of atmospheric vox told Tolwyn all he needed to know. Chimaeros and Wyvorn bastion-ships had opened fire upon those of the other Houses, and the Imperial Navy. Sudden, delayed-fuse torpedo salvoes whipped into the Imperial flotilla, seemingly of Adeptus Astartes pattern. The High King had infuriatingly few specifics, and he had no time to try to gather more. All around him the unthinkable was happening. His warriors were dying on the blades of their brothers, and somehow he had allowed it to happen.

Fyreheart had taken several punishing hits, though the Knight's shields had staved off any serious damage. Worse by far, Tolwyn had been forced to slay two Knights of House Chimaeros to avoid being cut down himself. He felt as though his gauntlets would never be clean again.

'I am High King,' he muttered. 'I must do my duty.'

Tolwyn, came the voice of an ancestor through his throne. Old Baron Nathaniel, the High King's great, great grandsire. *Look to your children. The heir must be protected.*

Tolwyn nodded unconsciously.

'Yes, that is paramount.' With an eye-blink, the High King opened a hardened vox channel to his Exalted Court. Two runes of the five in his retinal display remained ominously dark and dead.

'This is Tolwyn,' he began, pivoting *Fyreheart* to meet a charging foe. A thermal blast washed across his shields, and the cockpit temperature spiked. 'Tolwyn to all Knights of the Exalted Court. Hear me.'

The Knight came at him fast, a Chimaeros Errant. Young, thought Tolwyn. Looking to impress Gerraint no doubt. Tragic.

The High King's vox hissed and snarled as he side-stepped his enemy's charge,

ironclad feet pounding mud and water into the air. His opponent lunged with their chainsword. Too eager by half. Tolwyn swung his laser blade, and lopped the weapon from his enemy's arm. It sailed on and crashed to the ground, teeth churning the mud in its death throes. The Errant's servomotors whined as it tried to slow, to turn and address. It didn't stand a chance.

A young, defiant voice cut into his vox then, clear as a bell. The Chimaeros Knight.

'Long live High King Gerraint! Down with the Imperials!'

'Over my dead body,' snarled Tolwyn. His rapid-fire battle cannon boomed twice, and the Errant was smashed backwards. Three, I have slain three now, thought the High King in dismay. Gerraint would pay for this madness.

'..ather?' Jennika's voice swam through howls of static to reach him.

'My daughter, thank the fires you're alive! What of Danial?' As he spoke, Tolwyn worked his controls, beseeching the vox's machine-spirits for a clearer signal. It was no good, though. The scrapcode could not be breached.

'…still alive,' replied Jennika, and Tolwyn felt the icy grip around his heart lessen a little. 'Markos too… ather, what do we do?'

They had to fight back, but the scrapcode was making coordination impossible. As though reading his thoughts, Jennika's voice filtered through again.

'…telling the Knights… short range vox is bar… ly viable… use their autopennants… squire's code…'

Tolwyn felt a rush of pride and love for his daughter. Such a cool head, that one. Just like her mother. Squire's code was the first thing prospective Knights were taught, when they went hunting across the plains on horseback. Should vox become unreliable, or silent communication be required, the young squires would raise and lower the pennants on their lances in a simple code. It was something no Knight ever forgot, for it was hammered into them by their discipline masters from day one. It wouldn't overcome the interference of the scrapcode, but when coupled with the basic Code Chivalric that all Knights were conditioned to follow, it might be enough to achieve some cohesion.

Tolwyn broadened his vox-channel and boosted its signal as best he could, reaching out through the screaming cacophony to all those Knights of Houses Draconis, Pegasson and Minotos who might be able to hear him.

'This is the High King,' he said, voice stern and steady even as his shields absorbed another hammering volley of fire. 'We are betrayed. Houses Chimaeros and Wyvorn have turned upon us. I know not why, but they must be considered hostile. Fall back upon your Code Chivalric. Gather close, mass your shields,

and use squire's code to communicate.'

Tolwyn set the message to repeat on a loop, and began to stride through the sheeting rain and thunderous explosions towards the looming forms of his embattled Knights. If he could link up with his warriors and push back against the traitors, perhaps rally the Astra Militarum regiments to the rear, there was still a chance.

A fresh vox-hail request lit up on his retinal display. High Sacristan Polluxis, contacting him on a code-hardened private channel. He blinked it to life.

'Polluxis, what–?'

'My liege, I have succeeded in warding my Crawler's machine-spirits from this scrapcode for a short while, and cast an auspex augury. I know not how they veiled their presence, but the Word Bearers are here, on both flanks, and they have brought thousands of Donatosian turncoats with them. The Mubraxians and Tanhollis are overrun. We are outnumbered and surrounded to an untenable degree, my king. I calculate that, in our current disposition, we have but minutes before the foe eliminates our forces entirely…'

Danial spun *Oath of Flame*, servo-motors whining as the enemy code interfered with their power supply. Not quite quick enough. Gatling cannon rounds chewed into the *Oath'*s flank before Danial could interpose his ion shield, which flickered blue as the stream of fire splashed against it. He glanced at the damage manifold and cursed as it swam in and out of focus. His chainsword was a wreck, riddled with holes and leaking lubricant from split pipes. Power output from his reactor was down to seventy-three per cent, and his sensorium feed was little better than a string of glitched pictures. He was fighting half blind, relying more on auspex returns and instinct than anything else.

Keep moving, came the voices from his throne, and *remember to keep your shield up lad* and *you're getting flanked, stop letting them lead you*. Danial had mastered the clamouring voices a little, but it was like trying to fight while too many instructors berated him at once.

Three Chimaeros Knights were coming at him, each blink-click image showing them encircling him more completely. The one to his front was a Warden, and with its constant hail of fire it was forcing him to keep his shields angled towards it. The other two were Gallants, all crushing fists and roaring blades. Any moment, those weapons were going to tear through the hull of the *Oath* and rip him apart like the fleshy morsel at the heart of a shellfish. It was terrifying. Desperately, he tried to take a shot at one of the outflankers. With his targeting

reticules fouled by scrapcode, the thermal blast flew well wide of the mark.

Danial had been trying to find Luk amidst the madness. He had to know whether his best friend had turned. He had to believe that he hadn't. Now he was surrounded by enemies, and would die never knowing the truth.

'I'm sorry, father,' he whispered as his Knight shook and staggered. 'I'm sorry, Jen.'

Danial's cockpit rocked hard to one side, sparks raining down on him, and he cried out at the thought of whirring metal blades ripping into him. Instead, billowing flames lit his sensorium, and his vox crackled loudly in his ear.

'You're not dea… yet, little brother.' Jennika, her voice full of fire. Danial realised the *Fire Defiant* was on his flank, and that his sister had blasted one of the Chimaeros Gallants almost in half with her pinpoint shooting. The traitor engine was sprawled in the mud, reduced to flaming wreckage.

'Not for want of… bloody tryi… though, eh?' said Markos Dar Draconis.

Danial had never been so glad to hear the irascible herald's scathing voice. The images to Danial's right jerked and flickered through the motions of Markos' Knight charging in and meeting the other Gallant head on. Blows were exchanged in a flurry of sparks. One moment the Chimaeros engine was hammering its thunderstrike gauntlet into *Honourblaze'*s shoulder guard. The next it was laid out on its side, with Markos' Knight's foot grinding its helm into the mud.

'…oody die… you… ing bastard traitor!' spat Markos, twisting his Knight's foot one last time and eliciting a muffled explosion from the machinery beneath it.

The Chimaeros Warden was outnumbered, but its pilot clearly knew how valuable his prey was. The Knight emptied his carapace missile rack into the kingsward at point blank range. Danial stepped *Oath of Flame* back as quickly as he dared, bracing his shield as shuddering blasts shook him in his throne. But they were not as fearsome as he had expected. Peering through his static-fuzzed sensorium, Danial realised that his sister and the herald had both stepped in close, following the Code Chivalric, and locked their ion shields with his.

'I… thank you…' stammered Danial.

'…aise your auto-pennants,' replied Markos curtly. 'Easi… to comm… cate.'

Danial swiftly did so. Squire's code. Of course.

Flashing messages back and forth with their auto-pennants, the three House Draconis Knights coordinated their fire. Jennika and Markos wrestled with their compromised systems and swept their Knights out wide, turning their guns

inward as they passed their enemy's shielded arc. Desperately the Chimaeros Knight backpedalled, only for one of its feet to plunge into a waterlogged crater. Servo-motors in its knee joint sparked as they shorted under the crippling pressure, and the war machine listed to one side.

Jennika moved fast, flanking her prey and forcing him to pivot his shield to block her fire. Screaming his hatred and terror, Danial clenched his fist and punched. Heat washed through the nerves of his right arm as his thermal cannon bellowed its dracon's roar, and the enemy Knight's armour glowed and crumpled under the unbearable heat. Energy readings soared, and Danial had just enough time to cut his visual feed before the Chimaeros Knight exploded in a blinding fireball.

Reengaging his visuals, Danial saw that his tormentor was now little more than a pair of smoking legs.

His relief was short lived, as more fire whipped in from the left. Danial's heart leapt as he saw Luk's *Sword of Heroes* limping towards him. Luk's machine was wounded, one leg wreathed in sparks, a gaping hole ripped in its carapace. Behind him came a House Wyvorn Paladin, the acid green of its heraldry lurid through the smoke and rain. It was pounding battle cannon rounds into Luk's rear-angled shield, which flared with each savage blast.

Danial saw Markos' auto-pennants drop and rise, signalling all-out attack. Without thinking, Danial engaged his motive actuators and walked *Oath of Flame* straight into the herald's line of fire. Target warning runes lit up across his instruments as he entered the other Knight's field of aggression, and his vox spat a garbled mass of static and cursing as Markos bellowed at him to move. The kingsward stood his ground, doing his best to stay between the herald and Luk's Knight.

Seeing the standoff, Jennika signalled her intent to fire. Her battle cannon roared, hurling a pair of shells through the driving rain. They whipped past the *Sword of Heroes* and slammed into the Wyvorn Knight. The machine's shield caught one of the shells, but the other struck the Knight dead centre. The Wyvorn machine reeled and slowed, before its pilot turned it and fled into the smoke.

'…coward,' voxed Jennika scornfully.

Luk's Knight limped to a stop before them. Smoke and sparks billowed from its damaged hull. Amidst the hissing rain, Danial thought the Knight looked as though its shoulders were bowed in defeat.

'…loody traitors!' barked Markos, his channel open to Danial, Jennika and

Luk. ‘What….you have to say for yourself, eh Tan Chim… ros? What’s the meani… of this madness?’ Markos’ Knight Warden took two pounding steps, moving around the *Oath’*s flank and raising its gatling cannon.

‘His entire House turns traito… and you expect me to believe he doesn’t? Answer now, trait…r’s son, or I swear by the …aconsfire I’ll gun you down wh… you stand.’

‘Luk?’ voxed Danial. ‘Luk, what…?’

‘I don… know!’ said Luk, his voice flat and cold. Danial was shocked at the hate he heard there, but he also felt a worm of guilt at his own selfish relief; he couldn’t have lived with the personal betrayal of Luk turning traitor.

Markos’ pennants flashed up and down, swift, jerky motions.

[Engagement terminated.]

[Clarification needed.]

[Prisoner of war.]

Danial sighed in relief as Jennika’s pennants motioned her agreement, and *Sword of Heroes* powered its weapons down, lowering them in capitulation.

Jennika’s auto-pennants flickered again.

[Orders?]

Markos’ answer was simple, appearing through Danial’s sensorium in a series of still images.

[Form up.]

[Regroup.]

[Fight.]

Tolwyn’s voice cut through the screaming on the vox.

‘Knights. We are surrounded, outnumbered. The traitor Space Marines are here. If we stay and fight we will all be slain. I will not let our noble Houses be destroyed by heretics. We must break out of this trap, now! All Knights, mass on my signal if you can. If not, make for designated rally point Zeta-Lambda-Rho. Repeat, Zeta-Lambda-Rho.’

Retreat. The fight was lost, and even his father could not find any way to strike back against these traitors who had trampled their Knightly vows into the mud. Despite the metal god in which he rode, Danial felt helpless, impotent. Worst of all he felt betrayed anew, though he knew it wasn’t fair, this time by his own hero father. His hand went to the amulet that hung around his neck, and Danial whispered a bitter apology to one who had been more worthy of its blessings. He followed his father’s commands. With its boosted sensorium acting as a beacon, the *Fyreheart* was not hard to locate by auspex, even amongst the scrapcode

storm. Turning *Oath of Flame*, Danial strode west through the battle to re-join his father.

High Sacristan Polluxis watched his inload screens intently, fingers dancing like lightning across runic consoles while his mechadendrites slithered and clicked between socket-ports and information shunts. He worked the cogitator shrine at the heart of his Crawler like an impresario, fighting back the insidious scrapcode wherever it tried to worm its way in. His acolytes chanted binharic warding verses as they fired the Crawler's guns at their traitor counterparts or added their cogitation efforts to his own.

Polluxis had succeeded in exorcising the daemons from his Crawler's systems, reconsecrating the vehicle's machine-spirit in a baptism of pure data and surrounding it with an intricate lattice of encoded defences against re-possession. It was this swift work that had allowed the High Sacristan to restore his own strategic auspex feeds and read the shape of the battle. It was hideous to behold, its nature swirling and chaotic. The loyalist Knights had taken appalling casualties. Well over half of their engines were down, never to walk again, and of those that remained not one was undamaged. Polluxis had hacked his way unceremoniously into the data-feeds of his Minotos and Pegasson counterparts and found that their situation was, if anything, even worse than that of House Draconis. Five Pegasson Knights remained operational from a starting strength of over thirty, while only Grandmarshal Gustev and a handful of Minotos Knights were still in the fight. Polluxis had refrained from performing similar investigations into the Chimaeros and Wyvorn Crawlers' systems, lest they taint that which he had worked so hard to purge.

The Astra Militarum had suffered too. The encampment in the macrofactorum was completely overrun, and the Mubraxis and Tanhollis had both been all but exterminated. Many of their artillery pieces had been spiked, while some had been turned against the loyalists by traitor militia with the training to do so. Word was that the handful of Donatosian leaders who had accompanied the expedition this far were slain along with the Arbites who had guarded them. The Cadians had reacted with commendable speed and efficiency, some pushing forward to join the fight against the Chimaeros Knights while the rest fell back to aid the loyalist Crawlers.

Polluxis' transport rocked on its suspension as another volley of las-blasts splashed off its shielding. That battle was still ongoing.

Even with the Cadians' aid, the loyalist forces could not hold out for long. The

traitor hordes closing in to their rear and flanks were vast. The few crumbs of vox and pict-feed intelligence he had gathered about the Chaos Space Marines suggested that – though their numbers might be few – they were death to anything that found itself in their path.

The High Sacristan listened, impassive, to Tolwyn's voxed order for a breakout and retreat. He let it cycle thrice through his audio-pickups while he ran strategic simulations and counter-proposals. Finally, the High Sacristan was satisfied. The High King's solution was optimal.

'All loyalist Crawlers and surviving Astra Militarum forces,' he voxed across a code-hardened channel. 'The remaining loyalist Knights are massing on the High King and breaking out towards rally point Zeta-Lambda-Rho. Advise support this action, effective immediately.'

Polluxis gave the binharic command, and his Crawler's engines surged. He watched through hazy external imagers as his ornate transport rammed into a Wyvorn vehicle that tried to bar its path. The enemy Crawler was smashed onto its side by the impact, and Polluxis' larger, heavier vehicle accelerated away across the muddy plains. Around him, he saw other Crawlers following his lead, hammering mass driver and las-beamer volleys into their enemies as they disengaged. The Cadians, too, joined the action. Leman Russ battle tanks poured their fire into the huge enemy vehicles, and amidst clouds of explosions and flame the loyalist armour surged away towards the retreating Knights.

Danial hated the heretics who tried to bar his path. With every thunderous footfall, he crushed more of them into the mud. With every blast of the *Oath'*s thermal cannon or volley from its heavy stubber, he reduced more of them to corpses. He no longer wished to understand these traitors. He wished to see every last one of them dead.

Massed around the High King, the surviving Knights of Houses Draconis, Pegasson and Minotos ploughed unstoppably through their myriad foes. Not all of the Knights had been able to disengage, and the kingsward suspected that some had been forced to find their own escape routes. Despite that, it was still a prodigious force that followed their High King's lead, fifty-seven loyalist Knights piloted by warriors filled with the fury of the betrayed. Bolstered by a ragged column of Sacristans and Cadians, the Imperial spearhead hammered through the renegade forces deployed to stop it.

They pushed west at a loping run, away from the valle electrum. The pernicious interference of the scrapcode faded somewhat, though it did not vanish

altogether. It must originate from somewhere within the enemy fortress, thought Danial, storing the information away for later as he strafed stubber rounds through a knot of howling mutants. To his right, Sire Daeved's Knight Gallant struggled along, trailing streamers of smoke from its battered carapace. The kingsward was glad to see that the big Knight still lived, doubly so now that *Pyrefang* was smashing its way, one-armed, through the traitor armour arrayed against it.

The enemy horde was a veritable sea of bodies that had spilled from the industrial ruins to the west and out onto the plains. They waved ragged banners and screamed their devotion to their dark gods, but they had few weapons between them with which to combat Knights. Those they did, their tanks and artillery, were prioritised on Tolwyn's orders and swiftly obliterated. Meanwhile, a rearguard led by Garath Dar Draconis volleyed fire into the pursuing Chimaeros and Wyvorn Knights who pressed close on their tail. It was a hard fight, but Danial knew that his comrades would not be defeated here. They could not allow their betrayal to go unpunished.

'Transit bridge up ahead,' said the High King across the vox. 'We get across that and then bring it down behind us. The canal it crosses looks to be a hundred feet deep and half a mile w…de. That'll kill their pursuit.'

Danial signalled assent with his pennants and steered *Oath of Flame* into tight formation with Markos and Jennika, close in behind Tolwyn's *Fyreheart*. To their flanks, other Knights did the same, cohering into an armoured spearhead that would punch across the bridge to freedom. The structure loomed ahead, wide enough to allow six Knights to walk abreast, held aloft by vast ferrocrete columns and webs of steel cables.

'What are those auspex signatures?' came the voice of Suset Dar Draconis. 'At the entrance to the bridge? They don't look…'

Her question was cut off as a hail of heavy weapons fire hammered into the Knights from the front. Ion shields flashed blue. Energy beams and hurtling missiles punched through to buckle and blast Knightly armour.

'Word Bearers,' spat Jennika. 'Traitor Space Marines. Infan… and tanks.'

'No time to change plans,' came Tolwyn's voice as he pushed *Fyreheart* into a headlong charge. 'I don't care who they are. We're go… through them. *In Excelsium Furore*!'

Lances of Chimaeros and Wyvorn Knights were only moments behind them, their missiles and shells whipping down to strike speeding Crawlers and explode amongst the charging loyalists. Another Draconis Knight, Sire Poldred, was slain

as battle cannon rounds blew off his Knight's leg mid-stride and sent it crashing down. It was now or never, and Traitor Space Marines be damned.

'Draconsfire!' yelled the kingsward, *Oath* responding with a surge of power that carried it level with Danial's father. The two of them pounded along the cracked highway through the driving rain, straight into the Word Bearers' position. The superhuman warriors stood their ground, pouring shots into the charging Knights. A las-blast glanced Danial's chainsword. A volley of krak charges exploded against his Knight's shin armour, but it held. Directly ahead, a crimson-armoured tank swung its turret and unleashed a volley of las-blasts, but the *Oath*'s ion shield absorbed them. With a vicious curse, Danial swung his Knight's leg and kicked the tank so hard that it flipped onto its roof and exploded. Then he heard a cry.

Fyreheart was belching smoke from one mangled leg. One of the Word Bearers, some kind of leader or champion in hook-festooned armour, had leapt onto the Knight's foot as it swung past and ripped out fistfuls of the leg's mechanisms with his power fist.

'How strong are these?' snarled Danial, levelling his heavy stubber and hosing the Chaos Space Marine with fire. Shots sparked and rang off the warrior's armour, dislodging him and sending him rolling onto the ferrocrete road-surface. The traitor began to rise, clearly unharmed, only for a blow from the flat of Tolwyn's blade to hurl him sideways.

The Word Bearer sailed across the bridge, smashed into one of its ferrocrete supports and crashed to the ground. He did not rise again. Yet the damage had already been done. *Fyreheart* could barely walk, let alone run, and the enemy were closing fast.

'Rally to the king!' shouted Danial. 'Rally to the king!'

The loyalist Knights slowed their pace, forming a shield wall for Tolwyn while those who had broken through turned back.

'No!' shouted Tolwyn, his anger shocking Danial to silence. 'The enemy are upon us and I can barely move. There is no time, and I'll be damned to the coldest hells if I'll see these traitorous curs claim victory because of me. Those with motive damage, rally on me and prepare to fight a steady rearguard. Polluxis, have your Crawlers lay charges as they cross, and slave control to my throne mechanicum. I want to be able to bring this bridge down the moment we're across. The rest of you, do not wait for us. Get to the rally point and regroup. If we don't join you then find a way to win this war for the Emperor.'

For a moment the vox was silent and the Knights hesitated. Fire whipped and

whined. Explosions bloomed against shields. Crawlers and Cadian tanks hammered firepower into the last of the small Word Bearers force.

'I said bloody move!' roared the High King, jarring his subjects into action. 'Jennika, you and your brother get clear now!'

'I…' began Danial.

'Da, we have to,' urged his sister. 'The succession. Da, duty, honour. Father can still win this, but you can't fight with him. Just move!'

Danial felt the ghosts of his throne then, soothing and reassuring, helping him overcome his horror at what was happening, moving his hands on his haptic controls so that he walked his Knight out across the bridge as though in a dream. His father was risking death so that they could escape, and it was his duty as the kingsward to survive, so that House Draconis could survive. Danial accelerated *Oath* to a loping run and fled along with the rest of the loyalist forces. He saw Markos' Knight wavering at the High King's side, then the herald broke away and followed, the last loyal warrior to join the retreat.

'Danial, Jennika,' said his father's voice across a private channel. 'I'm so bloody proud of the pair of you. Survive and fight back. Show these traitors how hot the draconsfire burns.'

'We will, father,' replied Jennika fiercely.

'So will you,' said Danial, angrily. His father made no reply.

Looking back through his sensorium, Danial watched as the High King's Knight backed slowly across the bridge. Sire Daeved's battered *Pyrefang*, Sire Kristov's *Crimson Sword* and Sire Natan's *Drake Ascendant* all joined him. Two Minotos Knights, too battered and blasted to run any more, and a ragtag assortment of Astra Militarum and Sacristan Crawlers with damaged tracks that would slow their retreat completed the wounded rearguard.

Drake Ascendant fell as a shell tore through its torso and exploded from its back. *Crimson Sword* staggered as shots stitched its greaves, then burst into flames as more enemy fire tore into its reactor housing, yet still it retaliated. Then the Chimaeros charge hit home.

'Draconsfire!' roared Tolwyn, hacking his blade through the chest plate of a traitor Knight. 'Hold them back! Don't stop moving!'

Through rain and static, Danial watched the diminishing figure of his father's Knight fighting valiantly. His energy blade flashed in bright arcs as *Fyreheart* and its comrades backed towards the centre of the bridge. Only a hundred yards remained before the king could blow the explosives.

A Chimaeros Gallant tumbled from the bridge, blazing like a comet. A

squadron of Leman Russes exploded in flames. A Sacristan Crawler rammed forward into the shins of a Wyvorn Errant, the machine falling forward to crush its killer with its corpse.

Then only fifty yards remained and, as Tolwyn neared the far edge of the bridge, Danial's hope surged. His father was still up, still fighting. He was going to survive…

…until Gerraint Tan Chimaeros' Knight, *Therianthros,* charged headlong into the *Fyreheart*. Danial swore, heart pounding as the two Knights traded thunderous blows. Then they were lost amidst the driving rain, and *Oath of Flame* was off the bridge, the last loyal Knight to cross.

Danial cried out as a fireball suddenly bloomed amidst the rain, and desperately willed it to be Gerraint's machine. Then his vox crackled, and he heard his father's agonised voice.

'I'm sorry, my son. Be strong.'

The charges detonated, sending fire and rubble into the sky. The bridge shuddered, then collapsed, falling into the pit below.

High King Tolwyn was gone.

ACT TWO
ASHES AND EMBERS

Danial winced as his neural jacks uncoupled with a string of wet clicks. He let out a slow, shuddering breath and pulled off his haptic gauntlets, letting them clatter to the floor in a tangle of sensors and wires. Danial went to stand, feeling every ache and bruise from the savage battle on the plains. His head caught the deep dent in the *Oath'*s cockpit armour, and he sat back into his throne mechanicum with a hiss of pain. That last, spiteful hurt just seemed too much, and everything roared up at him at once. Betrayal. Loss. He realised with a sudden wrench that *Fyreheart'*s throne had surely been destroyed along with the Knight. He would never sit where his father had, never benefit from the advice of Tolwyn's ghost. He would never hear his father's voice again. Locked away inside the ironclad sanctuary of his Knight, inaudible to any but himself, Danial Tan Draconis gave in and let sorrow take him. Sobs wracked the kingsward's body, and he pounded his fist against the arm of his throne until it was bloody.

Dry-eyed and pale, Danial clambered from the opened carapace hatch of *Oath of Flame* and took stock of his surroundings. The High King had chosen the sanctuary well – rally point Zeta-Lambda-Rho was a vast subterranean complex of munitions warehouses, cavernous spaces in which even the goliath Imperial

Knights could hide away. Danial and the others had simply walked their Knights down the intake ramps at one end of the complex and vanished into hiding. Now, their battle damaged steeds stood still and silent in the shadows, illuminated only by the stab-lights and beacons of the surviving Sacristan Crawlers. A number of Cadians had survived too, though they had taken refuge in a separate warehouse elsewhere in the complex.

Sliding himself across the *Oath*'s carapace, Danial grasped the dismount rungs and clambered slowly down from his steed. The Knight had been sorely damaged in the fighting. Its heraldry was mud-spattered and fire-blackened, and every square foot of its armour was battered, scraped, bullet-riddled or buckled. I know how the *Oath* feels, thought Danial sourly. He pressed his forehead against the machine's hull and whispered his thanks all the same.

Dropping to the rockcrete floor, Danial coughed at the dust that rose around him. This warehouse had not seen use for a long time, it seemed. Small heaps of rubble from crumbled pillars, and ancient, shrouded crates added to the impression. He wrenched off his skullcap and jammed it into his belt, running one hand through his short hair currently plastered to his scalp. There were people throughout the cavernous space, but almost no one spoke. Knights were gathered in small knots, staring at one another in shock and bewilderment. The surviving Sacristans cleaved to their Crawlers. Danial saw a few Cadians stood in the mouth of the tunnel that led through to the next warehouse. They held lasguns close to their chests, their grim faces impassive.

'They're watching us,' said Jennika, coming to his side. 'They suspect we might yet turn, I think. Who can blame them?'

Danial could see that his older sister had been crying too. Her sharp features were drawn, and her eyes looked bruised. Dracon's eyes, thought Danial forlornly. Like their father's. Wordlessly, brother and sister embraced, holding each other close for a moment and sharing their grief. Jennika let go first, stepping back and looking her brother up and down.

'You're alive, Da,' she said, composing herself. 'And me. And we'll make them pay.'

'We will,' said Danial, feeling anger stir within him. 'But we have to make sure we're secure before we even start thinking of that. Did any of them follow us, Jen? *Are* any of us traitors?'

'After the bridge came down, there's no way they could have followed us.'

'I think they emptied the surrounding sectors for that ambush,' said Danial, nodding. 'Arrogant curs. Probably didn't think they'd need reserves.'

‘Well, with the Emperor’s blessing that arrogance might save us,’ said Sire Olric Dar Draconis. The rangy, sandy-haired Knight shrugged apologetically at his interruption. ‘I’m sorry, my liege, my lady. I overhead your conversation. This seems like a discussion we should be having between what remains of the Houses, no? The electrical storms may have hidden our retreat from the enemy’s eyes if we’re lucky, but there again they might not. Enemies might be on their way even now. We need to get sentries out there, get these Knights repaired, form a plan.’

‘We should organise sentries,’ Danial agreed, nodding. ‘And give the Sacristans leave to begin repairs immediately. Someone should talk to the Cadians, find out who will join us and convince them that we’re all loyal.’

‘But we’re not, are we?’ came a shout from nearby. ‘All loyal, I mean?’ Danial turned to see Markos, sweaty and bruised, marching Luk Tan Chimaeros towards them. He had one hand clamped on the back of the young Knight’s neck. Luk’s features were marred by a bruised cheekbone and a bleeding nose, and his black hair was dishevelled.

‘Luk!’ cried Danial in outrage, starting forward. ‘Markos, what did you do?’

‘What did I do?’ bellowed the herald, veins standing out on his temples. ‘What did *I* bloody well do? What about these traitors? What about the oh-so-bloody-noble House Chimaeros, eh?’ Markos gave Luk a hard shove, and the Chimaeros Knight fell to his knees in the dust. He did not resist.

‘If anyone here should be answering to anyone it’s him!’ roared Markos, ripping his draconblade free of its scabbard and pressing it to Luk’s throat. ‘Go on, traitor! Tell us! How long did your heretic of a father have this planned? How did he do it? *Why* did he do it?’

Luk stared straight ahead, his expression empty. Blood from his nose dripped slowly into the dust. A crowd was gathering, the remaining Knights scowling angrily and murmuring in agreement with Markos.

‘Come on, you piece of rubbish, speak! I trained you, boy. I trusted you. You owe me an explanation, at least.’

‘I’ve got to stop this,’ muttered Danial to Jennika. ‘Sire Markos,’ he said, taking a step forward. ‘Luk’s not a traitor.’

Markos rounded on Danial, his face red with rage.

‘The High King is dead! Tolwyn was killed by these traitorous dogs, and you’re trying to defend the son of the honourless bastard responsible! You know nothing of it, boy, and you dishonour your father’s memory with your weak drivel!’

Danial recoiled, his squire's fear of the discipline master still instinctive. Not so Jennika.

'Sire Markos Dar Draconis!' she barked, her voice ice and steel. 'You forget yourself! If anyone is bringing dishonour to our father it is you. We are all angry. We are all betrayed. But no one else is acting like a wild beast!'

The herald looked as though he had been slapped. He faltered, and the angry murmurs around the circle were silenced as quickly as they had begun.

'Now,' said Jennika, in a tone that brooked no argument. 'You will sheathe your blade, sire, and we will speak to this noble prisoner as the Code Chivalric dictates. Unless you would like to compound your dishonour by striking an unarmed captive again?'

'No,' muttered Markos grudgingly, his expression thunderous. 'No, of course not, milady. My apologies.'

'It is a difficult time,' replied Jennika graciously. Despite her sweat-stained bodyglove, her warrior tattoos and her livid bruises, the Lady Tan Draconis seemed, at that moment, every inch the capable aristocrat. Danial envied her that.

'Danial,' she said, gesturing him forward. 'He is yours to interrogate, brother.'

Danial stepped back into the circle, resisting casting a nervous glance at Sire Markos. The herald's anger was not done yet, he could feel it. He was conscious of the Sacristans moving up to join the throng. The survivors of Houses Pegasson and Minotos had gathered too, Grandmarshal Gustev among them. He was held up by one of his Knights, half his face a mask of dried blood. Amid the stab-lighting and the dust, all eyes were on Danial and his friend, knelt before him on the cold stone floor.

'Luk,' Danial began. Luk didn't respond.

'Luk Tan Chimaeros,' said Danial, louder, growing angry himself. 'Did you know about this treachery? Tell me you weren't a part of it.'

Luk looked up at him, but there was no recognition in his dead-eyed stare.

'I wasn't,' he said dully. 'I didn't know.'

'That's a bloody lie!' cried Markos. 'He's Gerraint's only son, for Throne's sakes. How could he not know?'

'They fired at me,' replied Luk. 'They tried to kill me. You saw that Danial, Jen, and you, Sire Markos. That Wyvorn Knight would have finished me off.'

'A fine way to win our trust, eh?' sneered Sire Garath. 'Pretend they're trying to kill you, worm your way back in, then when the moment's right, strike.'

Danial's mind whirled. Could his friend really be a traitor? But how could he

not have known?

'There must be some way to tell for sure,' he said. 'I don't want this to be true, but Luk, if you were part of this…'

'My own father tried to kill me!' shouted Luk, suddenly furious. He surged to his feet, only for Markos to kick him back down. The herald's blade returned to Luk's neck, unwavering.

'Try that again,' growled Markos. 'Please.'

Luk subsided, morose again.

'I knew nothing of any betrayal. I didn't know that my father had cast aside his honour, or made a pact with those traitors. He is a pawn of Chaos now. A heretic. If I see him again, I'll kill him myself. Would that be proof enough?'

'You must have seen something,' said Danial, thinking fast. 'Even if you didn't recognise it. Come on, Luk! Emperor's blood, you can't have been part of this.'

'The scrapcode,' said Luk suddenly, blinking. 'You all saw the way they fought out there. The scrapcode wasn't affecting them, but it struck me just like it did all of you.'

'Another lie,' said Sire Markos. 'We're wasting time with this traitor.'

'That is a misapprehension,' replied High Sacristan Polluxis. 'During the battle, me and my acolytes gathered substantial data regarding the infernal scrapcode conjured by the enemy. Our cogitator units are currently processing and analysing its nature to better understand this weapon of the enemy. Once we comprehend it, I believe that, with the Omnissiah's blessings, we will be able to bypass its influence and restore long-range vox communications with other loyalist forces.'

'That is good to hear,' said Danial, frowning. 'But what relevance does it have here?'

'Part of our interrogative process involved conducting an auto-séance with the machine-spirit of each loyalist Knight to determine the detrimental effects that the enemy code had upon its systems. Luk Tan Chimaeros is telling the truth in this – his steed was affected in the same fashion that yours were, honoured sires. A reasonable extrapolation would be that a warding agent was applied to the traitor Knights prior to the battle, but was withheld from Luk Tan Chimaeros' steed.'

'The baptism,' said Jennika. 'Da, that unguent we saw them applying to their Knights.'

'That must have been it,' agreed Danial, feeling something unlock in his chest at the thought that Luk might be telling the truth. His friend's expression was

thunderous, however.

'Those *bastards*,' he breathed.

'It's proof enough for me,' said Sire Olric, and Danial found himself nodding in agreement. The Knights of Draconis, Minotos and Pegasson looked at one another. Markos' face was still dark, and a few of the older Draconis Knights like Sire Garath looked the same. They had lost a lot of valued comrades in the betrayal, and their Throne-given sense of honour was set deep in their bones. Those men needed someone to blame, someone to strike out at for what had occurred. Even proof might not be enough to keep Luk from further trouble. But the majority, the kingsward could see, were convinced. Heads nodded. Frowns softened. It was one of the four surviving Knights Pegasson, Lady Eleanat, who spoke for the assemblage.

'It seems that Luk Tan Chimaeros is indeed the last loyal son of his House, and for that we must be thankful. We need every loyal Knight we can find in this dark hour. Danial Tan Draconis, we of House Pegasson are sorry for the loss of your father in this terrible time.'

Danial took a breath and nodded his thanks.

'And I am sorry for yours, my lady. The slain shall be avenged, for now we stand together.'

He extended his hand to Luk. The Chimaeros Knight looked at it for a moment as though he didn't know what it was, then he gripped Danial's wrist and allowed his friend to pull him to his feet.

'Right,' said Markos bitterly. 'Since that matter seems to have been decided, let us hope we can resolve all our other woes as easily. For instance, there's the question of what we do now?'

'We send out sentries,' said Jennika firmly, 'as my brother said. For that we need the Cadians – they have the numbers we lack, and far greater skill in fighting on foot. We can hardly stand guard in our Knights and not expect to be swiftly discovered.'

'Perhaps,' said Lady Eleanat, 'we might attend to that duty?'

'Thank you,' said Danial, well aware of House Pegasson's reputation as diplomats. 'I think we would all appreciate that very much.'

'I'll go with them,' said Grandmarshal Gustev, shooing away his attendant and standing, albeit unsteadily, without aid. 'Talk to their commanding officer as equals, eh?' Danial winced at the grandmarshal's lack of tact, but he could see the sense of what Gustev said. Any envoy to the Cadians needed to include a suitably senior figure to speak for the Adrastapolians with authority.

‘Very well, grandmarshal,’ he said. ‘Our thanks. Please do this as soon as our counsel has ended.’

‘And what of our Knights?’ asked Sylvest Dar Draconis, brother to Suset Dar Draconis. Of an age with Danial, the young Knight was taller than the kingsward but also rangier, and his youthful features were currently pale with worry. ‘If the traitors come back and our steeds are too damaged to fight…’

‘That will not be a concern,’ interrupted High Sacristan Polluxis. ‘My acolytes and I will begin full repair work upon your Knights immediately. We have sufficient Crawlers remaining to restore all but the most severely damaged Knights to full panoply. I cogitate no more than a day sidereal to effect all the repairs that we can.’

‘You should keep working on the enemy code, too,’ said Suset Dar Draconis. Short and full-figured where Sylvest was tall and gangling, Suset’s lively eyes and serious face reflected none of her brother’s nerves. ‘Perhaps we can understand it?’

‘That matter is already in hand, Suset Dar Draconis,’ said Polluxis, ‘and is our concern, not yours.’

‘Patch up matters with the common soldiery, set a watch, repair the Knights,’ listed off Sire Markos. ‘All solid, sensible moves. All easy, too. What about the hard part? What do we do to strike back?’ He strode into the middle of the circle of gathered Knights, and looked around at them all. The fires of anger burned behind his eyes still, the need to fight, to regain control. ‘Our honour lies trampled in the dirt amidst the bodies of our dead,’ continued Sire Markos. ‘Our allies have become our enemies and beaten us into a coward’s retreat. Shall we simply hide while they enjoy their victory feasts?’

Angry murmurs and oaths echoed his words.

‘We can’t just hide down here and leave those insults unanswered,’ growled the herald. ‘We won’t let all those deaths go unavenged.’

‘The insults, the deaths, our dishonour, all of it will be avenged,’ said Jennika. ‘But you heard Polluxis – at the moment we can’t even cut through the enemy’s interference to re-establish vox with our comrades. For all we know, we may be the last living Imperial servants on Donatos!’

‘All the more reason to get back out there and fight, then,’ put in Sire Garath angrily. ‘If they’ve killed everyone else then that’s a lot of lives need avenging.’

‘Too true,’ growled Markos, ‘and wars don’t get won by hiding. We didn’t used to need the Heavenly Host, or planet-wide vox networks. We didn’t have them when the orks invaded Adrastapol. We just sallied forth, found our enemies, and

destroyed them.'

'Destroy our enemies?' said Lady Tamsane Dar Pegasson in disbelief. 'Perhaps the reality of the situation escapes you, Sire Markos, but we are the ones who have been all but destroyed! How many foes remain in the field? How many renegade Knights? How many of those Emperor-damned Word Bearers? *If* we re-establish vox, and *if* there's anyone else left alive, then our priority should be to fall back to our beachhead and consolidate before we even consider returning to the offensive!'

'Trust a Knight of Pegasson,' growled Markos, 'to suggest we hide behind our castle walls when the fields are burning. Where were you during the Ork Wars anyway, Lady Tamsane? Hiding up in the mountains with the rest of your House?'

Several of the Knights shouted at once in response to this, their cries of outrage and demands for apology mingled with angry rumbles of agreement.

'We can't fall apart like this,' shouted Danial, struggling to make himself heard over the growing swell of angry debate. 'It is precisely what our enemies want.'

Then the crack of a gunshot cut through the clamour. All the Knights fell silent, looking around incredulously to see Sire Olric with his autopistol still pointed at the ceiling. The Draconis Knight's normally affable features were set in a stony scowl.

'Our houses,' he said in a low voice, 'have always had their differences. We have always argued, but we have always found our way to common cause through the wisdom of the High King.'

'Tolwyn's dead,' spat Sire Garath.

'That he is, Emperor keep him always,' replied Sire Olric, lowering his gun and brushing his sandy hair out of his eyes. 'And so tradition dictates that the succession needs to occur. The crown must be passed on in spirit, even if the artefact itself was lost when Tolwyn fell. The new High King must be invested. Only then can we have unity, and the strength to take this fight back to the foe.'

For a moment, Danial felt honest bewilderment as all eyes turned back to him. Then realisation clenched his innards tight. They meant him. He was the late High King's son and heir. And now, they wanted him to be High King. Panic threatened to choke off the air in his lungs as he saw the anger and exasperation writ plain on Sire Markos' face. Realisation dawned upon Luk's features even as it must have been spreading across his own. Then he looked to Jennika, to the older sister who had always defended him, always supported him and been there when he needed her aid. In her eyes, Danial Tan Draconis saw only sympathy.

Danial had only minutes to reconcile himself with the avalanche of change that had crashed down upon his world to bury him. It was all too much, too sudden. He clutched the amulet that his father had given him just one night earlier. The father who now lay slain. The father whose mantle of responsibility he was about to take up, because tradition dictated that it must be so. Danial felt like a young squireling, acting the fool by pulling on his father's outsized sword belt and robes. He wasn't ready to lead, and the thought of so much responsibility and pressure clenched his innards in a steely vice until he thought he would be sick.

Away across the cavernous space, a crude dais had been built from jagged chunks of rubble. One of Polluxis' surviving Crawlers had disengaged *Oath of Flame*'s carapace hatches and lifted free Danial's throne mechanicum. It now sat atop that heap of broken stone, flanked by chem lanterns on metal poles. Around it bustled the Knights, some making last preparations for the ceremony. Most just talked quietly and earnestly amongst themselves while shooting glances in his direction. Danial had no desire to know what they were saying, though he could well imagine.

'Da, you'll be fine,' muttered Luk, clapping one hand on Danial's shoulder and shaking him from his reverie.

'What would you know of it, traitor's son?' whispered Sire Markos, angry and urgent.

'Jen,' croaked Danial, throat tightening with panic. 'I'm not ready for this. I can't…'

'You can,' whispered Jennika in return, her tone firm and reassuring. 'And you will. This is a great burden to place upon you, Danial, it is true. But brother, we will be here to help you bear it. You are the son and heir of Tolwyn Tan Draconis and Polenna Tan Draconis. You are equal to this task because it is in your very blood.'

'I…' said Danial, before clearing his throat and starting again. 'I'll do my best, Jen, I will. But father was a hero. He was a king. I'm barely more than a squire!'

'You're ready,' she said simply. Danial took a deep breath, then nodded.

'All right. I'll take the crown.'

'Lady Jennika,' hissed Markos urgently, trying not to be overheard. 'You and I both know that the lad isn't ready for this! Emperor alone knows I've no desire to undermine him – he's Tolwyn's son, for Throne's sakes! I've practically raised him as my own. But asking him to take command? To make the sorts of decisions that your father could make? It's bloody madness!'

‘Sire Markos, I understand your concerns,’ replied Jennika stiffly, but Markos wasn’t finished.

‘Do you? Book learning is not the same as years of experience leading Knights in the field,’ he said. ‘Lady Jennika, surely this can be put off until we return to Adrastapol. The lad says he’s not ready, then he’s not! You and I could command for now. You’re royalty, I’m our House’s most veteran commander. Between us…’

But Jennika was shaking her head, and Sire Olric too.

‘You know it can’t be that way, Markos,’ he said solemnly. ‘Tradition dictates that the succession occurs at the earliest possible opportunity. Lady Jennika is not allowed to inherit the crown, even temporarily. And as for you and her sharing power and leaving the kingsward to languish? At best it would make House Draconis look so weak that we would lose primacy upon our return to Adrastapol. At worst it would seem an act of sedition at a time like this.’

‘He’s right,’ agreed Jennika. ‘Can’t you hear the whispers begin? Strange, they’d say, how the High King fell, only for his daughter and his herald to take power and depose his son and heir. Perhaps this wasn’t such an act of pragmatism at all? Perhaps it was a coup, and an assassination. Perhaps they are in league with the traitor Tan Chimaeros.’

Luk’s face set hard at those words, and Danial knew his friend well enough to sense the pain behind the mask.

‘I will do my duty,’ said Danial. ‘But I need your help.’ He looked straight at Jennika as he said this. ‘I’m not prepared for this mantle – I know it as well as you. But for House Draconis, I must bear this burden all the same. So I shall, no matter its weight.’

With that, Danial Tan Draconis turned and strode through the assembled Knights of Adrastapol. He kept his eyes straight forward, trusting to Jennika, Markos, and Olric to follow his footsteps. He ignored the sick pounding of his heart, the half-heard whispers from the seasoned Knights around him, and the distant rumble of the storms still raging on the surface far above. He kept his eyes upon his throne, sat so incongruously outside of his Knight on a crude heap of rubble. A traitorous voice in Danial’s mind whispered that he was ascending his father’s fresh built cairn, to sit the throne atop his grave. Danial clamped down hard on the thought, lest it cause the horror of the moment to overwhelm him.

And then he was before the throne, and the dracon banner was being raised above it, and the banners of House Minotos and Pegasson were being raised

alongside. No banners for Houses Chimaeros or Wyvorn, thought Danial numbly. Not any more.

The next moment he was sitting, and High Sacristan Polluxis was there beside his throne, bearing a small metal casket in his flesh-and-metal claws. His silvered mechadendrites slithered to open the chest, and plucked from it a simple circlet of adamantium and gold. The crown, Danial knew, was not the one that had belonged to his father. That one had been lost when he fell. This was a replacement, fashioned within the belly of Polluxis' Crawler, fresh and untested. Just like me, thought Danial with sick fear as he tried to ignore all the faces turned towards him, all the staring eyes.

Then Jennika was there, taking the crown from Polluxis' metal tentacles and placing it reverently upon Danial's brow.

'Kneel,' she said, her strong voice carrying through the cavernous space. 'Kneel for Danial Tan Draconis, High King of Adrastapol.'

As one, the assembled Knights drew their ceremonial weapons, their draconblades and minotane hammers and pegassine rapiers, then sank to their knees with their heads bowed. Some went more grudgingly than others.

'All hail the High King!' shouted Jennika, raising Danial's sweating hand in her own.

'All hail the High King!' they shouted back. And just like that, amid a chorus of raised voices, in a coldly lit, dusty cavern on an alien world, Danial Tan Draconis became High King of Adrastapol.

The rain still fell in curtains as Varakh'Lorr marched along the Saints' Walk, beneath the gaze of immortalised Imperial heroes. Famed generals, accomplished Magi and Space Marine lords, all watched the arch-heretic stride past, and he fancied that he saw screaming ghosts of their mortal selves writhe behind their stony features as he did so. The statues had been defaced by the Donatosian rebels, their necks wrapped with barbed wire nooses, their limbs broken off and their age-worn marble smeared with bloody Chaos runes.

'They were ripe for revelation, these Donatosians,' said the Dark Apostle. 'Desperate for a way to escape their rotting Emperor.' Gothro'Gol, pacing steadily along at his master's back, said nothing in reply. They were walking through the streets of the valle electrum's inner districts, towards the Square of Martyrs, and though this was firmly held traitor territory the hulking bodyguard had his reaper autocannon primed and ready.

Always vigilant, thought Varakh'Lorr, and never mind that a squad of Word Bearers shadowed their lord; the Dark Apostle knew from long experience that Gothro'Gol trusted no one else with his master's safety. The monstrous Terminator was a tether of sorts. Gothro'Gol had been with him since the beginning, his faithful ally and protector for thousands of years by mundane,

mortal reckoning. The quiet warrior had tied his colours to Varakh'Lorr's banner with absolute conviction, and never once wavered. The Dark Apostle knew that Gothro'Gol's apparent lack of personal ambition and absolute loyalty were every bit as much a mask as the Red Veil. Still, it had proved valuable. More and more, as Varakh'Lorr's quest for immortality progressed, his huge bodyguard had served as a solid link to reality. He was the anchor that kept his master from drifting upon the tides of empyric power. It would be a shame, thought Varakh'Lorr, when the day came that he had to cut that tether loose.

Today was not that day. Today was a different warrior's time to meet the gods.

Emerging from between the towering statues, and the gothic data-shrines that loomed behind them, Varakh'Lorr and his honour guard entered the Square of Martyrs. It was a huge plaza, one of several that dotted the inner city, and was ringed by towering buildings meant for industry and commerce. Crowds of the emancipated faithful thronged the edges of the square, as they did wherever the Word Bearers went. They massed at windows and flooded the entrance streets, but were held back by cordons of devoted turncoat militia whose ragged uniforms and armour were daubed with the Word Bearers' holy symbols.

Varakh'Lorr's warriors awaited him. Further battalions of traitor militia were drawn up in serried ranks, eyes shining with fervour at the honour of assembling for their master's pleasure. Looming over them were the turncoat Knights of Adrastapol, still scarred and mud-spattered from the battle on the plains the day before. Their bulky repair vehicles idled in their shadows.

At the heart of the square stood a black marble dais raised there for the Dark Apostle's purposes. The edifice was precisely eighty-eight feet high, with eighty-eight graven steps leading up to its apex. Atop the dais rose a barbed metal frame, a cruel looking thing from which a brass cage hung suspended over a huge iron brazier. More Word Bearers stood in a wide circle around the dais, all those who were not still fighting in far-flung warzones across the continent.

As Varakh'Lorr gained the marble steps towards the top of the dais, cries of adulation and worship rang from thousands of throats. Gongs clanged, bells rang, weapons were discharged into the skies, and he felt all eyes fall to him. Especially those of the Word Bearer who languished in the brass cage.

As he reached the summit of the dais, Varakh'Lorr's honour guard spread out around its edge. Only Gothro'Gol remained at his shoulder. Ignoring the figure in the cage, Varakh'Lorr turned slowly, his arms raised as he looked out upon his worshippers.

'People of Donatos,' he boomed through his armour's vox amplifier. 'A great

victory has been won!' Cheers washed over him like waves, and Varakh'Lorr leered with the helpless remains of eight stolen faces. 'The Imperial invaders thought that they could march up to our gates and knock them down.' Howls of anger and rage came from the crowd. 'They thought they would find us weak, easy prey for their weapons of oppression.' Another wave of fury rolled in and Varakh'Lorr basked in their hate, his altered senses perceiving it as billowing crimson storm fronts.

'But they were wrong!' he shouted, and the crowds went mad with excitement. 'Through their own ignorance and arrogance our enemies walked straight into our trap. Through the might of my divine Word Bearers, the conviction of our enlightened allies amongst the enemy ranks, and the faith of your Donatosian Army of Liberation, our enemies were crushed!' The people of Donatos screamed their devotion, earning nothing but contempt from Varakh'Lorr. 'The gods are pleased!' He roared, and they roared back.

'And yet,' said the Dark Apostle, his tone suddenly sombre. The crowds quieted, straining to hear their prophet's sermon. 'The war rages on. Our oppressors are not yet defeated, and that is thanks in part to a traitor in our midst.'

Varakh'Lorr turned, at last, to look upon the Word Bearer trapped in the brass cage. The warrior had been cruelly stripped of his armour, even those components that had grown to become a part of him. He was beaten and bloody, and a metal gag had been sutured across his mouth. He stared with intensity and hatred, straight into Varakh'Lorr's eyes. The Dark Apostle drank in that hate, and returned it with his own.

'Daksha,' he intoned, weighting the name with all the scorn and anger he felt. 'Ever too hasty. Ever too eager for glory, with no thought for the consequences of your deeds. You are the Blood Lord's fool.'

The muzzled warrior gripped the bars of his cage with flayed fingers, and grunted in anger from behind his iron muzzle.

'This traitor,' cried Varakh'Lorr to his assembled flock, 'failed me in the battle yesterday, and in doing so he failed us all. Worse, he failed the gods. He it was who was ordered to bring the bridge down into the western industria once the trap was sprung. He, it was, who disobeyed those orders, knowing that our enemies would see their escape route open and come to him. This fool underestimated our foes, and in doing so he allowed them to escape the noose!'

Varakh'Lorr swept his gaze across the raving, frothing crowds around the edge of the square, and smiled cruelly.

‘Fear not, my friends. The enemy will still be defeated, for they enjoy but a stay of execution. The same cannot be said for Daksha.’

With that, the Dark Apostle motioned to one of his honour guard. The horned warrior loped across the dais and handed his master a flamer. Varakh’Lorr hefted the bulky, bio-mechanical weapon, staring for a moment into the rolling yellow eye that grew like a blister on its barrel. Then he levelled the flamer at the brazier below Daksha’s cage.

‘Gods of Chaos,’ boomed Varakh’Lorr, ‘I give you this offering. A traitor’s pain!’

He squeezed the trigger, and a sheet of green-tinged flame belched into the brazier. The fuel-rods heaped there caught light, and noxious fumes rose from the tainted incense coating them. Dirty flames leapt high, roaring hungrily towards Daksha.

It took the captive Word Bearer almost a minute before he lost control and started to scream. Even from behind his iron gag, Daksha’s raw howls of agony rang across the square as the flames did their work. The dying Word Bearer gave one last muffled howl of agony before the life left his body. Black lightning flared once across the skies, and was gone. The rain continued to fall in slow, lazy curtains, hissing and sizzling as it struck Daksha’s burned corpse and the scalding-hot bars of his cage.

Varakh’Lorr turned his back on the blackened corpse of the warrior who had failed him.

‘Assemble the senior Knights,’ he muttered to Gothro’Gol. ‘They will attend me in my sanctum.’

With that, the Dark Apostle strode from the dais with his cloak billowing behind him.

Gerraint Tan Chimaeros entered the inner sanctum of the Word Bearers with his head held high. Though his augmetic brace hissed and whined with every movement, it robbed him of none of his lordly dignity. He had never let it, just as he had never allowed his scarred face or the reduced station of his Noble House to render him any less than he was. If the Dark Apostle sought to intimidate his allies with displays of violence and ominous surroundings, he would find that the Viscount Tan Chimaeros was not so easy to cow.

Not viscount, he reminded himself with a grim smile. He was High King of Adrastapol now, and he wore the crown upon his brow to prove it. Taken from the wreckage of Tolwyn Tan Draconis’ Knight, won through conquest in the old

way. He was the High King of a whole planet, and kings did not bow to priests, even in the temples of their gods.

Gerraint took in the blood-stained summoning circle and the huge Chaos star that hung from the ceiling. He saw the macabre trophies that festooned every pillar and arch, loyal defenders and servants of the Omnissiah reduced to wire-bound fetishes for the glory of the Ruinous Powers. The shadows seemed to twitch and stir unnaturally in this place, and the stench of blood and unclean incense hung heavy on the air.

Behind Gerraint walked the surviving Knights of his Exalted Court, and those of Dunkan Tan Wyvorn. Victory had not been won without cost the day before. But they were all of them accomplished warriors with the exception of the Sacristan, hard, battle-scarred veterans bound by oath to Gerraint's claim of kingship. All wore rebreathers, given to them by robed acolytes of the Word Bearers so that they might breath clearly despite the psychotropic fumes that drifted through the sanctum.

'We have allied ourselves to dark creatures here,' murmured Gerraint to Dunkan Tan Wyvorn as they closed on the shrine's servo-pulpit. The same acolytes who handed them breathing gear had bidden them assemble beneath the pulpit and await the pleasure of Varakh'Lorr.

'But powerful,' replied the archduke, his hooded eyes gleaming. 'Powerful enough to ensure your rule of Adrastapol, my liege.' Gerraint grunted in agreement. He had never liked Dunkan Tan Wyvorn, who all knew to be a man of cruel inclinations and unseemly personal ambition. Yet of all the Noble Houses, Gerraint had been surest of House Wyvorn's support and discretion while planning his coup. Their distaste for the rule of House Draconis was well known. Besides, the archduke was a brutal and dangerous warrior, as were his Knights, callous fighters with more interest in victory than honour. Fitting allies, for a distasteful endeavour such as this.

And then there were the rumours of Wyvorn's hidden strength, some secret weapon locked away within their House vaults. In Gerraint's experience, it paid not to ignore such rumours.

'He is not mistaken, Gerraint Tan Chimaeros,' came the voice of Varakh'Lorr. The Dark Apostle stepped out of the shadows of the pulpit, resting his gauntlets on its circuit-inlaid railing as he looked down upon the Knights. Behind him loomed an immense figure in baroque armour.

'Well met, Dark Apostle,' said Gerraint, hiding his horror at his ally's appearance with an effort of will. Brace whining, Tan Chimaeros inclined his

head, careful to keep the depth of the gesture as to an equal at court. He would not show servitude to this monster, only martial respect. The Dark Apostle's flesh-masked face seemed to writhe with a life of its own as he considered his response.

'Easier than passing whispers through the mouth of a daemon,' said the Dark Apostle. 'This way, you can look me in the eye as you explain to me why you failed.'

Gerraint had known the threat was coming. His new ally would not have gone to such trouble and showmanship in the square, if not to make a point. Still, it took self-control not to quail in the face of the Word Bearer's displeasure. Tan Chimaeros was tall, still built like a warrior despite his scars, but this looming monster of the Long War made him feel a squireling by comparison.

'If there was any failing at all, Lord Varakh'Lorr, then it was on the part of that wretch you burned to death,' replied Gerraint, his voice steely. 'It would seem that punishment has already been meted out.'

Varakh'Lorr stared at Gerraint as though the Knight was some form of unpleasant insect he had found in his boot.

'It would, would it, mortal? Throne-sworn Knights still walk this world. They are still a threat, one that you were meant to remove.'

'Their strength is broken,' replied Gerraint coldly. 'House Pegasson are all but annihilated, House Minotos also. As for House Draconis, our Sacristans have confirmed that over half their number were slain during the battle. And I slew High King Tolwyn myself. The old Houses are leaderless, honourless and defeated.'

'And yet,' rumbled Varakh'Lorr. 'Not all are slain. Our whispering friend tells me that the High King's son yet lives to contest your claim.'

'He's just a boy,' replied Gerraint contemptuously. 'And a bookish weakling at that. My own son would have…' Gerraint stopped himself, feeling a swell of anger and shame at Luk's fate. Now is not the time for that, he thought.

'Your own son is dead,' smiled the Dark Apostle cruelly. 'Is there any betrayal more terrible than that between the father and the son?'

'My losses are not your business, Chaos worshipper,' spat Tan Chimaeros, anger overcoming self-discipline. 'I am not proud of the betrayal we have been forced to perform, the dishonour this has brought upon us. I am not proud of what I have sacrificed upon the altar of war. But they betrayed us first, they and their cursed Emperor. They broke the old ways, took the crown from those whose right it was, all in the name of their corpse god. What has He ever given

my House but scars and pain?'

'Little, I don't doubt,' nodded Varakh'Lorr. 'But you are wrong, Gerraint Tan Chimaeros. Your losses, your sacrifices, they *are* my business. It is the price you have already paid that shows me your determination, your dedication to our cause. It is your sacrifices that tell me you are still a worthy ally – none would pay such a price for victory and then fail to claim it.'

Gerraint felt the truth of that, and nodded slowly. He had lost too much to step back from the precipice now, even if he was only now realising just how diabolical his chosen allies were.

'True enough. The last Draconis heir must die, for only then is my claim secure. And you must know victory on Donatos, for only then will you aid me in my rightful conquest of Adrastapol. So what do you suggest, Lord Varakh'Lorr? How may we serve you and bring this war to a close?'

In answer, the Dark Apostle uttered a string of jagged, unnatural sounds that made Gerraint's ears ring. From behind him came a wash of intense heat and a sudden emerald glare. He spun, reaching for his chimersword, expecting some terrible trap. Instead, his eyes widened as he saw that a great green pyre had burst alight in the middle of the summoning circle. Within the flames danced images, a flickering map of Donatos Primus that wavered and swam. Jagged runes flickered across it, and Gerraint swiftly recognised them as force markers and objective designators.

'More Chaos witchery?' he whispered.

'You see that the Imperials retain their beachhead around Pentakhost to the south,' said the Dark Apostle, ignoring Gerraint's utterance. 'And enclaves of planetary militia are still holding onto the voltaei langurum, the palacio metallurgum and the nordindustriala. However, following our victory yesterday, my brothers are leading offensives on every front.'

At these words fresh sigils blazed on the map, flowing streamers of coloured fire illustrating the enemy's enclaves, and the traitor forces pushing into them.

'What of air, and fleet?' asked Gerraint, unholy firelight flickering in his fascinated eyes.

'The orbital battleground is still contested,' replied Varakh'Lorr, a note of irritation in his voice. 'Even with your turncoat warships to aid them, my craft barely have the strength to match the Imperial Navy ships. This is why the situation upon the ground must remain stable. Once I complete the ritual, and receive my rewards from the gods, the enemy will have nothing that can stop me. But we cannot allow any interruptions.'

‘And the loyal Knights of Adrastapol represent the last real danger of such a thing,’ said Gerraint.

‘Just so,’ replied Varakh’Lorr. ‘The hour draws nigh, and all else is in readiness. I will soon begin my great ritual, but it will not be swiftly concluded, and should any interruption occur… well, the displeasure of the Dark Gods is nothing you wish to witness, mortal.’

Gerraint nodded, narrowing his eyes as he stared at the unnatural map.

‘The industria is a large area. When we hunt upon the plains, not all quarry is easily tracked. But there are other methods. My Knights and I shall locate what remains of Draconis and their allies, and we shall crush them for you. But only if they can be found before they link up with other Imperial forces. Our Sacristans estimate that there are still prodigious Imperial numbers in the field, despite all the damage done by our trap.’

‘Stay your mortal fears,’ replied the Dark Apostle. ‘Even if the Imperial lapdogs had the wit or will to reforge an army, our scrapcode fills the skies. My warp smiths tell me that its more potent effects do not stretch far beyond the valle electrum, but the Imperial vox and auspex networks have been corrupted planet-wide. They can neither see nor speak far enough to re-gather their strength.’

‘My lord,’ hissed Xedediah Dar Mechanicus, bowing his hunched and hooded form low. ‘If my brothers and I might be given leave to inspect the device by which you are projecting the signal, perhaps we might aid in boosting its efficacy? Our knowledge…’

‘Xedediah,’ spat Duncan Tan Wyvorn angrily. ‘You overstep, Sacristan. Silence, before I strike you for impertinence.’

‘Your knowledge is all you care for, machine priest,’ chuckled Varakh’Lorr. ‘Newly rebelled, no longer bound to the strictures of your Omnissiah. I see it, the desperate, acquisitive need in you. The greed. But trust me priest, you do not wish to meet my Mournful Angel.’

As if to underpin the Dark Apostle’s words, Gerraint heard something shift and scrape in the noisome shadows of the choristrium. He felt an unreasoning revulsion fill him as he caught sight of heavy, undulant movement amidst the darkness.

‘My Lord Varakh’Lorr,’ said Gerraint, turning back to the Dark Apostle as cold sweat trickled down his back. ‘We shall uphold our end of this bargain, and do our duty. I have your oath that you shall do the same?’

Varakh’Lorr sketched a mocking bow in response.

‘But of course, Gerraint Tan Chimaeros,’ he replied with a wolfish grin. ‘Now leave me. I have matters of ritual to which I must attend.’

Gerraint bowed, his Knights following suit, and turned his back on the Dark Apostle. He strode away towards the exit, feeling burgeoning relief at escaping this terrible place and its monstrous master. He was brought up short just paces from the doorway as the Dark Apostle’s words echoed after him.

‘Gerraint Tan Chimaeros. I would have you bring before me the one amongst your ranks who speaks to the daemon.’

‘That is me, Lord Varakh’Lorr,’ replied Gerraint stiffly. ‘As High King, it is my honour alone.’ He bridled as the Dark Apostle laughed in response.

‘You are many things, viscount. But you are not yet High King, and you are certainly no witch.’

Without looking around, Gerraint marched for the exit, his Knights trailing after him. There was much to be done, and little time to do it. The Word Bearers were abhorrent in ways he could not have imagined, but he would not turn aside now. Victory was within his grasp, and none would say that Gerraint Tan Chimaeros lacked the resolve to seize it, whatever the cost.

Three days had passed. Three dark, fearful days of knowing little and achieving less. Danial hated himself for every second of them, but still he couldn't see a path forward. An accord had been reached with the Cadians thanks to the diplomatic efforts of the Pegasson Knights and the comradely bluster of Grandmarshal Gustev. The worst injured of the Knights and Imperial Guardsmen had received what medical care could be offered in the apothecarian bays of the Crawlers. Busiest of all had been the Sacristans, who laboured tirelessly and worked miracles to repair the Adrastapolian steeds. Yet for all this, it felt to Danial as though they had achieved precious little.

As the fourth morning dawned on the surface above, the High King sat in his dislocated throne upon its heap of ruin, and brooded. Sire Olric and his sister perched on blocks of rubble to either side of him, waiting to offer counsel if it was needed. The rest of Danial's forces were scattered through several of the subterranean warehouses, having spread out somewhat in search of space. He could see a few Knights from where he sat, Sylvest and Suset Dar Draconis crouched in the lee of a Sacristan Crawler. They were idly throwing dice with Sire Wallian by the light of the Crawler's lamps, sipping from canteens of water and talking sparingly. Occasionally, one of the Knights would shoot a neutral

glance at their new king.

'For every task the Cadians and Sacristans perform, our Knights become ever idler and more frustrated,' said Danial bitterly. 'Morale is crumbling and discontent is growing. I don't doubt there's plenty of them muttering uncouthly about me by now.'

'They await orders, my liege,' replied Sire Olric. 'They need to fight back, to return to their war.'

'I know,' sighed Danial, 'and I with them.'

'We can't act until we know what is going on out there,' said Jennika. 'And Polluxis swears to the Omnissiah that he's close to perfecting the data wards. It's no failing to wait for all the facts before you make your decision. You just have to show confidence – show you know what you're doing.'

'Father *would* have known what he was doing,' replied the young king, his voice sharp with frustration. 'If he were still alive we'd have been out there by now, taking the fight back to the foe. He'd have found a way.'

'Well, he's not, Da, but you are,' replied Jennika curtly. 'Loathing yourself won't help. Measuring yourself against father's ghost won't either. You were always very different men, but he saw the greatness in you, brother, as I do. You're not King Tolwyn, you're King Danial. So find your own strengths and use them.'

'Wise words, Lady Jennika. Whatever we do, though, we should do it soon. Men of stern honour and short temper are given to foolish deeds when they are forced to stand idle.'

Olric was interrupted by a shout from the cavern's exit tunnel. It was Sire Vancenz Dar Draconis.

'My liege! A duel has been called!'

For a second Danial felt a flood of relief; he had half expected the burly Knight to tell him they had been discovered by the enemy. Then an unpleasant thought struck him.

'Markos,' said the High King. 'And Luk.'

Danial saw his own alarm reflected in Jennika's eyes.

'Oh for Throne's sakes,' she cursed. 'Prophetic words, Olric.'

'Sire Vancenz,' said Danial, leaping from his throne and hastening down the rubble with Jennika and Olric on his heels, 'take us there at once.'

The clash of blades rang along the tunnel as they ran, mingled with shouting voices and the scuff of booted feet. Danial burst from the mouth of the tunnel

into another of the huge, grim warehouse spaces. A dozen Draconis and Minotos Knights loomed in the shadows around the chamber's edge, some still encased in Sacristan repair-armatures. At the centre of a loose ring of shouting Knights, Markos Dar Draconis and Luk Tan Chimaeros circled each other warily by the light of chem-braziers. Markos, heavy-set and pugnacious, wielded his draconblade, *Orksbane*. The weapon's fuel reservoir was lit, the blazing blade leaving roaring fire-trails behind it with every swing. Luk was taller than his opponent by a head, and lither, but lacked his opponent's physical strength. The young Knight held his chimersword in his off-hand, the weapon gleaming like spilt oil. Danial saw that his friend already had a split lip, and a scorched nick in one sleeve of his bodyglove.

Danial started towards the fight, but Sire Olric caught his sleeve.

'My liege, an honour duel like this, with blades drawn…'

'I know, Sire Olric,' snapped Danial, pulling his arm away. 'I do understand the importance of the Code. They can fight to the death, should they wish. We can't interfere. But that doesn't mean I have to approve of this idiocy.'

He and Jennika joined the circle, expressions stern.

'Sire Markos,' Danial said, his voice carrying over the shouting crowd. 'I thought this was settled. Are you so set on vengeance that you'll fight an innocent man to the death?'

Markos kept his eyes locked on his opponent as he replied.

'He called the duel, lad, not me,' barked the herald. 'But I'll fight it. And I'll do it for you. You're soft on this traitor, and it'll get you killed. No one else apparently has the balls to deal with the problem, so I have to.'

'It's all right, Da,' said Luk. 'This crazy old fool can't get it through his head that I'm not my father.'

Markos laughed mirthlessly. 'If you were your father, I might actually feel worried.' The herald spun his sword around, its flames growling through the air. He launched suddenly at Luk, moving fast. The herald's downwards blow was aimed straight for his opponent's neck, but was blocked in a shower of sparks by Luk's chimersword. The Chimaeros Knight spun away rather than lock weapons, tossing his blade swiftly from his left to his right hand, and aimed a cut at Markos' midriff that the burly herald barely intercepted. The two Knights stepped back from one another once more, and resumed their wary circling.

'Sires, this is bravado and idiocy,' said Jennika, exasperated and angry.

'The High King,' spat Markos, 'has thus far seen fit to leave our enemies unmolested, lady. So if I can't kill the enemy out there, I'll kill them in here

instead.'

Luk snarled and lunged at Markos from across the circle. The young Knight aimed the point of his blade at his opponent's weapon hand, trying to knock the sword from Markos' grasp. The herald parried, then drove Luk back with a series of hard, heavy blows that rang against the younger Knight's guard. Seeing a momentary opening, Markos drove a kick into Luk's stomach. The Chimaeros Knight was thrown back into the edge of the crowd, winded and gasping. Knights gripped Luk and pushed him back into the circle, where he wheezed for breath as he raised his guard once more.

'Sire Markos,' tried Danial one more time. 'There's no honour in this.'

The herald did glance his way for one moment then, and Danial was surprised to see sorrow in his eyes.

'No lad, there's not,' replied Markos. 'And I don't want to believe that he's a traitor either. But someone has to cleanse the taint of House Tan Chimaeros, and if you won't then I'll do it for you.'

With that, the herald turned back to his opponent, who had recovered his breath and was tossing his chimersword back and forth from one hand to the other. The weapon sang weirdly in the air with each pass.

Markos Dar Draconis advanced on his enemy, swinging his blade in a blazing figure of eight.

'Don't worry, boy, I'll make it quick,' growled Markos as he advanced. 'For old times' sakes.'

Seeing the older Knight trying to force him into a corner, Luk feinted then threw himself into a forward roll, passing Markos before he could react. The younger Knight came up fast, spinning as he did and whipping his singing blade around in a tight arc. It met Markos' draconblade, and sparks flew. Danial watched grimly as the two Knights traded a rapid flurry of blows. Luk was marginally quicker, but Markos' sheer strength must have been sending numbing shocks up his opponent's arms every time their blades met.

'Whoever wins this,' said Jennika, 'it's our loss in the end.' Danial nodded, then hissed as Markos' sword drew a line across Luk's chest. It had been a bare touch, just the tip of the sword connecting at the furthest extension of its arc, but it was enough to spatter blood across the dusty ground and leave a smouldering rip in Luk's bodyglove. If the Tan Chimaeros Knight had been a fraction slower in weaving away from the blow, Danial's best friend would have died there and then.

Luk made to back away, Markos' face grim as he pressed forward to retain the

advantage. The next second Luk was spinning, turning his feigned retreat into a graceful pirouette. As he spun, Danial saw his friend give the hilt of his sword a hard twist. With a clatter the blade came apart, segmenting and lashing out like a whip made of metal discs. Danial's eyes widened as Luk's suddenly fluid weapon wrapped around Markos' sword hand. The herald roared in pain as the blades dug deep, reflexively releasing his grip on *Orksbane*. Another flick of Luk's wrist saw the blazing sword skitter across the stone floor.

Disarmed and wounded, a lesser Knight might have conceded and hoped for mercy. Markos instead closed his injured fist on the metal cord strung through the chimersword and gave it a savage wrench. Surprised, Luk was pulled forward off balance. The crunch of breaking cartilage was loud as Markos drove his forehead into the bridge of the young Knight's nose, and blood sprayed. Luk reeled, and Danial muttered a curse as Markos repeated the brutal attack, hammering his opponent backwards and forcing him to relinquish his hold on his own weapon.

'You don't want to turn this into a brawl, boy,' said Markos, dropping the chimersword in disgust. 'It'll hurt more.'

Luk was still reeling, blood pouring from his smashed nose, as Markos bulled forward and caught him around the waist. Hoisting the young Knight off his feet, the herald slammed him backwards. Luk's head cracked against the floor. Markos straddled his opponent's chest, grabbed a fistful of his bodyglove, and hauled Luk's head and shoulders up. Markos balled his wounded fist and drove it with brutal force into Luk's face, slamming his head back into the ground with a crack.

'Go on, Markos, beat him to death,' yelled Sire Garath above the shouts and cries of the crowd. 'Show him what traitors get.'

Markos looked around, locking a disgusted glare upon Sire Garath.

'Dishonour doesn't beget dishonour, Garath,' growled the herald. 'You know better.'

He rose, leaving Luk bloody and dazed on the ground. Danial's old discipline master, and mentor of long years, walked across the circle to reclaim the sword with which he would kill Danial's best friend, and the High King could only watch with mounting dread. He wouldn't look away, he vowed to himself. He had fled his father's death, but he wouldn't run away from Luk's too.

Then Jennika's fingertips brushed his arm, a subtle gesture. He shot a glance at her, then followed her gaze and his own eyes widened with surprise. Luk was watching Markos as the herald bent to retrieve his sword, and carefully, slowly,

scraping his hand across the floor. The young Knight was not as brutalised or stunned as he seemed.

Markos turned, took three swift strides, and raised *Orksbane* above his head.

'Sorry, lad,' he said.

Markos' blade swept down, but struck only rockcrete. Luk had rolled aside, and now flung a handful of dirt into Markos' eyes. The herald choked, then roared in anger as Luk pistoned a kick straight into the side of his kneecap. There came another terrible crunch of cartilage, and Markos' shout became a strangled cry of agony as his kneecap was driven sideways out of its joint.

Amidst howls of outrage from around the circle, Luk rolled away and came back up on his feet. He was reeling and punch-drunk, and his eyes were already blacking around his broken nose. Blood was also trickling from the back of his head, Danial saw, but Tan Chimaeros was up while Markos had crashed down onto his side, face white with pain. Luk staggered to his chimersword and scooped the weapon up, before turning back towards Markos Dar Draconis.

'Stay down, old man,' spat Luk through broken teeth.

Still the herald forced himself to his feet, only to fall again with a hiss of agony as his shattered knee refused to support him. Unbowed, he drove the point of his sword into the floor and pushed himself up once more, heavily favouring his undamaged leg. Slow and determined, Markos raised his burning sword and took guard stance.

'I don't kneel before traitors,' he spat.

'Good,' said Luk with a ghost of his normal, cocksure smile. 'Then you'll have no trouble kneeling to me.'

He lashed out with his chimersword, and Markos parried. Both combatants were sluggish now, one crippled by pain and the other most likely concussed. Still their blades clashed, then clashed again. Markos stumbled and almost fell, but managed an ungainly hop to keep his feet. Luk swung wide more than once, while blood spattered from his face and pattered on the rock floor.

With a sudden roar Markos lunged, over-extending in an attempt to surprise his foe and ram his sword through Luk's chest. Luk threw himself desperately aside and lashed out, his chimersword clattering apart and wrapping around Markos' sword. The herald fell, unable to stop himself, and with a snarl and a flick of the wrist Luk constricted his weapon's bladed coils and snapped Markos' draconblade in two. The severed halves of the blade rattled away across the floor, trailing burning fuel behind them, and in their dying light Sire Markos rolled on his back and looked up.

‘Bravo, traitorson,’ he gasped. ‘Now finish the job with honour, eh?’

Luk slowly raised his weapon. Across the circle he heard Sire Garath spitting curses as two other Draconis Knights held him back. Slowly, deliberately, Luk looked around the circle of Knights. Then, he twisted his hand upon his weapon’s hilt, uncoupling its blades. Instead of lashing out, Luk dropped the weapon in a useless tangle.

‘I won’t kill you, old man,’ said Luk wearily. ‘There has been enough of that.’

Turning his back on Markos, the son of Gerraint Tan Chimaeros knelt before Danial.

‘High King of Adrastapol, Danial Tan Draconis, hear my vow, I beseech you,’ said Luk, his voice grim and formal.

‘I hear your vow, Luk Tan Chimaeros,’ said Danial, remembering the correct words for the ritual. He knew now what his old friend was about to do, and that it could not come easily.

‘Tan Chimaeros no longer,’ intoned Luk, and Daniel heard no sadness in his voice, only anger. ‘By this vow I renounce that name, and spit upon its dishonour. By this vow, I discard my rights, my titles, my lands and my House. By this vow, I declare myself Freeblade, and ask that you, my king, recognise me as such.’

Danial understood Luk’s decision. Only by renouncing his station and becoming a Freeblade would the young Knight ever prove beyond all doubt that he didn’t share in his father’s heresy. Yet it was a terrible choice to make, for it cost Luk everything but the Knight in which he rode to war. Luk looked up, and Danial saw the knowledge of all this clear upon his friend’s features. Luk knew what he was doing.

‘Very well, Luk Kar Chimaeros,’ responded Danial, reciting the words from the Code by memory. ‘I name thee Freeblade. By what title shall you be known henceforth?’

‘I will be the Knight of Ashes, my liege,’ said Luk fiercely. ‘For they are all I have left.’

‘Then so be it,’ said Danial sadly, drawing his draconblade and touching its tip against Luk’s chest, directly over his heart. ‘Rise, Luk Kar Chimaeros, once-son of the traitor Gerraint Tan Chimaeros, now the Knight of Ashes.’

Silence met the High King’s proclamation. The naming of a Freeblade was nothing to celebrate. Luk rose and limped across the circle. Solemn, he held out his hand to Sire Markos. The old Knight looked at it for a moment as though it were a serpent that might bite him. Then, grudgingly, he clapped his hand around

Luk's wrist and allowed the Freeblade to haul him to his feet.

'Traitorson no longer, eh?' grunted Markos, face pale with pain. Luk shook his head. 'Still broke my damn sword though,' said the herald. 'Had that a long time.'

'You *were* trying to kill me with it,' replied Luk, his tone neutral.

'I was,' admitted Markos. 'That's what happens when you duel a man, lad.'

'I apologise, Sire Markos,' said Luk stiffly, and Markos sighed.

'Sod it. Just get me to the medicae, Luk Kar Chimaeros. You've made your point.' Luk nodded, and glanced at Danial. We'll speak of this later, the look said, and Danial nodded in turn.

Luk and Markos limped away in search of a Cadian medicae, and the circle of Knights slowly broke apart. Some, Sire Garath loudest amongst them, were still muttering and cursing, but they would have nothing further to say to Luk after his vow. None would besmirch the Code by harassing Luk further after he had rendered himself a Freeblade.

'At least that's one problem solved,' sighed Jennika as the crowd dispersed. 'Now I'm going to go and look into another. I'll see if I can't get a straight answer out of Polluxis for you, Da.' His sister turned and strode away. Danial realised that he was left alone with Lady Suset.

'Was there something you wanted, milady?' he asked.

Suset pushed her dark fringe out of her eyes and frowned. She was somewhat shorter than Danial, but she had a presence about her that he found both compelling and slightly unsettling.

'I just wanted to tell you that I'm sorry for the loss of your father, Danial,' she said. 'And that I know this must be a difficult time. If you need someone to talk to…'

She let her sentence hang, unfinished. Danial shook his head ruefully.

'I feel like that's all I *have* done for the last few days. Talk. I think it's time I acted.'

'Of course, my liege,' she replied, suddenly stiff. 'Then may your ancestors' wisdom guide your deeds.'

Suset walked away, and Danial couldn't help the feeling that he had missed some hidden dynamic within their exchange. The thought was pushed aside as Suset's parting words sank in. He wrapped the fingers of one hand around the amulet he wore, and felt a growing spark of excitement.

'The wisdom of the ancestors. Perhaps that's precisely it.' Filled with sudden purpose, Danial strode away through the gloom to find a Sacristan.

As his neural jacks clicked into place, the High King admired the repair work that Polluxis' acolytes had done. It was exceptional, the dents hammered and smoothed, the damaged systems replaced and even the heraldry restored. When at last he rode to battle, Danial would do so in full panoply.

That was not his mission now, however. His sister had told him to show confidence, but how could he do that when he felt none? Danial had never in his life been forced to make important decisions without the guidance and wisdom of his father. Tolwyn was lost to him, a fact he had yet to fully come to terms with, but there were others that could lend him their advice. Others, daunting though they were, who could help him understand his allies turned enemies, and gain insight into how to defeat them.

Oath's reactor came online with a snort of exhaust and a shuddering rumble. Runes lit across the Knight's instruments, a few flickering amber before holding steady on green. Danial heard the background hiss and whine of the scrapcode that polluted his auspex and vox, and he muttered a prayer to the Emperor for protection.

'Come on, my friend,' murmured Danial to his Knight. 'We're going to seek revelation.' The Knight Errant growled, and Danial took *Oath* out at a slow stride, angling his steed towards the darkness of the transit tunnels. Some were too small to walk a Knight through, but there were plenty that he could use to move deeper into the complex. Danial needed solace and isolation to think. *Oath of Flame* left huge footprints in the dust, raising swirling clouds with every booming footfall. The particulates whirled like a storm in the light from the Knight's lumens, filling Danial's path with a golden haze.

He pushed deeper, into warehouse chambers that hadn't seen human usage in what must have been decades. Perhaps centuries. Small mountains of crates sat abandoned beneath dust sheets that were probably hundreds of years older than Danial himself. Web-strewn aquilas lowered down from huge, cracked walls. Dust had collected into thick dunes. In places, *Oath* was forced to lengthen its stride in order to step over fallen pillars or heaps of rubble, and more than once Danial saw scurrying things the size of hunting canids fleeing the light of his lamps. This lightless warren would be dangerous to a man on foot. It didn't matter; cocooned within his Knight, Danial was beyond such concerns.

Beyond a partially-collapsed warehouse chamber dotted with the rusting corpses of tanks, Danial found himself entering an altogether more sacred space. *Oath*'s feet clanged upon riveted metal, and its lumen picked out old cogitator banks and arcane machineries looming all around. High on one wall was the

cog-and-skull emblem of the Machine God, its eye lenses glowing from some internal power source despite what must have been years of neglect. Or perhaps it was divinity that kept the embers alive. If he was to commune with the spirits of his throne, he wanted the Emperor watching over him. A place of ancient faith seemed apt.

Danial closed his eyes and wrapped both hands around his grandfather's amulet. Pushing down his disquiet, he opened his mind to the whispers of his ancestors, the ghosts in his throne.

Danial breathed slowly, waiting, beginning to feel faintly foolish and slightly relieved at the same time. And then quite suddenly a susurrus of half-understood voices engulfed him, their words building in urgency by the moment. Rather than fight, or force their words to make sense, Danial gathered his courage and let himself fall into their midst, sinking back into the mass of half-seen shadows and clutching hands. He parted the whisperers' curtain, and stared into the cold, dead eyes of the Knights Draconis from ages past. As he looked into his ancestors' eyes, so they looked into his and truly saw him for the first time. Danial felt a sudden surge of panic as the spirits of the dead pressed in on all sides. He tried to open his eyes, but couldn't. He tried to reach for *Oath*'s machine-spirit, but its reassuring solidity was gone. Ice cold waters closed over his head. A whispering shroud slithered over his face. Muttering voices swelled into a thunder that deafened his thoughts, and Danial thought he heard the dracon roaring. Then blackness took him.

...He was a man far from home. An explorer. One who had volunteered to depart the cradle world sure in the knowledge that he would never see home or family again. The thought made him sad, but the thrill of exploration filled him. His colony ship had landed on an uncharted world, barely habitable by humans, and had become a fortress and a home for its crew of colonists. Now he strode out in one of the STC biped-walkers that his ship's systems had created. A Knight, they called it, and so too was he…

...He was a warrior, a loyal man faced by the horror of disloyalty. He was a Knight of the House Draconis, marching beneath the colours of High King Rhoderic Tan Chimaeros to war across a burning plain. Before him were arrayed the traitors who had allied themselves with the Warmaster Horus. Knights of House Hydrax and House Medusos…

...He was a Knight engaging in a dual of honour upon the great Jousting Plains of the Valatane…

...He was a herald to the High King, holding his ion shield firm as alien energy

weapons battered at it…

…He was a warrior beset by bellowing greenskins that swarmed up the legs of his immobilised steed…

On and on it went, until Danial feared he would go mad, or else lose his sense of self forever amidst these whirling ghosts.

Please, he thought desperately, willing them to understand his fear and confusion. For a moment he felt his mind break the surface. Determined, he sought not to break free, but to ask his questions. Please, I seek your counsel, he thought. High King Tolwyn is dead and I am his son and heir. Viscount Gerraint Tan Chimaeros has led his House into heresy and I must stop him. I must understand my enemy. Please, help me. Ghostly voices howled and chanted and muttered all around, and then he was dragged down again.

…He observed now as through a silvered veil. A young Knight, tall and with flowing raven hair, strode through the fallen remains of an Adrastapolian Keep. He realised with a jolt that it was Gerraint Tan Chimaeros. Young, handsome, and whole, wearing upon his brow the crown of the High King of Adrastapol. Banners hung upon the walls of that blackened place, their swirling design strange and unfamiliar. Gerraint strode through veils of mist and shadow to a fallen mound of rubble and began to drag rocks from the heap. Revealed beneath was a crumpled human form. Alicia Kar Manticos. So young, little more than a child, and sorely hurt. Bending gently down, Gerraint lifted the wounded girl in his arms and bore her away…

…Gerraint again, older now and bearing fresh scars. The Viscount Tan Chimaeros no longer wore his crown, and his body was partially supported by the augmetic brace. Gerraint stood before a row of sarcophagi, each draped in an Imperial flag, and Alicia stood at his side in a black gown and mourning mask. Tolwyn stood on Gerraint's other side, speaking quietly and earnestly to the Viscount Tan Chimaeros. Suddenly angry, Gerraint snatched the nearest of the aquila banners. Hurling it to the floor, he turned and stormed silently away through the whirling shadows. Tolwyn and Alicia remained, talking for a time, slowly drawing closer together. They turned towards one another, so close that they almost touched…

…a dark place, and a cloaked figure receding away down a corridor. It swept banners on the walls as it walked, the crest of House Chimaeros but different somehow. Wrong. The figure rounded a corner and saw two more figures, cloaked and robed, waiting at the end of the corridor. The images were dimming. Grey strands of smoke tore apart, and Danial's breath became laboured as he

clung to the vision, trying to see the faces lurking beneath those hoods. A heavy, ironbound door swung open at the end of the corridor, admitting the absolute pitch darkness of the void. Something terrible stirred in that darkness, something with a single, staring eye that began to draw him in against his will. Something that, impossibly, knew he was watching from beyond the veil of the vision. He felt as though he were drowning, dying. Dimly he could hear his medicae monitors pinging and shrieking in alarm as his vital signs fell, but he could no more escape this vision than he could his duty as High King. And then suddenly he heard a voice, and felt

hands shaking him, slapping his face and dragging him out of his trance. Danial gasped in a great lungful of air, the terror of the thing that had almost taken him into its terrible darkness still lingering. He felt a burning heat in his palms, and realised that it came from his grandfather's amulet. His eyes snapped open, wild with fear and anger. Jennika was crouched beside his throne, her face inches from his, and the carapace hatch of his Knight was open.

'Jen,' he gasped, and grabbed her in a fierce, terrified hug. His big sister wrapped her arms around him for a moment, squeezing him tight, before she released him and rocked back on her heels in the confined space of the cockpit.

'What were you thinking?' she said angrily. 'Disappearing like that? We thought the traitors had gotten to you somehow! And this? What were you…' She stopped, and Danial realised that his face must be radiating the horror that she had pulled him out of. 'Da, what is it?' she asked. 'What did you see?'

'I can't do this any more, Jen,' he replied, his voice quivering with emotions barely held in check. 'I can't. I'm no king. I'm not even sure father was. Jen, you do it. You'd make a wonderful queen, wouldn't you? Our first? You can, you should, because I just… Jen, I…'

'Danial,' said Jennika firmly, her voice cutting through his rising panic. 'I can't. It doesn't matter if you want me to. It doesn't matter if I want to, and believe me, brother, part of me does. We're Knights. Honour, tradition, pride, duty, they're everything we have. So whatever it is you saw, whatever you were trying to do, I need you to put it aside and be High King now.'

Danial took a determined breath and nodded.

'The sentries have seen something, Da,' said Jennika. 'Brother, it's House Chimaeros. We've found them.' Danial nodded again, taking another deep breath, calming as his mind began to work again.

'Show me,' he said.

Three of them walked their Knights back together: Danial, Jennika, and Sire Percivane Dar Draconis. Jennika assured Danial that he would be better off hearing the news directly from the scouts that had gathered it. Thus the Knights spoke only sparingly as they cut a swift path back through the tunnels to the inhabited warehouses, meeting up with several more returning search parties on their way. Danial turned his visions over in his mind as they walked. If his flickering chrono was telling the truth, he had lost almost six hours in the embrace of his throne mechanicum, yet it felt like the experience had lasted only minutes. What else had he seen in that time and not remembered? What had his ancestors revealed to him? The ghosts of his throne seemed quiescent for now, but for how long? These were the thoughts whirling around Danial's mind as he brought his Knight in through the encampment, but he dismissed them in a heartbeat as he saw the assemblage that awaited him.

Disengaging from his throne, Danial clambered from the *Oath*'s carapace hatch and dismounted. Jennika and the brawny Sire Percivane met him at his Knight's feet.

'There will be voices raised for revenge, brother,' muttered Jennika as they approached. 'Loud voices. I would counsel caution but you are the High King

now, and the decision falls to you. Just know I'll support you in whatever course you choose.'

Danial nodded gratefully to his sister.

He guessed that every single loyalist Knight had gathered, along with a number of Sacristans and Cadians.

The Knights bowed to him as he passed, and the young king saw many curious glances from those wondering where he had been, and why. He shrugged them off and advanced to the centre of the gathering, where a pair of Cadian Guardsmen stood ramrod straight. Major Kovash hovered close by, while Polluxis, Luk, Markos, Gustev and other worthies moved forward to stand with them.

'Major Kovash,' began Danial. 'My sister tells me that your men have located the traitors?'

'That's correct, my lord,' said Kovash, saluting smartly. 'Troopers Stransk and Vance, of fourth platoon.'

Danial glanced at the two troopers, who saluted in turn. They were hard looking men, grizzled and intense.

Kovash gestured to the two Guardsmen to proceed.

'Trooper Stransk and I were on watch at waypoint seven-omega,' said one of the Cadians in clipped tones, 'from oh-three-hundred hours sidereal, scheduled for relief at oh-fifteen-hundred. At oh-six-hundred-seventeen, Trooper Stransk sighted three Knight-class enemy walkers crossing from east to west across our grid-locale. Enemy were observed at approximately half a mile distance, crossing the grid at a steady stride, and with lumens lit and sweeping.'

'What House?' asked Danial. 'Did they see you?'

'Their heraldry was consistent with House Chimaeros,' replied Trooper Vance, 'and no, in our opinion, my lord, they were on a reconnaissance mission. Most likely part of a circuit or grid sweep. During the remainder of our watch, Trooper Stransk and I observed a further three parties of House Chimaeros Knights moving along the same path.'

'It sounds like hunting parties,' said Luk. 'Beaters, trying to flush us.'

'It does,' said Danial. He saw now why the others were excited. The Code Chivalric dictated that any such hunt be conducted from a central staging post to ensure coordination. If the Chimaeros and Wyvorn Knights still obeyed even the rudiments of their training, then Gerraint or Dunkan would likely be there, commanding the search.

'We can turn their hunt against them,' said Sire Markos. 'Mount up, everything

we've got left, follow their trail back to their stronghold, and catch them by surprise.'

'Show the wretches what it feels like, eh?' added Gustev, thumping one fist into his other palm.

'It's quite an assumption, sires,' said Jennika. 'What if they're outbound from the valle electrum, and returning there when their sweep is done? Or just roving bands, with no central cohesion? Emperor, even worse, what if it's a trap, and they're just trying to lure us out?'

'They don't know we're here,' insisted Luk. 'So how could they be setting a trap?'

'Another assumption,' replied Jennika, but Gustev Tan Minotos cut her off.

'Lady Tan Draconis, we fled the turncoats' ambush wounded and demoralised. Gerraint Tan Chimaeros is a direct and decisive commander – if he'd known where we were, he would have struck the killing blow. Even if he had a reason to hold off, he would never have been able to restrain that thug Tan Wyvorn. And Emperor alone knows about those Word Bearers abominations.'

'Considering the atmospheric conditions, and the continued security of our rally point,' put in Major Kovash, 'it does seem unlikely that the enemy knows our whereabouts at this time, Lady Tan Draconis.'

Jennika bridled at the grandmarshal's boorish interruption, but she seemed mollified by the Cadian officer's words.

'Even assuming that this is a genuine error on their part,' she said, reining in the rumblings of the Knights, 'the fact remains that we don't know where they're going, or what strength of the foe would await us there.'

'It can't be the valle electrum,' said Sire Olric confidently. 'That much seems clear. The round trip for our enemies after the bridge fell would be wildly circuitous. It wouldn't be practical to maintain such a regular patrol from so distant a locale – the Knights' machine-spirits would become fatigued.'

Danial was beginning to feel a spark of excitement in his gut now. What if it were true? If there was a chance to execute one or both of the traitor leaders then they had to take it, irrespective of the risks. He wasn't sure he understood the full import of what his ancestors had shown him yet, but he was certain that the Viscount Tan Chimaeros was dabbling with dark forces that made him even more dangerous. Typical, he thought, that he had spent days in waiting, and now there was no time to think everything through. Still, to eliminate that threat before it could bring further harm to his subjects would be a relief beyond

Danial's ability to express.

Then, of course, there was the not-inconsiderable matter of exacting revenge for his father's death. That alone made him want to seize the opportunity with both hands. He remembered Jennika's words, though, tempering his growing excitement with caution.

'High Sacristan,' he said, 'tell me that you can ward off the scrapcode at last?'

The robed priest bowed his head, eye-lenses glinting.

'I regret, High King Danial Tan Draconis, that we cannot do so yet. I cogitate a minimum of sixteen hours and twenty-one minutes approximate before our wards are satisfactory. Additional, in eighteen hours precisely the micromanufactora aboard our Crawlers will have completed construction of a new wave of cherubim to replace the losses suffered by the Heavenly Host. At that time, it will be viable to deploy with full strategic cognisance.'

'Too long!' barked Markos angrily. 'Dangerously so! Tan Chimaeros is a lethal foe, and even if he doesn't know where we are, you can be sure that the longer we leave him untroubled, the worse a situation we'll face when we finally sally forth. Gerraint and his traitors are out there now. We've got an opportunity, but who knows if it'll still be there the best part of a day later. Danial, lad, wars weren't won with an excess of caution. We should seize this moment while it's there. For your father's sake.'

Danial could hear the sense in Markos' words, but also the frustration of a Knight trapped by inactivity for too long. He felt it too, like the drudgery of courtly ritual magnified a hundredfold. He wanted revenge, and he felt in his gut that his fragile new rule needed his warriors' approval lest the throne crumble beneath him.

'High King,' put in Lady Eleanat of House Pegasson. 'I would urge you, consider carefully. Surely at this juncture our priority should be to consolidate with other Imperial forces. We are stronger together, after all, and we have no idea of our enemies' numbers. Our duty is still victory on this world in the Emperor's name.'

'A victory that we're not going to win while my father draws breath,' said Luk grimly. 'He's dangerous, you know this, Lady Eleanat. I mean no disrespect, for the wisdom of House Pegasson is beyond question. But Markos is right. The longer we leave Gerraint Tan Chimaeros to plot, the worse our chances of victory become.'

Lady Eleanat glanced scornfully at Luk.

'When I wish the counsel of a Freeblade, I will demand it of you,' she said,

sniffing haughtily.

Danial drew a deep breath, and looked to Jennika. She inclined her head to him, her expression neutral.

'It is your decision, my liege,' she said. 'We will obey whatever command you give.'

Danial saw again, in that moment, the terrible dark doorway, and the hooded figures stood around it. He saw the corrupted Chimaeros banners, and Gerraint Tan Chimaeros' fist ripping through his father's steed. He thought of the same thing happening to his sister because he had shown weakness, or hesitation.

'Very well,' he said. 'I have heard your thoughts, and made my decision. High Sacristan, I want you to redouble your efforts. Whatever it takes, I want our vox and auspex fully operational again.'

'As the Omnissiah wills it, so it shall be,' replied Polluxis.

'Jennika,' Danial continued. 'I want you to handpick two lances from amongst our remaining strength to lead. You will remain here to protect the Sacristans and secure this position.'

Danial knew his sister well enough to see her frustration at his choice, but she nodded all the same.

'Major Kovash,' he continued. 'Keep your forces ready to move out at a moment's notice, and if we have not returned or gotten word to you within one day, you and my sister are to make for Pentakhost. If we're lost, I need people I trust to rally the defences there and be ready to continue the war.'

'It shall be done, High King,' replied Kovash, saluting crisply.

'The rest of you,' said Danial, raising his voice and casting his gaze around the circle. 'Make immediate preparations and don panoply. We are marching out on the enemy's trail. Nominate your best trackers – they will lead this hunt. We will stalk our betrayers back to their lair, and there destroy them!'

Cheers erupted at Danial's words. Fists punched the air, and blades were brandished.

'For High King Danial,' shouted Sire Percivane. 'And for the Emperor!'

'For my father,' replied Danial grimly.

The Adrastapolian Knights emerged from their sanctuary at full stride, pounding up the ferrocrete ramps from the shadowed warehouses that had hidden them. Their lumens were lit and their auto-pennants snapped and fluttered in the whistling winds. As the lightning-split clouds spread above them, scrapcode began to claw at the Knights' systems. Forty Imperial Knights spread out into the

crumbling ruin of the industria, towering gods of iron and adamantium shaking the rubble with their footfalls as they formed up behind their scouts.

As he manoeuvred *Oath of Flame* into position directly behind the vanguard of his force, Danial remembered his sister's last words to him before he mounted up.

'Take care, Danial,' she had said, gripping his wrist. 'I should be going with you, and fighting at your side, but I understand your choice. Just know, little brother, you're the future of our House. More than that, you're the last family I have left. Don't you dare die out there, or I'll find you when I get to the Emperor's table and kick your arse.'

Danial had not wanted to leave Jennika behind, but there was no one he trusted more. If he did not return from this hunt, he knew that he could count on her to get back to the Imperial lines and keep the fight going from there.

Touching his grandfather's amulet, Danial wished his sister good fortune and safety beneath the dracon's eye. Then he opened a vox channel.

'Knights of Adrastapol. We march.'

A chorus of static-warped cheers came back to him, along with a comforting swell of pride and determination from within his throne. They would right a great wrong this day, he vowed as *Oath* swayed and rumbled around him. He owed his father that.

The Knights followed a westerly course. No Crawlers accompanied them – Danial was not willing to risk the small compliment of Sacristans who remained. At the fore, the trackers followed electrochemical machine-spoor and heavy, Knightly footprints. Lady Eleanat of House Pegasson led the scouts in her Paladin *Sagasitus*, for her skill as a machine-scout was well known. With her marched Sire Boriss of House Minotos, and Lady Suset Dar Draconis, whose abilities with auspex and sensor-tracking during her years of squiring had been second to none.

Those three led the way through empty, rain-lashed streets. Rusting vehicles were strewn across the Knights' path, bullet-riddled remnants of the initial uprising. They passed through tumbledown mercantile quarters, where once barter-markets had crammed the transitways between towering commercia and aquila-fronted warehouses. They skirted collapsed hab-blocks, and made their way through the scrap-metal and rotting remains of old battles. The Knights pushed on as the hours ticked slowly past, beneath the dead-eyed glare of ancient gargoyles and the stained-glass judgement of immortalised saints. Once or twice

the advance slowed as the trackers sought out the fading trail, but always it was found again. The Knights' auspexes swept their surroundings, but found no hint of danger.

The march was nearly four hours in when the terrain began to change. Crags broke the urban sprawl. Transitways and mag-rail lines wound between the rocky outcroppings, which towered over the advancing Knights. Their flanks were thick with industrial pipework, petrochemical vats, and jutting agglomerations of refinery structures that snorted flame and smoke into the skies. The Adrastapolians slowed as they pushed along the ravines between the crags, where in places only two or three Knights could walk abreast. Warning that the terrain was perfect for an ambush, Sire Markos dropped back, telling Danial that he would keep his eye on the rear-guard.

After another wearing hour of cautious advance, Lady Eleanat and her scouts voxed that there was, indeed, an enemy stronghold, and that it lay dead ahead. The loyal Knights of Adrastapol joined Eleanat amidst the shadows at the edge of the crag-fields, and beheld a grandiose sight.

'What,' breathed Danial, slowing the *Oath* to a standstill, 'is that?'

Rising from a landscape of petrochemical swamps and abandoned manufactory plots, a singularly vast tower rose into the sky. Gun turrets and huge stablights dotted the fortress' flanks between spy-gargoyles and tangles of auspex arrays. The slab-sided building was crowned with an enormous bronze aquila, while its feet were surrounded by walls, razor wire and squat, ugly guard towers. An armoured gate barred access to the compound beyond, standing twice the height of the tallest Knight. Several Knights in the panoply of House Chimaeros could clearly be seen, striding a slow patrol route around the fortress' outer wall.

'Doesn't look as though they've detected us,' said Danial.

'We're still outside effective auspex range, sire,' replied Lady Suset. 'The rain and shadows should prevent physical detection, Emperor willing.'

'This must be the Adeptus Arbites precinct-fortress for this sector,' said Danial, looking at the statues of scales and cruel-faced judges that topped the building's secondary spires. 'A good choice of stronghold, fortified and well-armed, too, if they've roused the machine-spirits of those turrets.'

'Long range auspex shows multiple engine signatures within the compound around the building's base,' reported Lady Eleanat, 'and the Chimaeros machine-spoor leads right up to the gates.'

'No way to tell for sure whether Tan Chimaeros or Tan Wyvorn are actually in there,' said Markos.

‘Agreed,’ said Danial, his mind working over possible plans of attack. ‘But we can’t ignore the chance that they are. Scouts, can we get any more data information?’

‘I’m working on my auspex,’ replied Suset Dar Draconis. ‘There’s a few advantages to having grown up in the Drake’s Forge. Just… um… don’t tell the Sacristans, my liege…’

‘Can you see anything more of the foe, Lady Suset?’ he asked with the ghost of a smile.

‘Well, my king, I think I may have offended *Embersword’*s machine-spirit, but I can tell you that there’s… perhaps… eight Knights in there? Twelve at the most? As well as the sentries, of course. But I’m reading some strange energy interference, also.’

‘Good enough, my lady,’ said Danial, feeling strangely buoyed by Suset’s aid. ‘Thank you. Say fifteen Knights in total – that’s within the strictures of the Code for garrisoning a hunt stronghold. Or providing Gerraint Tan Chimaeros with a bodyguard.’

‘It is,’ agreed Sire Olric. ‘I counsel that we strike at once, while the numbers are in our favour.’

‘If Gerraint’s there then we put him down like the dog he is,’ agreed Markos. ‘If not then I say we take the place and lay a trap of our own for their returning hunt parties.’

‘There’s still the chance that this is a trap,’ cautioned Danial. ‘The terrain here is too open to conceal steeds. But we don’t know what other heretical trickery they might have prepared.’ Again he saw the dark door, and the ominous thing that lurked within.

‘Whatever they’re up to,’ said Markos, ‘we need to make a choice. *You* need to make a choice, lad. Do we get down there and attack, or turn around and march all the way back for nought?’

Honour, lad, whispered a voice from his throne. *Courage,* came another, and *a strong leader doesn’t turn from a fight*. Yet another sighed through his mind like a cold breeze, a voice he thought he dimly recognised. *Keep your wits about you, when hunting a beast to its lair* it said, *for there’s nought more dangerous than cornered prey*.

The herald made no attempt to hide which course he felt was right, and Danial knew he was not alone. He could hardly march his warriors all the way out here and then refuse a chance to strike down the traitor leaders. He was still concerned. But forty Knights against fifteen? Those were the sort of fights the

loyalists needed to be engaging in and winning swiftly, if they wanted to bring their foe's numbers back down to a level with their own. In the end, it wasn't really a choice at all.

'Very well,' said Danial. 'We have a chance to strike a blow against our foes, and we shall not shrink from it. With our numbers and the element of surprise, a swift, decisive strike will secure victory before the traitors can react. Priority targets are the Knights outside the walls – those we eliminate with mid-range firepower. Meanwhile, Wardens and Crusaders will destroy the main gate to the compound. Give us a way in, but expect the enemy to mass around it. Gallants and Errants, you will form the lance point. Aim for the gate, but be prepared for swift manoeuvres once our enemies commit their strength. Let the draconsfire burn within you! In Excelsium Furore!'

Danial felt a thrill of adrenaline course through him as his steed strode from the shadows. Around him his subjects did the same, servomotors howling and reactors roaring as they accelerated to a walk, and then a decisive stride. The handful of surviving Gallants moved to the fore, their pilots goading them into a loping charge at the forefront of the attack. As one, the loyalist Knights of Adrastapol emerged from the ravines of the crag-field and out across the wasteland before the Arbites fortress.

'High King,' came Gustev's voice across the vox. 'Permission to give 'em a taste of the third aria?'

'Not this time, grandmarshal,' replied Danial. 'We keep surprise on our side for as long as we can.'

Pride swelled within Danial's breast at the sight of his loyal Knights pressing forward into battle, their noble steeds glorious. It felt good to be striking back, at last. Good to finally act, and whatever consequences came from that decision he would own them, as a good king must.

Ahead, the Chimaeros steeds began to turn, their auspexes no doubt howling warnings.

'Honoured sires,' said Danial. 'Unshroud your wrath, and fire at will.'

Several dozen weapons flared in response, shells and missiles whipping across the wastes. Two enemy Knights were smashed from their feet instantly, while the third staggered as explosions battered its shield. At the same time, explosions blossomed around the gate. Shrapnel flew. With a monstrous groan, the massive gates buckled inward and fell, crashing backwards into the compound beyond.

'Auspex,' said Markos over the vox, 'enemy movements?'

'Beyond the gate, sire,' replied Suset in a voice of intense concentration. 'The

scrapcode's making it difficult but… yes, they've moved to either edge of the gateway. Whoever goes through that gate is going to get hit hard.'

Danial smiled coldly, and felt a surge of confidence as the enemy reacted as he had predicted they would. *When menaced by a narrow breach, the wise Knight makes another* whispered his throne, and Danial nodded in agreement.

'Gallants, Errants,' he ordered. 'Slow your stride. All long guns, split fire between mark point-one-three and mark point-one-nine.'

Danial's fingers twitched in his haptic gauntlets, flagging targeting data for his comrades. A moment later the thunder of heavy guns sounded. Fifty yards to either side of the gate, devastating firepower chewed into ferrocrete and slab-armour. Shot after shot struck home, and amidst thunderous clouds of explosions the walls blew in as savagely as the gate had. Through the smoke and flying rubble, Chimaeros Knights could be seen reeling back as the debris hit them.

'Now,' shouted Danial, adrenaline surging, 'Gallants, Errants, force those breaches. For Tolwyn!'

'For Tolwyn!' they roared, and the ground shook as the Knights pressed their attack. Desultory enemy fire whipped through the newly blasted breaches, but it splashed from the ion shields of the loyalist Gallants. *Oath of Flame* loped in behind Sire Jeremial Dar Minotos' *Thunderclap*. Through fire and smoke, Danial saw the Minotos Gallant shrug off the churning fire of a Chimaeros Knight Warden, then swing a ruinous uppercut into its attacker. Sire Jeremial's thunderstrike gauntlet ripped up through his enemy's sternum-plating and into the cockpit behind. Caged lightning leapt wildly as the Chimaeros Knight came apart in a terrible way, and its sundered wreckage crashed over backwards.

Danial swept left and right for his own targets. Wading in through the rubble and smoke, a foe flanked *Thunderclap.* An enemy Errant, about to fire.

Danial snarled, lost now to the angry roar of his Knight and the pounding blood in his temples. Taking three ground-shaking strides, he rammed the whirling teeth of his chainsword into the enemy Knight's thermal cannon, right at the joint between weapon and arm. Hydraulic supports and coolant cables were torn apart as Danial's blade ripped through the arm. He hauled the weapon back, sparks raining down as the Chimaeros Errant's cannon dropped like deadweight. His enemy reeled, suddenly off balance, and Danial barged in with *Oath*'s armoured shoulder guard. The Chimaeros Knight lurched sickeningly beyond its tipping point. Frantically his foe tried to get a foot down, but his Knight's agility was not great enough. The Knight Errant toppled sideways and crashed to the ground. The fallen war machine convulsed with explosions. Leaving it for dead,

Danial stepped *Oath* around the shuddering war engine and on into the compound.

The assault was going well. Only Sire Percivane's *Firestorm* was damaged. The machine's generator housing had taken a hit, causing a chain overload that had burned out half its heat-sinks and forced the Knight into an emergency shutdown. *Firestorm* would walk again, given a few minutes for its machine-spirit to calm its choler. Danial could hear Sire Percivane now over the vox, chanting prayers to appease the spirit of his steed.

By comparison, the enemy had been annihilated. Nine Chimaeros Knights had been unseated. Their steeds lay strewn beyond the breaches, too damaged to fight or else wrecked altogether.

Danial looked out now across the compound itself, a vast open space stencilled with gothic slogans and coloured guidance lines. It was dotted with wire-fenced buildings and smaller defence lines, and showed battle-damage. Three surviving enemy Knights stood half a mile ahead, near the feet of the fortress. They looked to have taken no part in the fighting, instead standing and waiting with their shields raised.

'None of those is my father's machine,' said Luk bitterly. 'The bastard isn't here.'

'Then let's finish them off and be done with it,' urged Markos.

'But what are they doing?' asked Lady Suset. 'Why aren't they attacking? Or retreating, for that matter?'

'Hold fire,' ordered Danial, slowing *Oath* to a walk. 'The Code dictates we at least give them a chance to surrender. And live Knights can give us information that the dead can't.'

'These traitors don't get to surrender, lad,' growled Markos. 'Give the order. Let us finish them off.'

'No, wait,' said Suset. 'I'm reading those strange energy signatures again… What does that Gallant have in its gauntlet?'

The Knights' weapons were lowered, as were their auto-pennants, in the gesture for surrender. However, the Gallant was holding its thunderstrike gauntlet out before it, the fingers curled half-closed and the palm turned upwards. It reminded Danial of the time Luk had found a tygertail moth when they were squirelings, and held the fragile creature out for him to see.

Slowly, the war machine's fist opened. A dishevelled figure was revealed, clinging to the Knight's servo-driven fingers, suspended thirty feet off the ground with her fine robes torn and her hair flying in the wind.

‘Alicia,’ gasped Luk.

Luk's heart lurched at the sight of Alicia. Gerraint's consort had borne Luk into this world, and though the Code forbade him from calling a consort from a disgraced house his mother, she was precisely that. Now, in his apparent madness, it seemed that his father was prepared to throw Alicia's life away as casually as his son's.

'What on earth is this?' said Markos in a tone of disgust. 'These traitors must really be getting desperate.'

Alicia looked terrified. She was shouting something as she clung perilously to the Knight's finger, but Luk couldn't make out her words.

'We have to, Da,' he urged. 'I can't lose them both on this damn world.'

'Knights,' said Danial. 'Shroud your weapons and hold fire. Advance quarter pace, draw up fifty yards distance. Gustev, no bravado from your men please, sire. Markos, hold ten Knights back at the breach and watch for enemy stragglers.'

'Be careful, lad,' warned Markos. 'Don't let those traitors get the drop on us just because they've a hostage in hand.'

'We will not risk the death of an innocent woman, sire,' replied Danial, and despite the panic that gripped him, Luk heard a note of steel in his friend's voice

that hadn't been there before.

Luk twitched his haptic gauntlets and blink-clicked a sequence of runes in his retinal display. *Sword of Heroes* purred around him as it gradually bled power from its weapon systems, drawing it back into reserve capacitors somewhere in its mechanical heart.

You're Freeblade now, lad came a bitter whisper from his throne, the voice of his old great uncle Osraek. *You've no reason to obey the orders of the dracon whelp.* Other voices spilled over and around Osraek's, some urging caution, others action. Luk gritted his teeth and shut them all out.

'I won't do anything to endanger her,' he muttered to himself, and to his ghosts. 'But the moment those bastards release her…' Energy bloomed through his thermal cannon again for a moment, a sympathetic response to his anger, and Luk hurriedly bled it away. His heart thumped sickeningly in his chest as he walked his Knight forward and brought it to a stop on Danial's left. Sire Sylvest drew up to Luk's right, and one by one the other Knights took their places in the line. Soon, a long, curved battle-line of loyalist Knights stood facing the three Chimaeros steeds across the rain-lashed compound. Pennants snapped in the wind. Lightning flickered fitfully overhead.

'Knights of House Chimaeros,' began Danial through his vox-amplifiers. 'I declare you traitors to the Emperor of Mankind, and to Adrastapol. Surrender now. Do not tarnish your honour further by harming a defenceless woman.'

Static hissed across the vox. Luk tried to control his pounding heart.

'No,' came the amplified reply from the Knight Gallant's pilot. Sire Hectour, Luk thought distractedly. He'd drunk mead with this man, played regicide. Now, the Freeblade barely recognised his voice. Hectour had never sounded so cruel. 'You are no High King, draconspawn. Neither was your coward father. The crown belongs to Gerraint Tan Chimaeros. You will offer us *your* surrender, now, or watch the consort die.'

Luk blinked. This was why his father had turned upon his own family? The crown?

Angrily, he played his auspex across the enemy Knights, looking for some weakness to exploit, some clever way to turn the situation around. He could see nothing. As a lad he'd loved the tales of Sire Adrastapol, the dashing Knight of the Mountains who always upheld the Code, always won the maiden fair, and always saved the day. Luk had believed on some level that piloting his own Knight in battle would be that way. The reality – watching helpless, as a traitor of his own House threatened to crush his mother to death before his eyes – was a

bitter draught to swallow.

'Danial,' came Sire Markos' voice across the vox, 'I know she was your father's friend, but…'

'I'm not an idiot, Sire Markos,' responded Danial frostily.

'I can knock out the Gallant's brachial actuators, cut the power to his gauntlet,' urged Sire Olric from his Crusader, *Draconsflame*. 'Let me take a shot, my liege.'

'The risk's too great,' replied Luk, his voice desperate. 'She could be killed.'

'Let me challenge him,' urged Grandmarshal Gustev. 'Settle it with the Code.'

'I think they've abandoned the Code, grandmarshal,' replied Danial. 'Hold.'

'What do we do, King Danial?' asked Sylvest Dar Draconis nervously. 'I don't think they're going to wait forever.'

As if to reinforce the young Knight's words, the lumens on the three Chimaeros Knights flashed through the gloom, and their leader spoke again.

'Now, *your highness*,' said Sire Hectour, and Luk thought again how strange he sounded. 'What is your decision?'

Luk looked at Alicia, clinging to her captor's ironclad hand, her raven hair plastered to her face. To see such terror on the face of one always so composed and reassuring terrified Luk in turn.

'Da,' he voxed on a private channel, 'please…'

'This gesture of defiance earns you nothing,' said Danial. 'You know I cannot surrender, and you know I will not let you leave this place alive if you harm the consort. Killing her would be an act of idiotic spite that would gain you nothing but a swift and painful death. End this now and I give you my word, you will be taken as captives of war, and treated with honour.'

'Come on,' whispered Luk, desperately willing the Chimaeros Knights to comply. 'Come on, *please*, this is insane. Just let her go, you idiots. Don't make him choose.'

The Chimaeros Knights stood silent and unmoving, and Luk dared to hope for a peaceful resolution. He flexed his haptic gauntlets nervously, rolled his shoulders against the padded metal of his throne, and offered up a silent prayer to the Emperor.

At some unspoken command, Sire Hectour opened the digits of his gauntlet. The consort's look of fear vanished, and slowly she stood up on the Knight's palm. Alicia ignored the wind and rain as she drew herself up imperiously and stared at the loyalist Knights.

She spoke and, impossibly, they all heard her. The consort's voice spilled

through the Adrastapolian vox channels, warm and assured. His mother was amused, Luk realised in growing confusion.

'I suppose that really was too much to hope for,' said Alicia Kar Manticos, smiling ruefully. 'The complete surrender of the new High King and all his Knights, for the life of one consort? Arrogance on my part, I fear, but I thought perhaps I might be able to save you.'

'Lady Alicia.' Danial's voice sounded uncertain. 'What is this?'

'Mother,' blurted Luk, unable to restrain himself. 'Did they hurt you?'

The consort raised one hand in a placating gesture. She seemed perfectly balanced upon her perch, impervious to the wind that whipped at her, and Luk felt as though his confusion and fear would suffocate him if something didn't make sense soon.

'I am unharmed, Luk,' she said, and her voice reassured him despite everything, on some instinctive level. 'In fact, I am very well. Unlike you, it seems. A Freeblade? Oh my boy, I'm sorry for that. I'm sorry for all of this, really. You deserved better. But I knew that you didn't have it in you to turn against your friend and his House, and your father has always trusted my judgement.'

Luk recoiled in his throne as if slapped. He shook his head unconsciously.

'No,' he whispered. 'No, not you too, Emperor please, not you too…'

But Alicia was still talking, to Danial now as though she had dismissed Luk altogether.

'To answer your question, Danial, this is justice for House Chimaeros. We have taken back the crown, and we shall take back our world, from you and from the rotting corpse that you worship.'

'Heresy!' cried Sire Olric through his vox amplifier, even as a chorus of disbelief and anger swelled across the Adrastapolian vox.

'A fool's word for truth,' said Alicia, her voice cutting through the loyalists' outrage. 'The god that I worship, that I have always worshipped, is one of knowledge and wisdom, not ignorance and fear. You are all here by his will, and I am sorry Danial, Luk, truly I am, my poor boys, but it is by his will that you shall all now die. A sacrifice is due. The pretender's line must end, so that House Chimaeros can rule unopposed. As it always should have been.'

Luk felt like he couldn't breathe. This couldn't be his mother talking. She had gone mad. Or perhaps he had. Perhaps the Becoming had broken his mind, and he was hallucinating all of this in some dank cell…

Dimly, Luk heard Danial issue the order to open fire. And then the ghosts of his throne were there, whispering into his mind and urging him to reclaim his

honour by doing the unthinkable. The traitors must die.

All of them.

Explosions and searing energy beams engulfed the traitors, and the Freeblade's optic dampers kicked in for a moment, dulling his view. Luk blinked the filters away, peering through the smoke and rain, needing to see the damage done despite the horror he felt. Yet as the wind clawed the blast-fumes to tatters, the three Chimaeros Knights stood unharmed, shielded by a shimmering wall of blue flame as Alicia marshalled the same unnatural energies across her outstretched hands.

'Witch!' roared Gustev Tan Minotos, storming forwards. His Crusader, *Thunderhymn*, unleashed every weapon, hammering the consort's unnatural shield. Sorcery, thought Luk, nauseously. Give it its true name.

Luk watched in disbelief as missiles wisped to steam and bullets turned to clouds of flittering moths. Alicia, her beautiful features set in a cold mask, uttered a string of strange words. Her voice rang across the compound like a tolling bell.

Whirling energies surrounded Alicia, and she rose aloft amidst the howling vortex. Her tattered robes whipped madly around her, and her eyes shone with blue light. The consort swept her hands together, and from them leapt a searing beam of blue and purple energy. It stabbed straight through Grandmarshal Gustev's shield, sending fat sparks raining down as it blew out the Knight's ion generator and struck his steed straight in its helm.

'Emperor protect me!' cried Gustev over the vox as a rippling shockwave raced across the *Thunderhymn'*s armoured hull. Where the energies touched, Gustev's steed underwent an impossible transmutation, changing from adamantium and plasteel into twisted flesh and jagged bone. Fang-filled mouths yawned wide in bulging meat, vomiting streams of lurid fire. Rubbery tentacles and spars of bone burst from the steed's hull in sprays of gore. Eyes rose like blisters across the mutating Knight's hull, rolling madly as Gustev's horrified screams filled the vox. As more and more of the Knight turned from metal to biological matter, the whole vast heap collapsed under its own weight. It spilled out as a spreading pool of rubbery flesh and twitching, flailing appendages, many of which bore monstrous approximations of the grandmarshal's tortured face. Gustev screamed on for several seconds more, before his voice degenerated into a glottal roar and vanished from the vox altogether.

Luk fought down burning bile as revulsion turned his stomach. He and every other loyalist Knight stood frozen in horror at the impossibility of what they had

just witnessed.

'Do not mourn your comrade,' Alicia told them in an overlapping cacophony of voices, delirious and sorrowful, triumphant and rapturous, human and daemonic. 'He was lucky enough to feel the blessings of Tzeentch before his death.'

Luk screamed and triggered his thermal cannon. The heat beam speared towards Alicia, but she wove aside from the blast and regarded him with an expression of disappointment and pity.

'Mighty Tzeentch,' she cried out to the screaming winds, 'accept my sacrifice, and deliver your servants from harm.'

Bolts of fire leapt from her hands as every loyalist Knight opened fire at once. Yet suddenly the traitors were gone, swallowed up by a geyser of pink fire that left nothing but empty air in its wake. Shells and missiles tore into the compound as Alicia's storm of spell-fire struck the base of the precinct fortress. Blinding light overloaded sensoria, and a string of thunderous booms rolled across the compound.

'Explosives,' gasped Danial as he watched a string of fireballs roll outwards.

Rather than fade away, the roar from the blasts built to a terrible rumble. The precinct fortress shuddered like a wounded animal, and vast cracks raced up its armoured flanks.

'Get back!' ordered Danial. 'It's coming down!'

Luk wrenched at his Knight's controls even as he poured power into its motive actuators. Around him the others wheeled ponderously and strode away from the crumbling fortress. The Freeblade could see through his autosenses that they would not get clear in time. The traitors had prepared their ambush well. They must have sapped the fortress expertly, for it was violently shaking itself apart as fresh explosions stitched across its foundations. With almighty thunderclaps, slabs of the building's cyclopean superstructure sheared away and began to fall.

The ground shook beneath *Sword of Heroes*' feet as Luk pounded towards the distant breaches in the wall. Ahead, Sire Markos and the rear-guard were already loping across the plains, away from danger. To his rear, Luk saw the writhing spawn that had once been Gustev lash out with suckers and pseudopods, grasping one of the Minotos Knights as they tried to flee. Gnashing tentacles fouled the Knight's legs, and Sire Jeremial cried out in terror as his steed tripped and fell. Sparks flew as the Knight was dragged across the ground and reeled in by writhing tentacles. Gnashing maws split open in the abomination's hide, bile pouring from them as they bit down on Jeremial's steed. Then the first chunks of building crashed down, obliterating the Gustev-thing and its victim. Titanic

masses of shattered architecture slammed into the ground, some as large as drop keeps. Luk saw severed walls, ragged doorways, the trailing remnants of tiled floors and sheared cables and flailing, hard-wired servitors. He saw gun racks and cogitators and corpses amongst the tumbling wreckage, cell bars and cyber-mastiffs, yet it was the tumbling boulders that held his attention.

Luk elevated his shield, just in time for a tank-sized lump of rubble to crash against it. Blue light flared, and *Sword of Heroes* stumbled as it was almost driven to one knee, but with a scream of gyros and servo-motors the Knight kept going.

Sylvest Dar Draconis was less fortunate, a plummeting spire cutting off his scream as it drove through his fleeing Knight, bursting from its abdominal plates to leave the war machine transfixed like a sparking, twitching corpse.

Luk fed more power to his Knight's actuators, its reactor thundering and its attitudinal alarms shrilling as he forced the machine to move as fast as it could. A boulder crashed down on his right, crushing a Knight of House Pegasson. Another hammered down to Luk's rear, barely a pace behind his Knight's heels. Through his sensorium he saw it toppling towards him, its shadow engulfing his Knight. Luk roared wordlessly as he forced his Knight to run faster. There was a titanic jolt as hundreds of tons of stone crashed against his shield, causing the cockpit lights to flicker and jolts of electricity to spit from overloaded systems. Somehow, by the Emperor's grace, *Sword of Heroes* stayed on its feet, Luk crying out in triumph as he burst through the gateway and out onto the plains.

Still he ran, smaller chunks of rubble crashing and bouncing around him, deafened by the endless, impossible roar of the fortress' collapse. Luk realised with a surge of pure relief that he was clear, and slowly, shakily, eased back the power to his actuators. Only now did he see the red runes flashing, the heat-sink overloads pinging insistently. His shield was all but burned out, and he had blown something in his Knight's reactor. One leg was dragging, the Knight's machine-spirit rumbling in pain at the extremes it had been pushed to.

Panting, Luk turned *Sword of Heroes* towards the devastation of the tower. The bulk of the structure had fallen, was still falling, collapsing downwards like a never-ending avalanche that sent vast clouds of dust billowing out to enshroud the area. The cloud rose like the blast-plume of some vast orbital warhead, towering even higher into the sky than the building that had spawned it.

As his breathing slowed and the ringing in his ears faded, Luk's adrenaline drained away, replaced by cold horror at all that had come before. Only then did he hear Sire Markos' urgent voice, cutting through those of their comrades.

‘Where is the High King?’ he repeated, and Luk’s blood ran cold. ‘Danial! Confirm position. Can anyone see the king? Where the bloody hell is Danial?’

Alicia Kar Manticos and her warriors flickered back into being amid a whirling vortex of flame, precisely nine miles away from the tower. As the last of the warp flames sputtered out, Alicia collapsed, gasping for breath. Shielding herself and her Knights from harm and wreaking the change-curse upon that idiot boor Gustev had sapped her reserves. And then there had been the not insignificant feat of opening the passage in the warp for her and three fifty-foot tall war engines. Alicia was utterly hollowed out by the expenditure of power, and it would take time to recover. Still, as she pulled her ragged robes around her and stared back at the rising plume of dust and smoke on the horizon, the sorceress felt nothing but elation. The daemon’s prophecy had been fulfilled.

‘In blackened tower’s shadow, the dracon there shall die, and from its scattered ashes, a queen, instead, shall rise…’ she whispered, repeating the refrain hissed to her by That Which Dwells in Darkness.

And rise she would, just as the daemon had promised, with her Lord Gerraint at her side. She had been inducted into the worship of great Tzeentch since the day of her birth, taught his sacred ways by her family before the ignorant and the fearful had put House Manticos to death in the name of their Corpse-Emperor. She knew how to tread the paths set out for her, and how to honour daemon pacts. The blood price had been paid, and in exchange she had absolute faith that her Lord of Fates had delivered the death of Danial Tan Draconis.

Alicia ran her thumb across the elegant vox-bead she wore in one earring, muttering the incantation of awakening that Sacristan Xedediah had taught her. The machine priest had proved useful, ambitious enough to be swayed to her cause with only the promise of the forbidden secrets that Tzeentch could whisper. Ambitious enough to creep through the throne-vaults of Houses Chimaeros and Wyvorn, tainting each throne in turn with Alicia’s tincture of faithbane and daemonsblood. Xedediah would have his reward, she thought. All those who aided her would, when she and Gerraint ruled Adrastapol together. One world, Alicia thought with calm assurance, would be just the beginning.

A soft chime sounded in her ear as the vox bead came to life, and she smiled demurely despite the rain tracking lines down her face.

‘Sire Hectour,’ she began with a smile. ‘Sire Paoul. Sire Guillarm. You were magnificent. Thank you, sires.’

‘Anything for you, Lady Alicia.’ The devotion she heard in Hectour’s voice

pleased her greatly. ‘It was a pleasure to lay low the false king and his band of oppressors.’

‘They will not all have fallen,’ cautioned Sire Paoul. ‘The hardest fight still lies before us.’

‘Good,’ said Sire Guillarm, his voice a wet growl. ‘But we will serve the Lord Tzeentch with faith and strength. We relish this holy war.’

The other Knights chorused their assent, and Alicia’s smile broadened.

‘Your faith gives me strength, my brave sires. The Corpse-Emperor promises our people suffering and servitude, but together we shall bring a bright new dawn to Adrastapol. We shall deliver our people from ignorance, from fear and from lies. We shall usher in an age of change, of boundless wisdom and endless power.’

Again her Knights cheered, and Alicia let them.

‘Now,’ said Alicia as they subsided. ‘You know what comes next. Sires, I would have you deliver me to the valle electrum with all speed. The High King shall have need of us all.’

‘Of course, Lady Alicia,’ said Sire Hectour. ‘But what of you? It is my honour to bear you hence, but perhaps you would prefer to ride within my Knight, where the rain and wind cannot touch you? There is a little spare room in the cockpit.’

Alicia laughed, genuinely touched by Hectour’s gallantry. Her tincture hadn’t turned them into monsters, as she had feared it might, and she was glad. Knights of the true faith were of more use to her than mutant beasts.

‘No, sire, but thank you. The Changer of the Ways has marked this vessel, such that I am beyond mere mortal concerns. Such is his power and his benevolence. Simply bear me to my destination, and that shall be enough.’

Hectour and the others vowed that they would, and with a thrum of servo-motors their Knights moved out through the narrow passes of the crag-fields. Alicia sat cross-legged and focused her thoughts. She stroked her vox bead, muttering another string of ritual words as she boosted the device’s power and selected a pre-set, heavily encrypted channel. The sorceress waited as static hissed and popped in her ear, taking a moment to process all that had just occurred, and what inevitably came next. It was a dangerous game they played, but the Changer of the Ways would give them the strength they needed to prevail.

Another soft chime sounded.

‘Gerraint, my love,’ the sorceress smiled warmly. ‘It is done.’

There was a pause before the lord Tan Chimaeros replied.

‘He is dead, then. The Tan Draconis boy. You’re sure of this, Alicia?’

‘I have faith,’ she replied simply. ‘The prophecy was fulfilled. The blackened tower fell.’

‘You saw his corpse?’ asked Gerraint, his voice tight and anxious. ‘We could have done this in open battle...’

‘My love,’ replied Alicia, her tone reproachful and indulgent, ‘how many times must I tell you to have faith? The power of Tzeentch is absolute, and the bargain has been honoured. The boy is dead. Besides, you know that all of our warriors are required for what comes next – you could barely spare enough Knights to bait the trap and pay the blood price.’

‘You’re right of course,’ sighed Gerraint. ‘This fight will be a hard one. They’re monsters, Alicia. Daemons in their own right. I fear, perhaps, that we have underestimated our foe. Are you sure we must turn against the Word Bearers now? Should we not simply allow Varakh’Lorr to honour his deal with us and help us win back Adrastapol?’

‘Would that we could trust him,’ said Alicia, ‘but you know that is not the path of fate we walk. That Which Dwells in Darkness has told me the Dark Apostle’s plans, and they do not include us. We were convenient to prevent the Imperials disrupting his ritual. Nothing more. Varakh’Lorr is balanced upon the precipice, upon the very cusp of daemonhood. Once he ascends, he will have no more use for us.’

‘Traitors are faithless creatures, whose loyalties can change on a whim,’ replied Gerraint, and Alicia knew her lover well enough to picture the bitter smile on his scarred face. ‘As they shall no doubt say of us. But we’ve seen how the betrayer smiles upon your face in friendship, even as they twist the knife in your side and tell you that it’s good for you. Tolwyn Tan Draconis did as much when he took the crown after the Galhorm Crusade. After Gedric. I won’t let Varakh’Lorr do the same, no matter how fearsome he seems.’

‘We, my darling,’ said Alicia. ‘*We* won’t let him. We’ll stop him together. And after we crush him, we will accept the fealty of all those of his followers with the sense to offer it. That shall be our army of reconquest, with which to take back our home world from the pretenders and their corpse god.’

‘As you say,’ said Gerraint after a moment’s pause, and the sorceress could hear purpose and determination filling his voice. She felt her own love for her scarred lord swell along with it. Gerraint was her deliverer, her Knight in panoply, and no matter what else might have transpired in the years since he had pulled her from the wreckage of her home, Alicia would always come back to her true love.

‘Is everything in place?’ she asked into the silence that followed.

‘It is,’ Gerraint confirmed. ‘The Dark Apostle has retreated to his inner sanctum for the final stages of the ritual, and his devoted flock are becoming alarmed as his Word Bearers round them up for sacrifice. Our Knights and those of Tan Wyvorn have taken up positions throughout the valle electrum and secondary war-zones in the surrounding districts. Dunkan assures me that his followers are equal to the task, and that his house’s hidden strength awaits deployment, should we need it. A weapon, I think, though the fool is being needlessly mysterious. There are a few Word Bearers leading the most far-flung assaults who will remain untouched, but we have most of them in our sights.’

‘And Xedediah?’ asked Alicia.

‘Doing his job admirably,’ replied Gerraint with an audible grin. ‘I’ve no idea how – some prattle about triangulated data-hymnals and servo-choristry with the Word Bearers ships in orbit – but he’s located the last of Tolwyn’s loyalists and passed the word on to our monstrous allies. Word Bearers are moving to engage the last of Tolwyn’s get as we speak.’

‘And enjoy mutually assured destruction in the process,’ said Alicia. ‘Such cunning will please Tzeentch. What of the Adamant Citadels?’

‘Xedediah has already left for Ironpeak, and his acolytes for their designated locations. The fortresses will have to be shut down and purged before they can be reclaimed, or so Xedediah tells me, but I trust our Sacristans to suborn their machine-spirits as we planned. Tzeentch willing, by this time tomorrow the Dark Apostle will be dead, the Adamant Citadels will be ours, and we’ll be able to begin a final purge of the Imperial forces both on the ground and in the void.’

‘And then Adrastapol, and our rightful rule,’ said Alicia firmly, feeling her faith burn hot within her breast.

‘And then Adrastapol,’ agreed Gerraint. Alicia heard him pause for a moment, before he asked the question that she knew he must.

‘At the blackened tower. Luk… Was he…?’

‘He was there, my love,’ said Alicia sadly. ‘He was beneath the tower when it fell. I am sorry.’

‘It’s both our loss,’ replied Gerraint heavily. ‘You loved him every bit as much as I. Don’t apologise for what the corpse god and his cursed faith have taken from us. Since they were young enough to hold practice blades, Luk and Danial were always inseparable. If we had broken that bond early… but we couldn’t. It would have drawn Tolwyn’s notice. And even had we done so, you read the omens yourself. Luk’s mind was poisoned by the piety of his Draconis friends.

To save our son was never part of the Change Lord's plans.'

'When we rule Adrastapol, I will bear you new sons,' said Alicia. 'Enough to sire a dynasty that shall last until the stars fall dead from the skies.'

'As Tzeentch wills it,' replied Gerraint.

'As Tzeentch wills it,' echoed Alicia. 'The Changer's fortunes upon you in the battle to come. Be victorious, and be safe.'

'I shall,' said Gerraint fiercely, 'and you also, my love. I will see you soon.'

'I count the moments,' said Alicia, severing the link and pushing down the fear she felt for her king. If anyone could defeat the Word Bearers, it was Gerraint Tan Chimaeros. The next step upon the path was his to take. She could not tread it for him. By the time Alicia and her escort returned to the valle electrum, the battle would be well under way. Hopefully, Gerraint and Dunkan would be close to victory.

Closing her eyes, Alicia Kar Manticos allowed her mind to drift free of her body and float upon the sea of souls, drinking in its energies. She trusted in her god to protect her, and to show her the path to victory. But Tzeentch gave his servants nothing that they did not earn by their own strength, and Alicia would need a great deal of that to prevail.

Fire Defiant lurched as a volley of rockets struck its ion shields, but the Knight's defences held. Jennika snarled at the force of the impacts as she lined up her Paladin's battle cannon and returned fire. The shells punched through a scrap-iron barricade and filled the cramped street with fire. Blazing corpses were hurled through the air, even the traitor Space Marines, who were unable to withstand the killing fury of a Knight at war. As the smoke cleared, little remained of the enemy but a deep crater and a scattering of armoured body parts. Still, it was an island of victory amidst what felt like a rising tide of defeat.

At least the damned rain has stopped, she thought ruefully.

'Major Kovash,' Jennika voxed, adjusting her Knight's stance at the head of the ramp and scanning for targets. 'Situation report.'

'Fourth an… Sixth platoons are holding at… south access ramps. Casualties rising. First and Third are holding our perimeter, but barring aid from the Emperor himself, even my lads won't hold for much longer.'

'Understood, major. Are your Tauroxes prepped for evacuation?'

'They are, ma'am, all th… still run. Give the word and we'll form up and foll… your lead on the breakout. Don't wait too long, Lady Jennika, or I won't have the manpower left to…'

‘Understood,’ interrupted Jennika frostily. ‘We will wait as long as we can for the High King to return, and we will retreat when, and only when, our position becomes wholly untenable. Am I clear, sir?’

‘Perfectly, ma’am,’ came Kovash’s stiff response. ‘The Emperor protects.’

‘He’d better do,’ muttered Jennika as she cut her link. A fresh scattering of contact runes lit up her jittering auspex, followed by a hail of small arms fire that pattered against her shield. From positions around her Knight’s feet, Cadian Guardsmen fired back. Their las-bolts whipped out across the rubble-strewn plaza, ripping through the ragged figures that swarmed amidst the ruins at its far edge. Cultists fell screaming, or dived frantically for cover, and Jennika added her heavy stubber’s fire to the Cadians’ fusillade.

‘Sires,’ voxed Jennika to her surviving Knights. ‘How goes the fight?’ Confirmations through walls of wailing static relayed that they still held their positions around the Imperial perimeter, and that the enemy were attacking in increasing numbers on all fronts. There were four Knights left now under Jennika’s command, since Sire Petaer’s *Honour Infernus* had been dragged down and ripped apart by clattering daemon engines. The ironclad beasts had been slain, but the loss of yet another Draconis Knight weighed heavily upon Jennika’s conscience. There were few enough of them left.

She thrust that thought aside, allowing the murmurs of her throne to bring clarity. She purged and re-engaged her strategic overlay twice as its feed fluctuated under the influence of the enemy’s scrapcode. As the display sluggishly unfurled for a third time, Jennika considered the situation. The traitor attack had begun almost three hours earlier, the Cadian sentries barely getting warning through before they were overwhelmed. The loyalists had lost almost everything in those first few minutes, as hordes of cultists poured down the access ramps with brazen Chaos war engines lumbering in their wake. Only the resolute discipline of Jennika’s Knights and their Cadian allies had seen them hang on and push back, purging heretics from the outer caverns and forging back up the ramps to establish a perimeter. Since then the fighting had been sporadic, but its ferocity was definitely increasing. They still had no idea how the foe had located them, but at this stage it hardly mattered.

‘Couldn’t kill us cleanly with the first strike,’ muttered Jennika, thumping another shell into a rumbling traitor tank and watching it detonate. ‘So now you’re trying to wear us down. Canny. It’s what I’d do. But how long before you tire of your game? How long do I have?’

Jennika possessed all the fire and passion of the Draconis bloodline, but she had

learned to temper it with cold, clinical pragmatism. She believed, first and foremost, in the survival of her House and the preservation of its honour. She knew that she could not wait forever for Danial to return. Her duty came first. Never mind that she had lost her father to this bleak, hateful world. Never mind that ordering the retreat would feel like admitting she had lost her brother, too. If she had to, Jennika would do her duty and pay the cost in sorrow later. But for a little longer, at least, she could justify holding position with a clean conscience. The High King's war party were several hours late returning from their foray, but it was within the remit of the Code to wait perhaps another hour at most. It would be just as great a failing to abandon the High King by turning tail and fleeing too soon as it would be to get her entire command killed waiting for him. And Jennika hated to fail.

Through the ruins ahead, she caught sight of another piston-legged abomination. Its boxy torso was covered in glowing runes that hurt the eye, and its legs skittered and stamped in a way that made it appear grotesquely alive. Jennika caught the machine's first volley of shots on her shield, then returned fire. Scrapcode played havoc with Jennika's targeting augurs, and so she manually aimed each shot without her Knight's auto-reticule. Her first shell blew out the ground beneath the daemon engine's feet, staggering it. The second blew out its torso. Yet already she could see more of the things clanking up to take its place, while the edge of the plaza was thick with traitors. The firefight was intensifying by the moment, bullets and las-blasts lashing back and forth in a storm. Cadian heavy bolters coughed and thumped. Grenades flew.

At that moment Jennika's vox crackled again, bringing her the distorted voice of High Sacristan Polluxis.

'…ady Tan Draconis. The Omnissiah has smiled upon our labours at last. Prep… ing to deploy data-wards and loose the renewed Heavenly Host.'

Jennika felt the stirrings of hope at the Sacristan's words.

'Magnificent work, High Sacristan,' she replied. 'My heartfelt thanks. As soon as you've worked your wards, I need access to the global vox net. Get us back in touch with the war.'

'Yes, Lady Tan Draconis,' replied Polluxis. *Fire Defiant* shivered almost imperceptibly around her, its machine-spirit rumbling a sigh of relief as the High Sacristan's data wards deployed. Jennika watched her auspex feeds clarify and targeting reticule settle. Her chrono stabilised, even as her Knight's motive actuators re-calibrated with a series of hissing clanks, and the laboured note of *Fire Defiant*'s reactor settled to a powerful hum. Skirling through the vox came

the last squeals and shrieks of the scrapcode, sounding somehow outraged to be driven out.

'Better,' said Jennika, settling her sights over the oncoming daemon engines and blowing two of them apart, one after the other. *Fire Defiant* growled in agreement.

Small, cherubic figures swept overhead. They shot from the darkness of the warehouse caverns, eye-lenses glowing and censers trailing the incense as they arrowed up into the skies. Jennika watched her strategic overlay blossom, its borders expanding by the second and clarity increasing tenfold. New runes leapt into view across the map, and the Lady Tan Draconis sucked in a breath as she saw the true strength of the enemy massed around her. Their main concentration was to the north, building rapidly amongst a field of transistor-towers. She had less time than she had thought, but Jennika thanked the Emperor and Polluxis all the same; if she hadn't seen that hammer-blow being readied, it would have crushed her forces.

Fighting to stay calm, Jennika scoured the western edge of the display for any telltale runes that might show her brother and his Knights returning. Her hope dwindled as she saw none.

'High Sacristan,' she voxed urgently. 'The global vox, if you please?'

'One moment, Lady Tan Draconis. My acolytes are completing the rites as we speak.'

Jennika drew breath to reply, and then her vox filled with scattered channels. Runes lit green across her instruments as her access to the global network was restored. Immediately Jennika began blink-clicking through channels, trying to gauge the strategic situation across Donatos Primus and to locate any word of Danial. Jennika fought on even as she worked the vox, her Knight's legs braced and its shield up as she fired shells at each fresh daemon engine to enter the plaza. Explosions made her shield flare bright, and more than one shot punched through to clang from her steed's armour, but she remained focused.

Each new channel brought fresh tales of desperation and destruction. There were still significant Imperial forces at large across the continent, it seemed, but they were scattered and – in many cases – fighting on the defensive without centralised command. Most of the Imperial forces, after all, did not have the newfound benefits of Polluxis' wards to aid them. The scrapcode signal continued to play havoc in the districts surrounding the valle electrum, while further out the Word Bearers and their traitor hordes were keeping pressure on the loyalists. Jennika adjusted her vox frequency with methodical precision,

hunting through snippets of mayhem and desperation.

'....helm, correct two points starboard and deploy interceptors, I want those torpedoes dead before they're within a hundred miles of the hull. We'll not break this damned stalemate with the ship torn in two. Gunnery, Murder Class Cruiser to our fore, get me a solution and…'

'...is Agha First-Class Dasheid, Mubraxis Twenty-Seventh, Fourth Platoon Command. Repeat, traitor armour pressing heavily in quadrants two, four and seven. That is two, four and seven. Pentakhost beachhead in jeopardy, reinforcement requested. Throne's sake, can anyone hear thi…'

'...pilot to bombardier, pilot to bombardier, commencing second run over nortus maximal now. Hellfire Squadron, make your run count, gentlemen, we may not get another. Stay low, watch the flak, and let's make a hole in these wretches that'd make the Emperor proud…'

'...Kannoch, on your right! Traitor Knight, two hundred yards and closing. Elevate main gun and put a round through him…Emperor's balls, he's still coming! Pull away, pull awa…'

'...repeat this is Sire Markos Dar Draconis, herald of House Draconis. Lady Jennika, can you…'

Heart thumping, Jennika twitched her vox controls back, hunting for the faint signal. A volley of plasma blasts raked her shield, shaking her throne and causing overheat alarms to shrill. The Lady Tan Draconis screamed in frustration as she lost the signal.

'Not now, you *cretin*,' she snarled, hammering shots into the daemon engine that had fired upon her. A quadruped horror with glowing cannons for arms and maw, the engine wove aside from her fire. Its weapons glowed as it gathered energy for another volley, and Jennika let loose a stream of vehement curses before engaging her motive actuators.

'I don't have time for this,' she spat, clearing the Cadian lines in a single stride and pushing *Fire Defiant* into a lumbering charge. The daemon engine fired, its cannons vomiting searing energies at her. Jennika swept the plasma blasts aside with her shield, then brought her chainsword down, sawing the machine in half in a welter of sparks and spurting ectoplasma. Caging her fire, Jennika walked her Knight carefully back into the Cadian position. As she did so, she reapplied herself to the vox, praying silently to the Emperor as she made one painstaking adjustment after another.

At last, blessedly, she heard it again.

'...herald of House Draconis. Lady Jennika, if you can hear this please

respond.'

'Sire Markos, this is Jennika. I hear you, sire.'

'Jen,' said Markos, weary relief in his voice. 'Thank the draconsfire you're still alive, girl. Thought for sure you'd be dead or gone by now.'

'Glad to exceed your expectations, Sire Markos,' said Jennika. She could see the first runes moving into the western edge of her strategic display. They seemed alarmingly few, and fear spread through her chest as she realised she couldn't see the *Oath of Flame* amongst them. Yet the Code demanded decorum and duty, and the ghosts of her throne would not allow her to ignore it. 'What's your situation, Markos? What happened?'

'We failed, Jen,' he said. 'It was a trap, and we walked right into it. They dropped a bloody fortress on us. Twenty Knights dead.'

Twenty. Jennika's mind reeled, and she fought to keep her focus on the battle. A ghostly whisper directed her attention to a blinking amber rune on her retinal display. Ammunition low.

'Sire Markos,' she said, her voice strained. 'We're under heavy attack. They're massing to the north, and if they land that blow, we're done. Do you have the strength remaining to deal with them?'

'We do,' growled Markos. 'Emperor knows there's not enough of these bastards on the whole planet for me to kill for what they've done to us. We'll hit them from the flank, then wheel round on your position.'

'Thank you, Markos,' said Jennika, before finally allowing herself to ask the question she feared the most. 'What of my brother?'

'He lives, my lady,' said Markos, and Jennika felt relief flood her. 'His steed is badly damaged. He's moving slower, with the rear guard, but they're not far back.'

Even as the herald spoke, Jennika saw fresh runes entering the combat zone from the west. Signifiers winked into being for Sire Olric, Lady Suset, Sire Wilhorm Dar Minotos, and, trailing a hundred yards behind the rest, Danial Tan Draconis with The Knight of Ashes at his side. Jennika felt a weight lift off her shoulders. Within her, the draconsfire blazed bright.

'Welcome back, Da,' she voxed on a private channel, and frowned at the simple vox-blip of acknowledgement she received. There would be time to check on her brother later, she thought. For now, they had gained a chance at victory and she didn't mean to lose it.

Markos commanded the charge into the enemy flank. *Honourblaze* led an

unstoppable spearhead of Knights through the transistor towers, their guns thundering as they drove the enemy before them. Massed rebel tanks traversed their turrets and began to fire back, but the traitors had been fixated upon the foe to their fore, sure of imminent victory. The speed and fury of Markos' attack caught them by surprise, smashing through them like a battering ram sundering a castle gate. The Knights crushed renegade militia underfoot, or engulfed them in racing fireballs. Crude Chaos icons fell and were trampled. Transistor towers toppled like olidarne trees, wreathed in haloes of leaping energy that burned heretics alive. Even the small knot of Word Bearers coordinating the attack could not stop the wrathful war engines. Traitor Space Marines crippled one Knight of House Minotos with melta-guns. A pair of hulking fleshmetal warriors scythed the legs from beneath Sire Galharad Dar Draconis with a volley of lascannon blasts, leaving his fallen steed tangled amid the wreckage of a crushed transistor tower. Sire Markos coordinated the firepower of seven Knights at once upon the traitors' position, and reduced them to ashes.

Within minutes, the Knights had shattered the greatest strength of the traitor forces and split in two, Sire Markos leading one spearhead and Lady Eleanat Dar Pegasson the other. They stormed down corpse-strewn streets, between the burned-out hulks of ruined buildings, and fell upon the remaining enemies from flank and rear. With Jennika's warriors holding firm as the anvil, the returned Knights served as the hammer, smashing the attackers between them without mercy.

Danial watched it play out across his strategic display, cocooned within the heart of his limping steed. He was relieved that his sister and her followers had survived, but he couldn't find it in himself to feel much beyond that. Twenty Knights were dead. Twenty irreplaceable thrones lost along with all their ghosts. Twenty venerable machines, buried beneath thousands of tons of rubble or… worse. For a moment the image of Gustev's horrific death flashed before his eyes and Danial's mind squirmed with horror. It didn't matter that he hadn't had time to think through his options. It didn't matter that he was inexperienced in war, let alone command, or that he had acted on the advice of Knights far more seasoned than him. The inescapable truth was that he, Danial Tan Draconis, had ordered his followers into that ambush and twenty Knights had fallen. They had been tricked again. *He* had been tricked again, and the cost was insupportable.

'Perhaps I really am my father's son,' he muttered bitterly to himself. 'The unworthy inheritor of a crown that was never mine.' Danial felt the ghosts of his throne stir angrily, pressing in upon his mind to remonstrate or reassure. He

pushed them back, with an effort. Their counsel wasn't welcome. Perhaps it wasn't even deserved. Danial's mind whirled with all he had seen. Tolwyn's death. Chimaeros and Wyvorn's betrayal. The fortress thundering down upon them like the inescapable judgement of the Emperor.

Alicia.

The consort played on Danial's mind most of all. If what she said was true, Alicia had always been the abomination revealed this day. How blind had they been, never to see it? How far had her taint spread? It seemed clear that poor Luk had never been part of his mother and father's heresy, but did that mean he was truly clean of their taint? Danial's own father had always been firm friends with the consort, and though she had passed away in sickness when Danial was only five, he knew that Queen Polenna had not approved. Had Alicia influenced his father in any way? Corrupted his rule? Every question spawned two more, eroding the bedrock of his life as they multiplied.

The damaged Knights were nearing Jennika's cordon, and the fight was all but done. Danial coaxed his steed's weapon systems to wakefulness all the same, as his audio-receptors picked up the chatter and thump of gunfire ahead.

'Luk,' he voxed. 'Weapons up and shield ready, just in case. *Sword*'s damaged enough as it is.'

His auspex picked up a sluggish heat-bloom from the Freeblade's Knight as his friend followed his advice, but Luk didn't reply.

'Luk,' he tried again. 'I'm sorry. About Alicia. About all of it.'

'Don't, Da,' interrupted Luk tiredly. 'Don't say sorry. What did you do, to be sorry for? Did you make my father a heretic?'

'No,' frowned Danial.

'And did you make my mother a witch, and me so stupid that I never even once suspected that something might be wrong?'

'You know I didn't, Luk,' said Danial. 'I meant that…'

'What? That you're High King now so everything must be your fault?' Danial heard sudden anger in his friend's voice. 'Danial Tan bloody Draconis, High King and bearer of everyone else's burdens. Just because our fathers betrayed us, Da, just because they stuck a crown on your head and told you that you were in charge, doesn't make you a king, any more than it makes you responsible for the horrible things my parents did. Throne, we're barely more than squires! Not everything going on here is about you, do you understand that?'

Danial felt a surge of defensive anger at his friend's words.

'No, Luk, you're right.' The words spilled out like poison from a wound. 'I'm

not responsible for your father killing mine in cold blood. I'm *not* responsible for the fact that somehow no one, not me, not even you, saw how rotten House Chimaeros was or realised your mother was a witch. But believe it or not, we can't all just take an oath and throw our responsibilities out the castle gates. I *am* the High King, crown and all, whether I want that burden or not. So yes, I am sorry, because I have to be. And because you're still my friend, despite everything.'

'Right,' responded Luk after a pause. 'Understood. My liege.'

Danial sighed as his friend cut the vox link between them. He knew Luk, knew his temper. They had argued a hundred times before, as only best friends can, and always patched things up once Luk cooled off. But he wondered, this time. In just days, everything had changed. Still, he realised that he meant what he had said about the crown. He was the High King, and he couldn't just cast that burden aside because it was heavy, or because he had failed. That was a squire's response. His hand crept to the amulet about his neck, and from deep within the shadows of his throne an ancient voice sighed, a dry whisper that he had never heard before.

The draconsfire burns brightest in victory, and is easy then to see. But a true king is he who sees the embers burn low, and fans them again to fury.

Danial strained to hear more, pushing his consciousness as far back as he dared into his throne. The voice was gone, submerged as though beneath cold, black waters. And then Danial and Luk were walking their steeds into the plaza before the northern exit ramps, the last loyalist Knights to gather upon Jennika's position.

The enemy were fleeing into the surrounding ruins, chased by disciplined Cadian volleys. Jennika was glad of victory, but appalled to see how badly damaged *Oath of Flame* and *Sword of Heroes* were. Both Knights dragged damaged limbs and nursed buckled plating, severed cables and multiple power-leaks. A number of the other Knights looked scarcely better off, and she found herself hoping that Polluxis' acolytes could effect sufficient repairs to keep them all in the field. The Knights stood facing each other across the corpse-strewn plaza, a gathering of war-weary giants.

From the darkness below came Polluxis' remaining Crawlers, summoned as soon as the last shots were fired. They wove between the Knights, two of their number splitting off with Cadian escorts to salvage the fallen steeds. The rest drew to a halt in the Knights' midst and deployed their repair rigs. Blessed arc

welders sparked. Sanctifying incense billowed. Hard-wired servitors rose on hydraulic booms, unfolding spider-like limbs heavy with whirring tools, as acolytes guided auto-loader carriages into place with fresh ammunition for the Knights' depleted guns.

Ordering repair and resupply in the open was a gamble, but Jennika knew they couldn't afford to vanish below ground again. Besides, she didn't want to spend another minute in those stifling caves.

'Perimeter secure, ma'am,' voxed Kovash. 'We'll stand guard while you get your machines patched up.'

'Thank you, sir,' replied Jennika. 'The Emperor protects, as you say. But I'm glad we have you to help him.'

'Yes, ma'am,' replied the major, and Jennika thought she caught a note of satisfaction in his voice. The Cadian cut his link, and she turned her attention to the Knights assembled around her. Jennika was uncomfortably aware that Danial still had not spoken to her or – it seemed – to anyone else. She resolved to lead proceedings in his stead for now, but he would have to face his responsibilities soon. No doubt her younger brother had been through a lot. But then, they all had.

'My lords and ladies,' began Jennika. 'I am glad that you have returned. We couldn't have held this position for much longer.'

'You shouldn't even have remained as long as you did,' said Sire Olric archly. 'But we're all glad you did, I'm sure.'

'Aye,' agreed Sire Garath, his tone lacking its usual sardonic edge. 'Thank you for your faith in us, Lady Jennika. Without those Crawlers we'd half of us never have made it back to friendly lines.'

'And where should we consider to be 'friendly' now?' asked Lady Eleanat. 'I don't know how many of you have found time to attend the vox network, but matters sound grim from Pentakhost to the nordindustriala.'

'Pardon, my lady,' said Sire Percivane. 'You must have faith.' The burly Knight's steed had regained power just in time to limp clear of the falling fortress' shadow. The apparent miracle had bolstered Percivane's already abundant zeal. 'Imperial forces are still in the field, and in substantial numbers. Since the High Sacristan cleared our vox channels we have received requests from numerous battle groups, all asking us to reinforce them and turn defeat into victory. The Emperor still rules this world. We cannot give in to despair when we walk in His light.'

'Well said, sire,' said Jennika. 'Duty and honour, my friends. We won't show

weakness in the eyes of the Emperor. This war is not done.'

'Perhaps so,' said Sire Markos, 'but if you've been hearing the same vox chatter I have, then you know the reason we're being called from so many different directions is that we're losing a lot of fights. Throne knows we're not about to turn tail and run back to Adrastapol, but this feels like a desperate battle. Where do we commit our strength?'

'We commit where we can kill the most,' said Suset Dar Draconis hatefully. 'We make them pay for my brother, for Grandmarshal Gustev, for King Tolwyn. For all of them.'

'We chased revenge before,' cautioned Lady Eleanat, her voice momentarily distorted as repair servitors worked their way across *Sagasitus'* dented carapace. 'It led us only into destruction and defeat. That cannot happen again.'

'Agreed,' said Sire Olric, 'but where then do we go? Which of the dozen battle-fronts scattered across this benighted continent is most deserving of our strength?'

'Do we even know what's going on?' asked Luk Kar Chimaeros scornfully. 'Has any of us genuinely had time to weigh the options and get a clear idea of the wider tapestry? Who is alive and who dead? Where the enemy are and what they're trying to achieve?'

'The lad's right,' agreed Markos dourly, over the rattle of his gatling cannon being reloaded. 'We've been back on the vox for a matter of minutes, and it's already patchy in places. We can pick a foe to fight, but Emperor only knows if it'll be the right one.'

Jennika glanced hopefully in the direction of *Oath of Flame*, whose hull was now half-engulfed in repair armatures and lit by the sharp glare of las-cutters. She prayed that her brother would say something. That he would lead. He said nothing, and the Lady Tan Draconis felt her frustration grow. Still, she would not question him directly. Doing so would court a violation of the Code, not to mention drawing attention to his apparent failings.

'What we need,' said Sire Olric firmly, 'is proper strategium facilities so we can take a decent look at how the tapestry is woven.'

'No!' said Lady Suset angrily. 'The nearest is Pentakhost, many days' march from here. Days in which we should be taking the fight to the traitors.'

'Lady Suset, remember the Code,' said Jennika, though privately she agreed with every word the young Knight had said. 'If duty compels us to Pentakhost, then hence we must go. No matter our personal feelings.'

'At least then we'd be able to fully resupply,' said Markos. 'I confess, I erred

when I called for action before intelligence. These aren't barbarous orks we face. I've let the draconsfire burn out of hand since Tolwyn fell, and for that I'll do penance, but I won't make the same mistake twice. We should know where to strike before we act again, and gauge what our enemy plans. It sounded as though the beachhead would benefit from our aid, anyway.'

'Well,' said Sire Olric. 'Then I suppose, in the absence of any other suggestions, it is decided? We should set out as soon as Polluxis has everyone mobile, would be my feeling. That way, we can…'

'No.' Danial's voice cut across the vox exchange like a knife.

'My liege?' asked Sire Olric, uncertain. 'I wasn't sure that your vox was operable. Do you object?'

'I do, Sire Olric,' replied Danial, and Jennika raised her eyebrows at the surety she heard there.

'Listen, lad,' began Sire Garath. 'Your elders have more experience than you in this sort of thing. Now's hardly the time for you to…'

'You address me as "my liege",' said Danial, interrupting once more.

'What?' asked Sire Garath, sounding wrong-footed, and not a little annoyed.

'You call me "my liege", Sire Garath. That is an incorrect form of address. "Your Highness" is acceptable. You will remember that you speak to your High King.'

'Now listen…' tried Sire Garath again, sounding truly angry now.

'No, Sire Garath,' said Danial firmly. 'You have forgotten yourself, sire, and do yourself nothing but dishonour. Do not call me "lad", or "boy". Even "Da". Any of you. Refer to me by my proper title. This crown I wear makes me more than just a figurehead. I am the son of Tolwyn Tan Draconis, and your rightfully appointed king in the eyes of the Emperor Himself. And as your king, I tell you that we will not be returning to Pentakhost.'

In the silence that followed, cutters and drills whined, and auto-hammers thumped. Servitor limbs skittered. Jennika could only imagine Sire Garath's face burning with embarrassment and anger, but the rebuke had been fair, and richly deserved.

'All right,' said Markos at last, a wary frown in his voice. 'Your Highness. If we're not returning to Pentakhost, then what do you suggest we do?'

'Sendraghorst writes, Sire Markos, that when one loses one's focus in a war, one soon loses the war as well,' observed Danial. 'We stand upon the brink of that precipice now, and one wrong step will see us fall. We have wandered far from the path the Emperor has laid for us. I have allowed it, with my

unwillingness to rule, and my eagerness to curry your favour by indulging your desires for revenge. That ends now. We will not turn and flee with our duty still undone. We will take the fight to the foe in the valle electrum, and we will bring down the Adamant Citadels as was always our objective.'

Several Knights cried out in disbelief, others in bloodthirsty approval.

'My liege,' said Sire Olric. 'This is unwise in the extreme. Our strength is not what it was, while theirs has grown with the addition of our traitorous kin.'

'I understand, Sire Olric,' said Danial. 'But that is true of the wider theatre, not just that one battlefield. Wherever we strike, the enemy's strength will be prodigious. Better, then, to hit them where they least expect.'

'What of gathering reinforcements, your highness?' asked Lady Eleanat. 'Surely if we were to link up with the Donatosians to the north…'

'I don't disagree,' replied Danial. 'But while the Adamant Citadels remain operative, there is no way to reach those regiments, or for them to reach us, without massive casualties. There is also the matter of the enemy's scrapcode – our allies do not have the benefit of Polluxis' data wards, and will continue to suffer unless we eliminate its source. We have to take the valle electrum first, my lady.'

'If we do this,' said Olric, 'and if we fail, then the last hopes for Adrastapol and this world alike will be lost.'

'You're right, Olric,' said Danial. 'But it is the only way. I have thought long and hard about our options. I have examined the strategic overlay, listened to the vox network and considered the teachings of both the Sage Strategic and my father. The key to victory on this world is to eliminate the valle electrum. Not only will doing so rob our enemies of their greatest weapons, but it will crush their morale while ours will soar. The enemy are winning this war, my Knights, and we are the only force left on Donatos that can stop them. But we must strike this blow, and we must do so now. You know this as well as I.'

'My liege,' said Sire Markos, his tone heated. 'Surely you must at least consider the retreat to Pentakhost. Attacking the valle electrum is madness. We'll be wiped out. Dracon knows I'm all for fighting, but what you suggest is suicide. Your father would never have countenanced such a reckless waste of lives. I'm glad to see you taking on the mantle of kingship, I truly am, but not if you lead us into another massacre.'

Jennika winced at the old Knight's blunt words, but Danial's response was firm and unwavering.

'Sire Markos, I appreciate your counsel. And you are right, the odds are stacked

against us. But Garath said it himself. Most of you are veterans with decades more experience of war than me. If you are honest with yourselves, you must surely see the same thing as I. We stand at the crux point of this war. If we retreat now, and cede the initiative to our enemies altogether, then it will not be a tactical withdrawal, but the beginning of the retreat that sees us hand this world to the heretics and leave our kin unpunished for their crimes.'

'It would take us many days' march to reach Pentakhost,' said Jennika. 'And even should we find the beachhead still in Imperial hands, there is no telling what strategic gains our enemies would make in that time.'

'Exactly,' said Danial. 'Right now the enemy's forces are scattered. They're fighting on a number of fronts. Throne, many of them are no doubt still out on the hunt for us. But if we retreat now, if we afford the traitors time to conclude their battles in the north and reinforce their defences around the valle electrum? It will be rendered forever beyond our reach. We must strike now, my Knights. The Emperor will not give us another chance at redemption.'

'I could argue further,' said Sire Markos after a pause. 'But Emperor damn me, you're right, my liege. We have to strike now. Though I still don't see how we're going to go about it.'

'Well,' began Sire Olric. 'We can't risk a direct assault against the pass primus.'

'Are you sure about that?' asked Suset. 'We did a lot of damage to their defence lines before…'

'Before my father stabbed us in the back,' finished Luk for her. 'We did, Lady Suset, but there's still the macrocannon batteries.'

'We Pegasson can attest to their lethality,' added Lady Eleanat grimly.

'We can't go that way,' agreed Danial. 'We need another way in. Something less defended.'

'Tunnels?' said Sire Percivane. 'Anything like the warehouses we sheltered in? We could emerge right in the enemy's midst.'

'Unfortunately, Sire Percivane, no map or auspex data exists to support such a hypothesis,' said Polluxis across the vox. 'The valle electrum has only three entrances. All are mountain passes – the pass primus, the maw omnissan, and the nortus maximal. All are heavily fortified, and beyond any rational strategic cogitation of our current martial strength.'

'Still, there are two other passes,' said Danial. 'Either might prove a chink in the enemy's armour. Polluxis, have your acolytes provide a full strategic assessment of the maw omnissan and the nortus maximal. Defence schematics, vox-intercept of troop movements, hypothesis on weaponry and garrison

strengths, anything else you believe would be useful.'

'Yes, Danial Tan Draconis,' said Polluxis.

'Meanwhile, my Knights, I would have you send out coded requests for reinforcement. We may be cut off from our allies to the north, but we weren't the only Imperial forces to escape the ambush. Any additional strength we can gather may aid us in breaking through.'

At this, Jennika sat forward in her throne. She knew where she had heard the names of those passes, not long ago. A lone fragment of transmission from a Marauder Bomber squadron that suddenly seemed a blessed message from the Emperor himself.

'My lords,' she said excitedly. 'I don't believe we are alone in this endeavour. I know where we must strike.'

ACT THREE
INFERNO

Upon the advice of the Lady Jennika Tan Draconis, the Knights of Adrastapol marched north along ravaged highways, across rocky, polluted highlands and through industrio-conurbations. They walked beneath shell-cratered bridges and passed transparisteel arco-shrines where damaged servitors still auto-flagellated in the Omnissiah's name, and through the scattered wreckage of ferocious looking battles. They waded through a miles-wide cloud of choking black smoke that would have killed their Cadian allies, had they not been sealed away within their transports. The source of that smoke turned out to be a sprawling refinerum complex in a nearby valley, its structures wreathed in flame and blazing like a preacher's image of damnation. On occasion, aircraft and winged daemon engines raced high overhead, locked in frenzied dogfights. Higher still the firmament was streaked by the contrails of orbital wreckage burning up on re-entry.

Donatos had been mauled by war, savaged by it, and seemed as likely to die of its wounds as it did to ever recover. Many Adrastapolian lives had been lost already, and more would fall before the end. It is said that High King Danial was deeply troubled by the destruction he saw all around

him, but that it seemed only to strengthen his resolve. The young king had set his followers on this path, convinced them to the best of his abilities that it was the correct one. Now he had but to follow it.

Danial led just twenty-six Knights by this point. Several steeds had been beyond the Sacristans' abilities to repair with the limited resources they had left. Those they could not restore had been hobbled to prevent the enemy salvaging them, and then left behind. Their thrones had been removed and stowed upon the Sacristan Crawlers, their unseated pilots forced to ride in ignominy within those same vehicles for the remainder of the campaign. Polluxis had assured King Danial that, Omnissiah willing, the lost steeds could be recovered once victory on Donatos had been achieved. For now, though, the noble machines lay abandoned in their wake. It was another weight for Tolwyn's son to hang upon his conscience, part of the burden of being High King.

As they marched, King Danial's Knights vox-communed with Imperial forces already engaged around the nortus maximal. It was these brave warriors that Lady Jennika had overheard while seeking Danial's hunt-party, and it was from them that the Knights of Adrastapol discovered a potential route into the valle electrum.

As it transpired, a substantial Imperial force had been battering the defences of the nortus maximal for several days. The betrayal upon the plains had cost the Imperial invasion dear, but King Danial and his followers had not been the only ones to fight their way clear. Leading remnants of the Tanhollis 601st and several tank squadrons from the Cadian 454th, the Mubraxian Sheik Halna'sir had sought to rally his forces, and to strike again at the valle electrum. The sheik had been aided in this by the disgraced Donatosian Commander Korgh, reports of whose death had proved false. The commander's local knowledge had proved invaluable, allowing his new comrades to locate and capture a hardened vox-relay bunker seven miles west of the nortus maximal. With this crucial asset, Sheik Halna'sir had coordinated air support from the Imperial Navy, beginning a steady bombardment of the pass. Substantial damage had been caused and as further Imperial dregs gathered to Halna'sir's banner they had even succeeded in hurling back a traitor counter-attack, felling several House Wyvorn Knights in the process. However, the Imperial forces were still hampered by the scrapcode emanating from the valle electrum – vox and auspex were all but useless

within a mile of the pass, while those forces pressing closer had found their systems malfunctioning, and even seen maddened machine-spirits turning weapons upon their users.

Worst were the casualties suffered by the brave pilots of the Imperial Navy. Those craft that strayed too far into the airspace of the valle electrum dropped from the sky like stones. Combined with the hammering fire from the traitor-held Icarus batteries within the pass, the Navy pilots had lost dozens of craft.

Through such brave sacrifice does the Imperium of Mankind endure, and with their lives these warriors had bought King Danial's forces a chance at victory. They had weakened the defences of the nortus maximal enough that a determined charge by the Knights of Adrastapol might carry the pass and permit them entry to the valle electrum beyond. Now was the moment for High King Danial to prove that he was worthy of his crown, and for his noble Knights to reclaim their tarnished honour.

Reports tell of how King Danial was both shocked and impressed at the dedication the flight helots had shown to the Emperor with their continued attack runs. As his forces crested a ridge and flowed down the transitway towards the smoke-wreathed mouth of the nortus maximal, the High King must have hoped that they could make each and every martyrdom worthwhile.

– Extracted from the writings of Sendraghorst,
Sage Strategic of Adrastapol,
vol XVII *'The Donatos Uprising'*

As *Oath of Flame* crested the ridge, Danial saw the battlefield spread out below. He led his followers down a dusty transitway, the mountains looming to their right and a sprawl of urban wasteland to their left. Ahead waited the massed ranks of the Astra Militarum, thousands upon thousands of infantry, battle tanks and artillery pieces needing only the Knights to lead them to war. Their guns were turned towards the dark maw of the nortus maximal, the mountain pass belching smoke from fortifications that were battered, but unbowed.

'Danial,' voxed Markos over a private channel. 'Orbital auspex confirms the Donatosian intelligence.'

'The traitor Knights have turned upon the Word Bearers, then?' asked Danial.

'It seems so,' confirmed Markos, 'though our ships are hard-pressed in the void,

so they've not been able to confirm specifics.'

'Still, that's good news,' said Danial. 'Such are the wages of heresy. It looks as though the Emperor is smiling upon us, eh Markos?'

'It does, my liege,' replied the herald.

'But…?' prompted Danial.

'But there's still the Adamant Citadel to consider, my liege,' said Markos. 'Once we advance on the pass, we'll walk straight into range of missiles. Even with Halna'sir's support, casualties will be grim.'

'They will,' agreed Danial. 'But there's little we can do about that now, save pray to the Emperor. Our faith will have to be shield enough until we can get inside its minimum range.'

'By which point we'll have Throne-knows what else to deal with,' said Markos. 'Thousands of bloody Word Bearers, probably.'

'Let us hope not,' said Danial. 'But as you have told me on many occasions, Sire Markos, wars are not won with an excess of caution. Besides, this attack, it's what my father would have done. I know it.'

'Your father,' sighed Markos. 'My oldest friend, should not be the only star you hunt by, Danial. He got himself killed because he was too damn noble for his own good. He could have dismounted.'

'There wasn't time,' said Danial, defensive at the bitterness he heard in Markos' voice. 'Besides, the Code Chivalric demanded that he fight.'

'You know that's rubbish, Danial,' replied Markos. 'There wasn't much time, but there was enough. He could have retreated with the rest of us. But High King Tolwyn, hero of the people, first High King of House Draconis? He couldn't stomach the notion of ordering others to their deaths, especially in that fight out of all of them. Not after Gerraint's brother. Not against Tan Chimaeros.'

Danial frowned and drew breath to ask what Markos meant, but the herald was still talking and the young king felt compelled to listen.

'No, Tolwyn couldn't leave his men to die in his stead, so instead he let the traitors kill him. And right before he did that, leaving his young, inexperienced son with the impossible burden of command, do you know what else my best friend did?'

Danial thought back to the bridge, and Markos' Knight hesitating beside Tolwyn's amidst the driving rain and pounding explosions.

'He made you swear to protect me,' said Danial. The images from his throne swam before his eyes once more, accompanied by the traitorous thought that perhaps he had never really known his father at all.

‘He made me swear to protect you,’ echoed Markos angrily. ‘Me, a sour old war dog who never whelped in his life. He was a good man, the High King, but in that he erred. You, your sister, Luk, you’re the closest I ever came to children of my own, and to my eternal shame, in the heat of the moment I underestimated you. Inexcusably so. I thought you were a bookish squireling, didn’t I? Clever, doubtless, and no idiot with a blade, but barely experienced enough to pilot your own Knight, let alone command an army of them.’

The herald barked a laugh, though the sound had little mirth in it. ‘Looks like I might have got you wrong.’

‘Not all the way, Sire Markos,’ said Danial with a slight smile. ‘And you’ve said and done all that you have with the noblest of intentions. I’m sorry that father left such an impossible burden upon your shoulders.’

‘Just another mistake of his that you shouldn’t have to apologise for, lad. My liege, I mean.’

The Knights were marching along the front line of the Imperial army now, the sight of the metal war gods raising wild cheers from amongst the ranks. Soon, Danial would have to address this army that he was about to lead, but he had a few moments yet.

‘I understand, Markos,’ he said. ‘But why do I feel as though part of you is still opposed to this attack?’

‘Because I don’t want you to throw your life away for the sake of honouring a man who didn’t deserve your sacrifice,’ said Markos.

‘I shan’t,’ said Danial firmly. ‘Though your counsel is valued, as always. I would hear more of my father and his history, as I’m sure Jennika would too. But for now, I am leading us into the valle electrum not for Tolwyn Tan Draconis but for the Emperor. And for the honour of House Draconis. And because I truly believe that it is the only way we can win this war.’

Markos was silent for a long moment, as their steeds thumped to a halt at the head of the Imperial army. At last he answered, and Danial heard a new determination in his voice, sweeping aside his weariness and resignation.

‘All right then. Yes. For the Emperor and House Draconis, and for High King Danial. Lead on, my liege, and let’s show these traitors how the draconsfire burns.’

‘As you say, Sire Markos,’ said Danial. ‘I am glad to have you at my side.’ With that, he took a deep breath and keyed his steed’s vox amplifier.

‘Knights of Adrastapol,’ he began. ‘Warriors of the Imperium. Now is the hour that we strike back against our betrayers. Before us lies a battle as hard as any of

us has ever faced, but with the Emperor watching over us we cannot fail!'

Cheers rose from the assembled Imperial forces.

'The enemy's strength is great,' said Danial. 'Their weapons are fearsome. Many of you may feel doubt, even fear, at this prospect. But know, brave warriors, that we do the Emperor's work this day. We walk in his light. His strength is our strength!'

More cheering, from soldiers sat high in their tanks' cupolas, and from infantry massed beneath their fluttering banners.

'Better yet,' continued Danial as their confidence fed his. 'Even as our faith and courage unite us, the enemy's traitorous nature tears them apart. We go to war not against a single, determined foe, but a frenzied rabble! They will find that to turn their backs upon the warriors of the Emperor brings them nothing but a swift death. So take heart, soldiers of the Imperium,' he cried, brandishing his Knight's chain blade and revving its cutting edge with an industrial roar. 'Today we march upon our enemy's stronghold and cast it down in flames. Today we take revenge for our countless fallen. Today, we hurl down our heretic foes and claim victory in the name of the Emperor!'

This time the cheers rose from the Imperial lines like the roaring of ocean waves, breaking across *Oath*'s hull without cease.

'A fine speech, High King,' crackled Sheik Halna'sir's voice over a private channel. 'My warriors are prepared, and the Imperial Navy stand ready to play their part. All wings have been pulled back into orbit for repair, refuelling and rearmament.'

'Thank you, sheik,' said Danial, half of his attention on the conversation and the other on the warriors readying for battle all around him. The moment to attack was nigh. 'We will do everything we can to knock out their flak defences on the way in. Please inform the air marshal that his craft will have a clear corridor all the way to the generatorums, as soon as we have eliminated the source of the scrapcode. I swear it upon the draconsfire.'

'As the Emperor wills it,' came the sheik's reply, and Danial heard a fierce grin in the man's voice. He hadn't met Halna'sir in person, and had only seen him from a distance during Tolwyn's final briefing, but he found himself with a great deal of respect for the man. The sheik's actions after the betrayal had been decisive, his leadership unwavering and his choices sound. Now he was going to lead the Astra Militarum infantry into the breach in person with sabre drawn, a gesture that spoke to Danial's throne-enhanced sense of honour.

'Wield the draconsfire, sheik,' said the young king.

‘And may the Emperor watch over your road,’ came Halna’sir’s response. ‘Hunt well, Danial Tan Draconis.’

With that, the sheik cut the vox link, and Danial flexed his haptic gauntlets in readiness.

‘Warriors of the Imperium,’ he boomed through his steed’s amplifiers. ‘In Excelsium Furore! Advance!’

Like an iron tide, the Imperial forces rushed towards the mouth of the nortus maximal. The Astra Militarum forces drove in behind a concentrated spear tip of armour, while the Adrastapolian Knights advanced in their midst to provide fire support. As they came into range, the waiting enemy opened fire. *Oath of Flame* strode towards the enemy lines with shells exploding all around, and Danial was reminded of that first, glorious charge just days earlier. Before betrayal. Before loss.

‘Forward,’ he roared into the vox. ‘Forward for Adrastapol and the Emperor! Sires, ladies, fire at will!’

His Knights cheered in reply, and let fly with the full fury of their steeds’ weaponry. Howling storms of gatling fire chewed through ferrocrete strongpoints, collapsing stonework already weakened by bombardment. Missiles leapt away on trails of flame, spearing into the midst of the enemy. As his steed pounded closer to the outer defences, Danial saw small figures dashing frantically along fire steps, directing gun batteries and portable heavy weapons at the Imperial forces. What must it be like, he thought, to face such a gathering of metal gods, all shaking the ground as they charged?

As the firestorm intensified, Danial kept part of his attention upon the strategic overlay while listening to the timely whispers from the ghosts of his throne. Danial’s ancestors no longer overwhelmed him with their advice, but instead offered counsel with respect and restraint. He dared to hope that they and he had reached an accord, but whatever the case the patterns of battle stood out to him with more clarity than ever.

‘Sire Wallian, Lady Eleanat, suppression fire upon the bunker complex at mark point-two-seven. Lady Jennika, have your lance draw fire from the Cadians if you can – Kovash’s transports are taking punishment. Gallants, mass on Sire Percivane and turn your advance to mark point-three-one-one. With that battery down there’s a gap in their fields of fire. Make me a breach.’

Responses chorused back to him. Still he watched anxiously as the Imperial forces approached the edge of the Adamant Citadel’s projected engagement zone. To the young king’s surprise, its ferocious bombardment failed to

materialise. Leman Russ battle tanks churned up fans of mud as they sped towards the heretic fortifications, firing shot after shot. Shells sailed overhead from artillery in the Imperial rear lines. And still no missiles rained down from beyond the mountains.

'So much for their vaunted Adamant Citadel,' came Jennika's voice over the vox.

'Something must have happened to it,' said Danial as shots splashed from his ion shield. 'That or they're luring us into another trap.'

'Too late for such thoughts now, brother,' said Jennika. 'We're committed.'

'That we are,' said Lady Suset. 'Thermal cannon in range, firing now. Die, you murdering traitors!'

Her shot went through the armoured front of a bastion and brought the structure down in an avalanche of melted plasteel, rumbling stone and screaming militiamen. Following her lead, Danial opened fire into an armoured battery flanking the felled bastion. Superheated energies engulfed the structure, blasting its exposed gunners to ash in a heartbeat before cooking off the weapon's magazine in a spectacular fireball.

'Breach at mark point-two-four,' reported Danial as the smoke cleared from the blast.

'Breach at mark point-three-one-one,' came Sire Percivane's voice a moment later. 'We're through their forward positions.'

As the Knights kept firing, Commander Korgh led a headlong charge to claim the nearest breach. Several hundred Imperial Guardsmen ran at his heels, firing lasguns from the hip and banners flying proudly. Desultory fire fell amongst them, but the enemy had been battered and shell-shocked, and Korgh led his attack home with unwavering courage. Within minutes, the Imperial banners were hoisted high above the scorched remains of the enemy fortifications, and more loyalist forces poured through the breach to engage the secondary defences located deeper into the pass. The story was the same all along the line, the last of the traitors fleeing in panic or dying, bottled up in their strongpoints with nowhere left to run. Danial touched his fingertips to his grandfather's amulet for a moment, and allowed himself a fierce smile of victory. At long last, the war was turning in their favour.

The first enemy defence line had fallen, but further strongpoints remained. Two narrower lines of defences were strung across the heart of the pass, along with numerous fortifications dug into the jagged flanks of the mountains themselves.

'We're losing our artillery cover from here on in,' Danial voxed to his Knights,

‘and the Astra Militarum can accompany us no further. We fight alone from here.’

There had been no time for Polluxis to work his data-wards upon the Imperial Guard war machines, and no guarantee that they would have shielded their more primitive machine-spirits. Until the Adrastapolians silenced the scrapcode, they would fight unsupported.

‘We don’t need them anyway, my liege,’ said Sire Federich Dar Minotos, full of bravado and determination. ‘We’ll smash a path through these filthy traitors the old fashioned way. For the grandmarshal.’

‘For the grandmarshal,’ agreed Danial. ‘And all our fallen. Gallants and Errants at the fore, Wardens and Crusaders concentrate on the fortifications’ biggest guns. Paladins watch our flanks, and knock out any strongpoints you locate in the valley walls. Knights of Adrastapol, for the Emperor, advance.’

Danial felt the mingled elation and fear of command race through him as he spurred his steed into the front ranks of the attack. *Feel them*, whispered his ghosts, *but control them. Control is the mark of a true leader*. Ahead, the second defence line lit with a furious storm of muzzle flare as the heretics opened fire upon the Adrastapolians.

Luk’s voice came through on a private channel, mocking but also more than a little rueful. ‘Do I have to call you “your highness” too, your highness?’

Despite the storm of firepower battering at his shield, Danial couldn’t help a grim smile.

‘You more than most, Knight of Ashes. Show some respect.’

Luk snorted.

‘Such uncouthness, and from the High King no less. I’d sooner show these bastard traitors some fury. Together?’

‘Together,’ said Danial. ‘Just like always.’

‘For Adrastapol!’ roared Luk, moving into a loping charge.

Danial took up the cry, and all around him the other Knights did the same. The flanks of the mountains loomed above them as they charged, lit by the flicker of lights and the flare of explosions. Shells and plasma blasts rained down upon the Knights, hammering their ion shields as they closed with the enemy defence line. Danial’s retinal display lit up with damage markers, runic signifiers flickering to amber then red as weapon limbs were wrecked, armour rent and systems burned out, but the Knights attacked without hesitation. Before him, the traitor defences were wreathed in smoke and flame. Towers collapsed in sheets of rubble. Generator blocks exploded, overloading weapons batteries, which blew apart in

turn and took their terrified crews with them. The scale of the devastation unleashed was breath-taking, the clamour of war magnified to an apocalyptic tumult in the confines of the pass.

Danial's shield glowed and his steed took hits; an auspex receptor shattered; an armoured greave was torn and dented. He kept aiming and firing even as he watched the strategic overlay and his comrades' status manifolds. The flood of information would have cooked an unaugmented brain in minutes, but Danial Tan Draconis was a son of kings, with a mind as sharp as a whetted blade. He thrived on the flood of information.

A line of shells stitched *Oath*'s damaged greave, prompting amber alert runes to flash and electromuscle bundles to spasm. Danial compensated for the lurch in his Knight's stance, sidestepping the next volley and obliterating the offending gun turret with a roaring thermal blast.

Seamlessly, Luk charged *Sword of Heroes* into the resultant breach, swinging his Knight at the waist-gimbal to carve his reaper chainsword along a fortified fire step. Blood sprayed as heretics were churned to crimson mist, but Luk wasn't done. Sparks flew as the Knight arrested its blade-swing with a scream of overstressed servo-motors. Revolving his blade, the Knight of Ashes carved the weapon straight down, through the fortified wall before him, ignoring the small arms fire sparking from his hull. Ferrocrete parted in a fountain of rubble, and Luk bulled his armoured steed straight through the gap. Weakened, the wall gave way, and the heretics bellowed in terror as they were crushed underfoot or swept away by the avalanche of ruin.

'Breach,' shouted Luk over the vox-net. 'Mark point-seven-three.'

Danial felt his friend's satisfaction as he strode *Oath of Flame* through in the *Sword*'s wake. Heretics and mutants fled in terror from the ironclad deities looming over them. Danial looked down without pity, and then, along with Luk Kar Chimaeros, he opened fire.

With the breach secured, a single defence line remained. Sporadic fire rattled down from bunkers set into the ravine walls above, but Sire Garath led the most accurate Knights in sniping them one by one. Danial gathered his warriors before a sharp bend in the valley. Here they were shielded from the final line of enemy guns by the jutting immensity of the mountain's feet. They caught their breath, checked their ammunition counts, and allowed Polluxis' Crawlers to repair and re-arm them from the Sacristans' dwindling stores.

'Sires and ladies of Houses Draconis, Pegasson and Minotos,' said Danial as the Sacristans finished their work. 'Let us sweep aside the final obstacle, and

carry our wrath into the heart of the enemy's fastness!'

The vox filled with rousing battle cries, and with a roar of generators and a booming of ironclad footfalls, the Knights of Adrastapol rounded the bend and bore down upon the last, thin line of heretic defences.

The traitors never stood a chance. Though they put up a desperate fight, many abandoned their posts and fled rather than face the Knights' wrath. The Knights easily shrugged off the panicked fire of those who remained, and in a matter of minutes the towers were toppled, the guns silenced, and Danial's warriors were through the last line of defence.

Yet their cries of victory were silenced as they strode to the mouth of the ravine and gazed out at the sprawling, war ravaged city. The valle electrum spread out before them, surrounded by looming mountainsides thick with pipework and habs, dotted with rising columns of smoke and flame.

'Quite a sight,' breathed Sire Olric.

'There are the generatorums,' said Danial, blink-clicking designator runes over the distant trio of huge structures. 'But what in Throne's name is that?'

A roiling column of energy was rising from the heart of the city. It roared upwards like a never-ending river, as wide as a drop keep and churning with all the colours of madness, to spread in a monstrous, pulsing thunderhead.

'Danial,' voxed Jennika. 'I don't know what that is, but it's wrong on every level. It must be. We have to stop it.'

Perhaps Gerraint Tan Chimaeros had known about whatever heresy was occurring here. Perhaps he had not, but if Danial had ever harboured any lasts shreds of sympathy for the man, they fell as ashes before such obvious heresy.

'Knights,' he voxed grimly. 'This is the truth of Gerraint Tan Chimaeros' rebellion. For Adrastapol, we end this now.'

The towering Knight strode into the plaza, and Varakh'Lorr walked to meet it. He was snarling, the Red Veil contorted into a mask of hate. The acid-green war engine shook the ground as it advanced, every footfall landing with enough force to crush a battle tank like a ration tin. The Knight's immensity blocked out the clouds as it loomed over him, cannon swivelling in his direction. It was an engine built to slaughter armies, from whose shields the Word Bearers' fire splashed like rain.

'I have faced far worse than you,' said Varakh'Lorr.

He was thirty yards from the Knight's feet when it fired. Two swift concussions, the scream of shells cleaving the air, then the all-consuming roar as they detonated. A mortal warrior would have been slain instantly, but Varakh'Lorr was no longer truly mortal. The force of the explosions buffeted him, but the energies of the warp shielded him from harm. Ghastly daemonic faces shrieked at him from the churning void behind reality, then Varakh'Lorr burst from the billowing edge of the fireball and charged the Knight with a roar.

The Dark Apostle could see the soul of the Knight's pilot, burning like a candle flame amidst the metal immensity of his steed. Sparks of panic flew around that flame as the Knight attempted to redress its aim, but Varakh'Lorr was running

too fast, and far too close.

Warp-bulked muscles bunched in the Dark Apostle's legs and back. He sprang in a superhuman leap and swung his cursed crozius. The heavy mace slammed into the Knight's knee with unstoppable force. Plasteel and adamantium sundered. Cables tore and gyros shattered into spinning shrapnel. The Knight's knee was torn away entirely, its wreckage spinning and clattering around Varakh'Lorr as he landed.

Turning, the Dark Apostle watched the huge war machine sway, then tip. Servo-motors screamed as the Knight toppled sideways, accompanied in Varakh'Lorr's empyric senses by daemonic howls of glee. The machine crashed down with horrific force, before exploding like a macro-cannon shell. For a second time in as many minutes, the fires of obliteration washed over Varakh'Lorr and for a second time he scorned them.

As the smoke cleared, the rush of pleasure from killing the Knight drained away, replaced once more by sour fury as Varakh'Lorr beheld the folly that surrounded him.

Battle raged in the plaza before generatorum block two, backlit by the towering column of warp fire that surged from the building's heart. A lance of House Wyvorn Knights had attacked the Word Bearers' defences. Three of the machines had fallen already, either by Varakh'Lorr's hand or felled by the fire of the Predator battle tanks drawn up before the generatorum steps. Another Knight was listing badly, smoke pouring from a blasted hip joint as it limped away. The last two fought on, launching a volley of missiles that turned one of his Predators into a fireball and flipped another savagely onto its turret.

'May all of the Dark Gods rain their curses down upon these idiots for all eternity,' growled Varakh'Lorr. 'Gothro'Gol, why are those Knights still standing?'

'Apologies, master,' voxed his bodyguard. 'One moment.'

Varakh'Lorr's scowl eased as he heard a familiar engine scream. A trio of crimson-hulled Storm Eagles swept low over the Knights, guns blazing. One of the aircraft was clipped by chattering Icarus fire, smoke spewing from its wing as it wallowed out of formation. In return, one Knight shook and shuddered as multiple laser blasts burned through it from behind and burst from its chest plates. Secondary explosions rippled through the Knight and it slumped to a halt, dead and dark with flames crackling from its innards. The second fared little better, melta fire burning through its carapace armour and reducing one arm joint to slag. As its gatling cannon fell away, the wounded Knight swivelled its ion

shield as the Storm Eagles banked sharply around for another pass.

'Kill it,' came Gothro'Gol's voice across the vox. Heavy weapons fire pierced the Knight from every side. The last Predator transfixed the machine with lascannon blasts. Missiles whipped in from the buildings to either side, and Gothro'Gol himself stitched autocannon fire into the war engine from his position atop the generatorum steps. Even from several hundred yards away, Varakh'Lorr felt the pilot's singular moment of terror and agony. Then the luckless noble's body expired, and his soul was dragged away to join the towering Beacon of Sacrifice that roared upwards from the Chaos sanctum.

It would take many more souls than that to fuel Varakh'Lorr's ascension. This was the culmination of an ancient ritual that stretched across space and time. It was the final, mass sacrifice that would draw the eye of the Dark Gods to all that Varakh'Lorr had achieved in their name, and at last win him his immortal rewards. Many thousands had been taken already, and more were needed to fuel the beacon. The most loyal of Varakh'Lorr's mortal cultists were performing the harvest, overseen by the handful of traitor legionaries that could be spared. Bands of cultists were sweeping the valle electrum block by block, herding those who came willingly and bludgeoning those who resisted. A gratifying number of the fools cowering in the ruins still believed the Word Bearers to be their saviours, and flocked at the chance of being chosen as worthy. Willing or not, the civilian cattle were being herded through the war-torn city streets, or driven along sewer-tunnels where gunfire could not reach them. Their destination was the Dark Apostle's inner sanctum, and by the time they realised that they were to be nothing more than sacrificial meat upon his altar, it was too late.

'Not as weak as I thought, I'll give them that,' Varakh'Lorr muttered. He had been planning to betray the Knights the moment he seized his mantle of ultimate power. He supposed he couldn't blame them for being wise enough to attempt a pre-emptive strike. But he could hate and butcher them for it.

The Knights of House Chimaeros and House Wyvorn had turned suddenly upon the Dark Apostle's forces thirteen hours earlier, clearly obeying a pre-arranged signal. They had slaughtered many of his traitor legionaries and stolen command of great masses of cultists in the more remote warzones across the continent. The bulk of their strength had been committed to a sudden attack against the valle electrum, but here they faced stiff resistance. Not as stiff as Varakh'Lorr would have liked, since their machine priest had sabotaged the gun fortress atop Ironpeak. Still, the Knights had become bogged down in street-to-street fighting against cult armour and the Word Bearers' remaining daemon engines, leaving

the Dark Apostle with a chance to turn the tide.

He crossed the plaza, skirting fallen metal giants and the heaped corpses of gun-slaughtered cultists. Gothro'Gol paced down the steps to meet him.

'We act now,' said Varakh'Lorr to his bodyguard.

'The soulgather is incomplete, master,' rumbled Gothro'Gol. 'The beacon is unstable.'

'Let me worry about that,' replied the Dark Apostle. He paused as a banshee wail washed through the veil of reality to assault his senses. Gothro'Gol waited, hulking and silent as his master struggled with the manifestations tormenting him. It was as if an electrical storm raged within him, and Varakh'Lorr felt organs squirm and flesh twist as his body adjusted itself for the impending change.

'It comes now,' said Gothro'Gol.

'Soon, yes,' gasped Varakh'Lorr, a furnace glow cast across Gothro'Gol's armour from the Dark Apostle's eyes. 'The situation is imperfect, despite all our… hngh… efforts. But I must proceed, or face the consequences.' For a split second, a cavalcade of fleshy horrors and hungry, gnashing maws bombarded his mind's eye. The Dark Apostle stumbled, bracing himself against Gothro'Gol to stop from falling. As he pulled his hand back, Varakh'Lorr saw that he had left a mark scorched into the crimson metal, directly over his bodyguard's primary heart.

'I shall withdraw to the sanctum now, faithful protector,' he gasped. 'Reinforcements are on their way, yes?'

Gothro'Gol nodded. 'The Knights slew Kuvaris' warband in the exceptum fissional. We lost contact with Jothol'Kar over the trans-mechanoria. All other warbands have returned, or soon shall.'

'The Knights no doubt think they have won meaningful victories,' sneered Varakh'Lorr. 'They've won nothing. The only fight that matters is here, and soon it will be beyond them.'

Gothro'Gol said nothing. He merely stood and awaited orders.

'Pull all remaining brothers back into the generatorum blocks and have them dig in,' said Varakh'Lorr, wrestling for a moment of clarity. 'The Knights will break through the cultist lines again soon enough, and in greater force I don't doubt. But they can't risk damaging these generatorums, not if they want to claim the Adamant Citadels for themselves. They know they can't win this war without them, not against us and the Imperials. We'll make our stand here. See to it that the enemy does not break through before my ascension is complete.'

‘It shall be thus,’ rumbled his bodyguard, beginning to turn away.

‘Gothro’Gol,’ began the Dark Apostle, and his bodyguard paused. ‘See to the defences, then attend me in my sanctum. I would have you at my side when I ascend.’

The huge Word Bearer stood statue-still for a moment, then gave a single vox-pip of acknowledgement and strode away. Varakh’Lorr watched him go, seeing Gothro’Gol’s rotted soul laid bare like the innards of some flayed thing. For all his sparse words and ineffable, faceless menace, Varakh’Lorr saw the conflicted storm of ambition, caution, jealousy and devotion that raged within his bodyguard’s heart. They were all the qualities that had made Gothro’Gol useful over the centuries, and they would make him so once again today.

Ritual had transformed the sanctum into a luridly lit abattoir, and Varakh’Lorr stumbled in the doorway as a wave of empyric power washed over him. Where once the sacrificial font had filled the centre of the floor, there now burned a vast bonfire of varicoloured flame. Here was the Beacon of Ascendancy, conduit of the ninth feast. The ethereal fires roared upwards, through the eight-pointed star that hung above them, and on through the sanctum’s ceiling to soar into the sky. They caused no damage to the building itself, for these were fires of the soul, not of crude corporeal heat. Yet they lit the sanctum with a searing radiance that shifted and danced like a madman’s nightmares. Around the beacon were crowds of weeping, terrified sacrifices. The populace of the valle electrum were being herded in through the sanctum’s processional archways, their hands tied crudely with looted electrical wiring and their compliance assured by the menacing gun muzzles of the cultists escorting them. Begging and pleading, they were driven into ragged masses, then shoved headlong into the fires. Some tried to fight, but were bludgeoned with gun butts and thrown in all the same. A surprising number went willingly, their faces lit with the rapture of false hope. They all burned, their flesh reduced to ash in a heartbeat and their souls whisked upward to join the sacrificial energies of the beacon.

Varakh’Lorr could feel the eyes of the gods being drawn towards his offering. It was inevitable now. The Red Veil trammelled the countless souls of those worlds he had already slain, and now with this last offering Varakh’Lorr’s vast galactic ritual would be complete. If he was not prepared, the fleeting moment of the Octed’s regard would destroy him utterly. But he would be ready; he would greet his eternal masters with the proper sacrifice, with his mortal vessel anointed and prepared, and he would finally earn their greatest blessing.

Ignoring the trails of phantasmal blood seeping from the walls, and the flickering things that jerked and danced in his peripheral vision, the Dark Apostle forced himself upright with an effort of will and strode determinedly across the sanctum. The sacrificial victims wailed louder at the sight of him, some cowering in fear while others – the truly deluded – cried out for salvation.

Varakh'Lorr forged on, making for the data-pulpit at the end of the sanctum. Power surged and flared through the chamber. His skin was on fire, and his senses reeled as if he stood on the swaying deck of a starship in low gravity.

As he neared the pulpit there came a low, wet roar, as of many inhuman voices crying out at once. The sound was mingled with a screaming binharic surge of raw scrapcode. Flowing up from the choristry pit came a vast, fleshy abomination. Yards and yards of bulging flab and stapled, metal-chorded muscle flexed and strained. Spindly, claw-footed legs scrabbled in slime-slick profusion. Cable-tentacles and braided human arms lashed and clawed at the air as arcs of lightning leapt between the engine-spines driven into the thing's back. A golden cherub mask stared at Varakh'Lorr with idiot tranquillity, while below it a ragged, fleshy maw split open to scream.

Cultists and sacrifices alike wailed in terror at the sight of the Mournful Angel. The handful of cultists nearest to the choristry pit turned to run, only to be crushed into bloody paste by the monster's mass, or snatched up in its foul tentacles and snapped like twigs. The Dark Apostle turned, swaying but fearless before the creature as it pooled its revolting body and loomed over him like a fleshy cliff. He raised the Octed rune that hung upon a chain around his neck, as though warding the abomination away.

'Do not threaten me,' he said. 'I am your master, and you will obey.'

The monstrous thing roared, human screams and binharic howls melding into a chorus like a thousand damned souls. It clawed and lashed, but did not attack. Varakh'Lorr could see the tortured animus of Donatos' astropathic choir still writhing within the monster they had been fused to create. They hated him, but they feared him also, and the runes that the warp smiths had hammered into their mutated flesh bound them to Varakh'Lorr's service.

In theory.

'You are my servant, my Mournful Angel,' cried the Dark Apostle. 'Blessed with the power of the dark aria. But it is a purpose that I gave you, and what I give, I can take away!'

The creature pawed the air, screaming so loudly that even the warded systems of Varakh'Lorr's armour sparked with cut-outs and power surges.

‘Y’gleh K’gekh Il d’gyanha!’ roared the Dark Apostle in the words of the Dark Tongue. ‘Ir’klah! D’kaghaka kha’uun!’

The Mournful Angel writhed, recoiling from the cruel incantation. Wisps of steam rose from its bloated body.

Varakh’Lorr took a step forward, then another, spitting blood-flecked words of power. His eight-pointed amulet glowed with a hellish light as he incanted, and the monstrous scrapcode beast was driven back. With a final bellow of binharic rage it turned in a great heaving of flesh and scrabbling of limbs, and crashed down into its pit.

Varakh’Lorr lowered the amulet and staggered, almost dropping to one knee. Twisted images stabbed like splinters into his mind. The sensation of blistering heat and bone-cracking cold flashed through his limbs, causing him to grit his sharp teeth in pain. He let out a snarl as he felt even those grind together in strange new shapes, as though they were becoming too large and serrated for his jaw. With an effort, the Dark Apostle dragged himself upright, shrugging off the ethereal energies trying to claw through his flesh. He could not surrender now, or all would be lost and he would become something lower and more hideous than even his angel.

Varakh’Lorr turned his burning gaze upon his flock.

‘Do not cease!’ he cried, and heard his own voice twining with a deeper, more monstrous growl. They flinched in fear, scrambling to comply. Screams and wailing rose afresh as the terrible slaughter gathered pace.

Gothro’Gol’s spike-armoured immensity parted the masses like the prow of a ship as he strode up to Varakh’Lorr and slammed one fist against his chest in the old Legion salute.

‘All is ready, master.’

‘Good,’ rasped the Dark Apostle. ‘Attend me.’

He returned to the pulpit, every step like climbing some jagged, impossible mountain. Its peak was close, burning with power, but the drop at his back was terrible indeed.

Gothro’Gol kept pace beside the Dark Apostle. ‘You must endure, master.’

‘I must,’ said Varakh’Lorr, ‘and I shall.’

He gained the first of the twelve marble steps that led up to the pulpit. His shuddering hand found its railing and Varakh’Lorr ascended, Gothro’Gol behind him, ever watchful.

‘You have always been faithful, Gothro’Gol,’ gasped the Dark Apostle. ‘You are a capable leader and a devoted servant of the Octed. Yet you seem always

content to stand in my shadow. Why?'

'Master?' rumbled the bodyguard.

'Why do you serve, Gothro'Gol?' asked Varakh'Lorr, reaching the uppermost step and half-falling into the pulpit. He felt as though every atom of his body was trying to pull away from the rest, aching to reshape itself into something new, and he barely held himself together. 'Have you never desired to be the master, not the slave?'

'I am no slave,' replied the hulking Word Bearer. 'I am oathed to you. So it has been for centuries. I keep my oath.'

'Hah, loyalty from a traitor, is that it?' laughed Varakh'Lorr painfully as his bones flexed with an audible crackle. 'Selfless and devoted for all this time?'

Gothro'Gol said nothing. He merely loomed still and silent. Within his bodyguard's soul, though, the Dark Apostle could see anger and ambition surge to the fore.

'There's more than that, isn't there?' he asked, already knowing the answer. 'You haven't followed in my wake all these years out of duty alone. The great Gothro'Gol, destroyer of Valghoria, butcher of the Hundred Cities, champion of Chaos. You have walked this bloody path with me in the hopes of reward, have you not?'

Again, Gothro'Gol remained silent, but Varakh'Lorr saw the truth of it. He grunted and nodded in acknowledgement, as though the Terminator had spoken aloud.

'And why not,' said the Dark Apostle. 'Master of the warband, after my ascension. Already anointed in the blood of countless thousands. Already far along the bloody path yourself. Slave no longer, you would be Lord Gothro'Gol when I am risen, wouldn't you?'

'Yes,' he replied, hydraulics whining in his monstrous armour as he took a step closer. Varakh'Lorr smiled knowingly up at the armoured giant, and his stolen visage smiled with him.

'Recompense,' hissed the Dark Apostle. 'Validation. A just reward for he who has, for so long, served as my last true tether to mortality.'

'It is my right,' replied Gothro'Gol, his tone heavy with menace.

'It is,' nodded Varakh'Lorr painfully. 'But I am about to become a god, Gothro'Gol. And for that, even my final tether must be severed.'

Alarm flared within his servant, a swift blue flame that leapt through Gothro'Gol's nerve endings and spurred him to swing up his heavy mace for a killing blow. Varakh'Lorr channelled the raw powers of change into his flesh and

shaped it to his whims. His hand fused, transforming into an adamantium-tipped bone spike that drove through the Terminator's gorget seal and into his throat.

Blood sprayed from the wound, thick, dark gore painting Varakh'Lorr's armour and flesh. Gothro'Gol staggered, still struggling to raise his mace. Varakh'Lorr twisted the bone spike, ripping the wound wider, then pulled it back and drove it forward again, this time piercing Gothro'Gol's breastplate where his mark had burned into the crimson metal. Three feet of metal and bone impaled his bodyguard's primary heart. The organ burst, and Varakh'Lorr shuddered with pleasure as he felt more blood drench his unnatural form.

Gothro'Gol stumbled as the lifeblood poured from his body and the strength gave out in his legs. Motor-bundles in his armour whined as they attempted to compensate, and with a surge of desperate fury, he swung his mace with all his remaining strength. The Dark Apostle caught the weapon's haft mid swing. Contemptuously, Varakh'Lorr ripped it from Gothro'Gol's hand and flung it away into the gloom, then tore free the bone spike and let the Word Bearer's blood shower him like hot, red rain. Divinity beckoned.

Gothro'Gol gurgled something, some angry sound of betrayal and hate. Varakh'Lorr just laughed.

'The final anointing,' he said through a mouth full of needle fangs. 'The blood of the faithful slave, taken in sacrifice from his mortal form. Thank you, old friend. You have served loyally to the end.'

Varakh'Lorr raised one armoured boot and kicked the kneeling Terminator in the chest. Such was his unnatural strength that Gothro'Gol's dying body was propelled backwards from the data-pulpit, crashing and rolling down the marble steps to sprawl in a ruined heap at their feet. The hulking bodyguard twitched once, and then was still.

Varakh'Lorr turned away from the corpse of his longest-serving, most loyal warrior, and stared deep into the soulfires of the Beacon of Ascendancy. All was in readiness. The last step was complete. The time was now. Raising both arms high, Varakh'Lorr began to chant in a tongue forbidden since the dawn of time. His hearts thundered as he felt the eye of the gods turn towards him and his sacrificial offering, and triumph filled him.

Now, he would ascend.

The Knights of Adrastapol advanced along parallel streets of the valle electrum in three oversized lances, dispersed to maximise fields of fire, protect the wounded and ensure that no angle was left unobserved. They passed towering data-shrines, slab-sided worker habs, and outlying servitor factories from which heretical pennants and hanged corpses dangled. Yet they saw no trace of the traitors themselves, barring the distant flare and rattle of gunfire further towards the city's heart.

Danial Tan Draconis led the middle lance with Luk Kar Chimaeros and Sire Olric. Jennika had the lance on the left flank, supported by Lady Eleanat and Sire Percivane, while Markos Dar Draconis had the right with Sire Federich Dar Minotos and Sire Garath. The rest of the loyalist Knights were divided between their formations. In the midst of each lance came the nine remaining Sacristan Crawlers. The fuel, ammunition and spare parts the Crawlers carried were nearly exhausted, yet Polluxis and his acolytes could still make themselves useful. The Sacristans beseeched their machine-spirits for guidance, and their prayers were answered with a steady stream of triangulation data confirming that the Adrastapolians were closing upon the source of the hateful scrapcode.

Everywhere they saw evidence of infighting, from heaped cultist corpses and

burned-out Donatosian tanks to fire-blackened Crawlers and, on several occasions, the shell of a fallen renegade Knight.

Jennika had been a surrogate mother to her younger sibling since they were both small, but where she was a warrior born, Danial always seemed infuriatingly bookish and unsure. Jennika had worried that her brother would never truly come into his own, never be worthy of his status as heir. Today, she was glad to be proved wrong.

'You have the draconsfire in you, brother,' she voxed to him on a private channel. 'Even father might not have gotten us this far. He'd have been proud. I know I am.'

'Thank you,' said Danial. 'He would have been proud of us both, Jen. But your approval means more to me than any echo of his. I couldn't have done this without you, sister.'

'Yes,' she said, 'you could. You're every bit as strong as our father was. Danial, he was a good king. I believe you're going to be a great one.'

'As the Emperor wills it,' Danial replied. 'Don't praise me too soon though, eh? We've not met any resistance yet.'

'True,' she mused, riding out the sway of her cockpit as her Knight stepped over a crashed Arvus shuttle. 'For an enemy stronghold, there's an awful lot of wreck and ruin, but precious few foes.'

'Seems the reports of infighting were true,' replied Danial through a hiss of static. 'I just can't understand why they'd turn on one another when they were so close to victory.'

'That's because you have an honest heart and an earnest mind, brother,' said Jennika, only half joking. 'Don't seek to comprehend those of the traitor or the heretic. I'm told it's bad for the soul.' Danial snorted in response, then broadened his vox channel.

'Knights, be on your guard. The enemy are here, somewhere.'

'Good!' said Sire Markos irritably. 'All this waiting is giving me ill humours. Give me a bloody enemy any day, over wondering where in the Emperor's name they all are.'

'And what about that unnatural light?' said Sire Garath. 'Chaos witchery, I'll bet. Get too close, it's liable to steal our souls.'

'I'd wager the two are linked,' said Sire Olric. 'My guess is that the Word Bearers crossed a line even Tan Chimaeros wasn't willing to. Probably why he turned on them.'

'If that's true, it'd be the first sensible thing he's done in days,' said Markos.

‘Just looking at that light’s making me feel ill.’

‘You may be correct, Sire Olric,’ said Danial. ‘High Sacristan, *do* we have any way of knowing what in Throne’s name that phenomenon is? Could it have turned our enemies against one another?’

‘We do not, my liege,’ replied Polluxis, his voice raised over the binharic chanting of his acolytes. ‘Our auspex can gather no cogent readings from the phenomenon, but there is nothing in our cogitator-pict-base that matches it.’

‘Is it linked to the scrapcode?’ asked Luk over the vox. ‘Is that what’s causing it?’

‘Again, impossible to say, Freeblade,’ came Polluxis’ response. ‘Malefic code-surge fortitude is increasing by a factor of three-point-one-four every five minutes sidereal. This suggests either an amplification of the code originator, or that we are closing on its position rapidly. This would seem to imply, in turn, that the source of the scrapcode and the location of the warp anomaly are comparatively close to one another.’

‘Will your wards hold, High Sacristan?’ asked Jennika.

‘Yes, Lady Tan Draconis. The machine-spirits of the Crawlers can continue to amplify and reapply their data-benedictions as required. The wards will hold.’

Jennika nodded to herself, feeding a little more power into her motive actuators as the Knights marched up a steep hill between fire-blackened Administratum offices.

‘Good,’ said Jennika. ‘Then all we need to know is where…’

‘Contact left, one hundred yards!’ cried Lady Suset across the vox. At the same moment, gun muzzles flared in Jennika’s sensorium, followed a split second later by the rattling clang of multiple hull impacts.

‘Throne!’ she snarled, wrenching her ion shield around to intercept the stream of fire. Blue energy flashed as the shots continued to rain down upon her, and the Lady Tan Draconis ignored the warning runes flashing on her instruments as she hunted for a target.

‘Got you,’ she whispered, then, ‘Icarus battery, cathedrum rooftop, mark point-one-one.’ With deft twitches of her haptics, Jennika swung *Fire Defiant*’s battle cannon to bear, aiming at the twin-barrelled flak cannon spewing shells at her from on high. Two concussive thumps ran through her Knight’s hull as it fired, spent casings dropping from the battle cannon’s breach to clang down in the roadway and roll downhill. Her shots found their mark, obliterating the flak battery and the gothic architecture in which it nested. Rubble tumbled and shrapnel flew as the Icarus array was blasted apart.

‘More of them,’ voxed Danial, and Jennika’s strategic display lit with crimson contact runes. ‘I’m not reading any bio-signatures.’

Reports filled the vox, Knights confirming contact with servitor-crewed sentry guns located amidst the spires and rooftops all along the ridge line. Fire flashed in Jennika’s peripheral vision, and ion shields flared and spat.

‘Hypothetical,’ said Polluxis. ‘We have triggered the city’s automated defence grid by entering its auspex radius.’

‘Sires and ladies, fire discipline,’ barked Markos over the vox. ‘Defend the Crawlers, and watch the rooftops.’

‘Sires Federich, Olric and Percivane,’ said Danial, ‘eyes on the ground approaches while we clear a path through the turrets. I don’t want any heretics creeping up on us while we deal with these guns. Lady Suset, good eyes. Keep them on your auspex please, my lady, and call out if you see incoming threats.’

‘Yes, my liege,’ voxed Suset, her voice determined.

‘All lances, maintain advance one quarter pace,’ continued Danial. ‘Eliminate those turrets and don’t blunder into any fire corridors, but don’t stop moving either. We’re in dense urban terrain, and the Word Bearers are out there somewhere.’

Jennika’s targeting reticules flicked from one crenulated rooftop to the next, picking out anti-aircraft batteries and lascannon emplacements amongst the spires and gargoyles. As each was pinpointed, she blasted it apart. For several minutes, the crest of the ridge was lit with explosions as the Knights paced steadily between the buildings, trading fire with the automated weapon-emplacements. Several warriors spat curses or cried out as shots pierced their shields to buckle armour and damage systems, yet thanks to their tight formations and coordinated fire patterns, none fell. Finally, after what felt like an hour of thundering gunfire but was, in truth, more like five minutes, the last of the turrets exploded into leaping flames.

Jennika cycled her steed’s autoloaders and checked her damage display. Armour integrity still held at over ninety per cent across the majority of *Fire Defiant*’s body, though her steed’s chest plating had taken several deep craters, and two of her sixteen thermo-sanctifiers read as black and dead on her display. Ammunition was resting at just over two-thirds capacity. It wasn’t perfect, she thought, but what on this Emperor-forsaken world was? It would have to do.

‘Seems we’ve crossed into their defence lines then,’ commented Sire Garath across the vox.

‘Only automated turrets, though,’ responded Danial. ‘If all this gunfire didn’t

bring any enemies down upon us then there is a good chance the infighting is severe, and our foes' attention elsewhere. Let's not waste the element of surprise. Onward.'

The Knights advanced, encountering further nests of rooftop servitor-guns arrayed in complex defensive patterns through the city's streets and rooftops. The Adrastapolians knocked out each emplacement as they found it, marking a clear corridor in runes upon their strategic overlay that could be transmitted to the Imperial Navy command the moment the scrapcode stopped. Danial had promised the bombers a clear corridor for their bombing run, and he intended to deliver it.

The deeper Danial and his followers pushed into the city, the more evidence they found of recent conflict. They crossed a junction, its exits strewn with wrecked rebel armour, its statue of the Emperor bullet-riddled and cast down in rubble. In the streets beyond they found the smoking carcass of a House Chimaeros Knight, leaning against a hab-stack like a drunk attempting to gather his wits. Shortly afterwards a flight of winged daemon engines swept overhead, and the few Knights with Icarus arrays swivelled their carapace-mounted cannons skywards. Yet the drakes ignored them, wholly intent upon something deeper within the city.

'It is far too quiet,' voxed Luk. 'And this is far too easy.'

'Uncomfortably reminiscent of the Arbites fortress, isn't it?' said Markos. 'I pray to the Emperor himself that we're not walking into another trap.'

'Even if we are,' said Danial. 'We can't ignore that heresy at the city's heart. Its growing by the minute.'

'You're right, my liege,' said Lady Suset. 'Whatever the enemy are doing, we have to stop it.'

The scrapcode source grew nearer, and the unnatural column of light loomed overhead. The impossible thunderhead at its apex billowed ever larger, roiling with sick organic colours and the shimmering suggestion of eyes, mouths and screaming faces. More than one Knight muttered prayers across the vox as they looked upon the hideous sight, or cried out as they witnessed some horror churning in its depths. And all the while, Danial couldn't shake the suspicion that their time was running out.

'Bridge ahead, sire,' voxed Suset Dar Draconis. 'A big one. It merges several arterial routes and loops over the primary works of the manufactorum omnissi. It's our most direct route to the heart of the city.'

Danial brought *Oath of Flame* to a thumping halt. They were in amongst a belt of blackened ruins, buildings so skeletal and burned that it was impossible to determine their original nature. The High King was mindful of his own advice that they should keep moving, but according to his auspex the bridge was only a few hundred yards ahead, and he needed a moment to think. The hateful column of fire loomed above him, its squirming light a yellowing bruise. It felt unclean, even through his machine's hull.

'What are our options here?' he asked. 'The bridge will surely be an exposed route, and it'll funnel us no matter how big it is. Can we go through the manufactorum omnissi?'

'No,' said Suset, 'I don't think so, my liege. Not easily anyway. I'm reading a huge concentration of metalwork, and a great deal of heat blooming. Pipes and forges would be my guess.'

'The Lady Suset reads her auspex with commendable clarity,' voxed Polluxis, the High Sacristan's uninflected voice giving nothing away. Danial felt a twinge of guilt as he remembered that Lady Suset's adjustments to her steed's senses were meant to remain a secret. Polluxis was a firm and loyal servant of House Draconis, but if he believed Suset guilty of tech-heresy then he would be merciless in his censure. After all the lives forfeit, Danial would not allow another valuable Knight to be lost in such a senseless way; he resolved to intercede personally if Polluxis pushed the matter.

'She does,' said Danial firmly. 'Do you concur with her assessment, High Sacristan?'

'I do, your highness,' replied Polluxis. 'I can further append that the entire complex, which stretches lateral to our current path for a distance of eight-point-four miles, is set within a one-hundred-foot-deep ferrocrete trench for the protection of the municipal structures around it. Hence the necessity for a bridge.'

'Sounds like we're going over then, eh, your highness?' came Sire Markos' voice over the vox. 'The sooner we get to the heart of the city the sooner we can end this.'

'For once I must concur with your herald, sire,' said Lady Eleanat Dar Pegasson coolly. 'We have no other practicable route of advance without wasting a great deal of time. Though it is incumbent upon me to point out that, were I setting a trap for my enemies, this would be the place I would choose.'

Danial was half listening to his Knights and half to the whispers of his throne. He liked nothing about this situation, but even his murmuring ancestors had

nothing helpful to offer him. ‘We take the bridge. But if we’re about to ride into a trap, we must be ready to break out of it as quickly as we blunder in.’

They advanced swiftly now, Danial’s lance surging to the front of the formation while Markos’ slowed and took rear-guard. Jennika’s warriors watched over Polluxis’ Crawlers. The Knights’ footfalls rolled like thunder as they burst from amidst the ruins and approached the bridge before them.

It was a huge structure, a vast arch of ferrocrete and iron wide enough for five Knights to walk abreast, stretching away into the middle distance. Through his sensorium, Danial could just see the bridge’s far end, partially lost amidst a haze of oily black smoke. Those fumes rose from the massive trench beneath the bridge. Down in this man-made valley, the manufactorum omnissi was burning. A vast tangle of pipelines, boiler-isles, macro furnaces, smelteries and forge-temples, it appeared to be slowly consuming itself as its fires raged out of control and its overflowing crucibalia spilled rivers of molten metal.

The Knights poured power into their motive actuators and guided their steeds out onto the bridge. Danial easily rode the shudder and sway of the bridge, blinking through layered optic filters, attempting to clear his field of vision and see past the boiling smoke that rose around him. Rusted groundcars crunched underfoot like rock-roaches as he advanced, and the roar of flames from below filled his audio-pickups.

Steady vox reports filtered to Danial’s ear. There was no sign of danger to the rear or hint of enemy aircraft in the skies. As *Oath of Flame* crossed the halfway point, Danial dared to hope they might pass this obstacle uncontested. He could see the generatorums looming one mile beyond the bridge’s end, the hellish light rising from their midst.

Danger!

The sudden, dry hiss from Danial’s throne made him jump. Reacting on instinct, he angled his ion shield to the fore.

‘Knights,’ he cried, ‘shields front!’

A savage volley of fire flashed out of the smoke from the bridge’s far end. Danial’s instruments lit up with warning runes and his shield blazed like a newborn star. *Oath* faltered mid stride, its foot crunching down on the ferrocrete divider between two transit-lanes. Danial swore as he wrestled to keep his Knight upright and moving forwards. His augmented cerebrum expanded to filter dozens of information-streams at once, and he cursed again as he took in the full measure of the threat.

Through the drifting smoke, Danial saw the Knights of House Wyvorn blocking

their path, gathered at the far end of the bridge with weapons primed. The warning from Danial's throne had saved his Knights from complete devastation, but still Luk's *Sword of Heroes* had sustained damage to its right hip and carapace, while Sire Rikhardt Dar Minotos had lost his Crusader's gatling cannon, and been struck repeatedly in the torso armour. Worst hit was Sire Jeremial Dar Pegasson, whose shield collapsed under the thunderous volley. A trio of shrieking warheads slammed into the Pegasson Knight, blowing out its torso and ripping away its right arm at the shoulder. The third missile struck low, a well-aimed tripping shot that crashed through the Knight's shins, shredding motor-bundles and armour plating. Carried by its own momentum, Sire Jeremial's steed lurched forward as its legs were blown out from under it. The Knight toppled like a stricken olidarne tree, impacting face-first upon the bridge's surface. Sparks and flame filled the air as the steed skidded and slowed. It did not stop soon enough, tipping over the edge of the bridge and plunging into the fires below.

Panic threatened, but Danial forced it down with the aid of his ghosts.

'Knights! Present and tilt.' He paused, teeth gritted as his cockpit shook around him. 'We charge their line and break straight through! Draconsfire!'

'Draconsfire!' they bellowed, willing their steeds into a lumbering charge. Danial fired his thermal cannon at one of the acid green Knights blocking off the mouth of the bridge. The energies splashed against his target's shield to no effect, and Danial hissed in frustration. His warriors were firing back, launching missiles overhead from the back ranks, but the battlefield was so tight that only a handful of the loyalists could get a clear shot. The enemy fired another thunderous volley, then another. Lady Eleanat screamed as her Knight took a punishing hit to the sternum. Sire Olric's *Draconsflame* stumbled as shots tore through its carapace and set alight to multiple reactor cells.

'How did they catch us?' asked Luk, his voice lurching with the running gait of his Knight. *Sword of Heroes* was trailing flames from rents in its armour, but the Freeblade charged all the same.

'Old trick,' grunted Sire Markos. 'Shrouded reactors on low power, hidden behind enough fire and smoke. You can't see them 'till they rouse their steeds, and do this.'

True to form, the Wyvorn Knights' discipline was crumbling, their volleys devolving into a frenzied hail of shots. The Knights of Danial's lance were forced to slow, leaning into the bombardment with their shields front. Those behind were slowed in turn, the charge reduced to a trudging advance. A shell

detonated amongst Polluxis' Crawlers, slamming one vehicle onto its side and reducing another to a crater. Sire Percivane's shield flickered and a stream of gatling fire stitched his Knight's helm and carapace. Danial swore as a thermal blast tore into Sire Olric's limping *Draconsflame*. The noble Knight screamed as his cockpit melted around him.

Danial fired again and felt a momentary stab of satisfaction as his blast bored through the Knight that had slain Sire Olric, collapsing its shield and detonating its armoured torso. The machine's reactor vented roiling plasma that seared through the armour of the Knights to either side. Yet the next second the enemy fire redoubled its fury, and the High King felt *Oath of Flame* shaking around him.

'We've lost momentum,' voxed Danial. 'Front rank lock shields and brace. Concentrate your fire and unseat them one-by-one. It'll cost us, but we'll defeat them through fire discipline.'

'We're bunched up and we can't bring all our guns to bear,' voxed Markos. 'This is a desperate plan, my liege.'

'It's the best we've got, and we can't afford to retreat. Even if they don't cut us to pieces, we'll never reach the generatorums in time.'

Explosions suddenly blossomed amidst the Wyvorn Knights. The blasts struck home against the left-hand end of the Wyvorn line, sending one Knight pitching forwards into the blazing hell of the trench, and mangling the legs of another.

'What…?' began Danial, then he saw the speeding shapes of Donatosian battle tanks. They were racing in along the transitway that ran parallel to the trench's edge, Leman Russ pattern machines firing as they charged. Traitor banners flew from the vehicles' turrets, the horned daemon sigil of the Word Bearers. The attack had thrown the Wyvorn Knights into disarray. Those closest to the heretic armour charge were turning their steeds to address it, swinging their shields up to deflect cannon rounds fired from point blank range.

As they did so, the fire pouring into the Adrastapolians slackened. At the same time, new targets presented themselves.

'Knights!' said Danial, feeling the draconsfire burning hot. 'Our enemies have handed us an opportunity. My lance, Lady Jennika's lance, resume the charge. We'll break their line and scatter them. Markos, spread your lance along the edge of the bridge and enfilade them.'

'I'll teach them what happens when they turn their backs on us, lad,' said Markos, and a hail of fire whipped across the open gulf to hammer the traitor Knights from behind. At the same time, Danial fed power to the *Oath*'s actuators

and advanced. Luk marched at his right hand in *Sword of Heroes*, Jennika at his left in *Fire Defiant*, and the rest of the loyalists pressed in behind them.

They fired as they charged, smashing one Wyvorn Errant onto its back and ripping a leg from a Gallant, causing it to fall with a thunderous crash. Still the enemy fire hammered their shields and hulls, but its weight was reducing by the second as more Knights turned away to deal with the impertinent traitor militia. The heretics' tanks were being obliterated, stomped into wreckage, kicked into the trench or blown apart by overwhelming weapons fire. The distraction had been an Emperor-sent stroke of good fortune, and all the opening that the loyalist Knights needed. Danial snarled in satisfaction as he rammed his running chainsword into the guts of a Wyvorn Knight. Sparks and wreckage spat from the machine's midriff, and Danial felt *Oath*'s hull shudder as its weapon's cutting teeth chewed through adamantium and plasteel. A dull thud rang from deep within the enemy Knight, followed by a cloud of flame and smoke that billowed from the ragged wound. He wrenched his weapon free and his foe's steed slumped backwards, belching fire.

'For the Emperor!' cried Danial, his voice booming from his Knight's vox-amplifiers.

More Adrastapolian Knights charged off the bridge behind him. *Sword of Heroes* deftly sidestepped a haymaker punch from a Gallant's thunderstrike gauntlet before coring the Wyvorn Knight's torso with its thermal cannon. Jennika loped *Fire Defiant* between two Wyvorn Knights, spraying stubber fire into the helm of one before turning to hack her chainsword through the other's waist. The second machine was torn in half, while the first fired its battle cannon point blank only to have the shot impact against Jennika's rear-tilted shield. Rotating her steed's torso in a half circle, the Lady Tan Draconis lunged past her remaining enemy's guard, hacking its chainsword arm off before driving her reverse swing into the machine's chest. She gutted the second engine, then stepped back to hammer shells into the rear of a third Wyvorn Knight.

The fight had turned in their favour. Fourteen loyalist Knights remained and, though battered and damaged, they were driving the Wyvorn force back. The last of the heretic tanks had been obliterated, but the traitor Knights' efforts at self-preservation had shattered their lines and cost them the battle. Those not shot down or ripped to pieces at close quarters had begun a fighting retreat down the primary arterial that led off the bridge. At its end was a huge plaza, framed by buildings and statues. The Square of Martyrs, according to Danial's cartographic inloads. A platform rose at its centre, and atop it the fire blackened remains of a

strange metal cage. Beyond, looming over the intervening buildings, were the generatorums. And, by the grace of the Emperor, his Knights would reach them yet.

'All those too damaged to advance, remain here,' ordered Danial. 'Effect repairs then catch us up. The rest of you, with me. Drive them like cattle!'

'They're on the retreat,' growled Sire Markos. 'We have the momentum. Don't waste it.'

Four Knights dropped out of formation, Lady Eleanat amongst them. All were badly damaged, but kept their weapons up and ready as Polluxis' Crawlers went to work with what little they had left.

Ten Knights pressed on down the processional, following the fleeing Wyvorn Knights. Danial, Jennika, Luk and Markos stayed close together, the surviving members of the Draconis Exalted Court. With them came Suset Dar Draconis, Garath Dar Draconis, and Percivane Dar Draconis, alongside Sires Federich and Rikhardt Dar Minotos, and Lady Tamsane Dar Pegasson.

'So few of us left, from so many,' said Danial ruefully as they marched past the abandoned platform and its burned cage, entering a long avenue lined with defaced statues.

'Enough of us, sire,' replied Markos grimly. 'To do what needs to be done.'

'We may not live through this, but our honour will,' said Luk. 'And Emperor willing, so will Donatos.'

'Are you lot leaving it up to me to be the bloody optimist?' grunted Sire Garath.

They emerged from the Saints' Walk, between towering gothic structures, and into the edge of a vast and terrible storm of light and noise. Battle raged before them. Knights fired thunderous volleys into clattering, roaring daemon engines. Massed cultists traded fire with spike-helmed traitor militia from behind barricades of wreckage. Before the monolithic flanks of generatorum block two, beneath the hellish light of the warp anomaly, the traitor Knights of House Chimaeros and Wyvorn were locked in desperate battle with the forces of the Word Bearers, fighting a hideous war of mutual annihilation.

Gerraint Tan Chimaeros was furious. The burden of command was always heavy, but in this war he had been forced to make terrible choices and painful sacrifices again and again. His cause was just and honourable, Alicia had reassured him more than once. The Imperium had been a leech upon the heart of Adrastapol for far too long, and after what his erstwhile friend had done to House Chimaeros, to Gerraint's only brother…? Both had to go.

Besides, the Lord of Fates commanded it, and one did not gainsay a god. Not a true one, anyway.

Yet none of these justifications cast his conduct in a good light. He was painfully aware that Houses Chimaeros and Wyvorn looked like traitors, and he a monster. His own son, sacrificed upon the altar of ambition. There was nothing in the Code that could condone such a thing, and it still shamed him to think how he had betrayed the lad.

Regardless of what had passed, only absolute victory would guarantee that Gerraint and his allies were perceived by their people as the dutiful, noble and honourable warriors they were. History was a tapestry woven by victors, after all. But as he stared up at the roiling column of unnatural fire thundering into the heavens, Gerraint was less sure than ever of that victory.

A day ago, House Chimaeros had possessed ninety-two operable steeds, House Wyvorn another thirty, along with whatever secret weapon Dunkan Tan Wyvorn's House was keeping hidden away. He doubted they could claim even half that strength now. Thirty Knights of House Chimaeros and ten of Wyvorn were deployed through the peripheral warzones, ready to subdue the defenders of the Adamant Citadels and eliminate the outlying Word Bearers. If reports were to be believed then they had done their duty commendably, but still Gerraint wished that he had their strength with him. The simple fact was that he and Alicia had both underestimated the Word Bearers. Not just their monstrous strength, or the fanaticism of the cultists that served them, but their absolute willingness to sacrifice everything in the name of victory.

After banishing the weapon-spirits of the valle electrum's Adamant Citadel, Xedediah Kar Mechanicus had used the fortress' auspex arrays to enhance the strategic overlay of the Chimaeros Knights. The tapestry it wove was a desperate one. The Word Bearers warships in orbit had turned their fire on all targets, abandoning their positions above the valle electrum – and seemingly all strategic sense – to hunt and kill indiscriminately. On the planet below, Word Bearers warbands had raced back to the valle electrum by air in response to Gerraint's attack. The enemy had redeployed their strength with breathtaking speed, abandoning the outer warzones to secure this site. He had thought it desperation until the column of light roared up from generatorum two, and reports filtered in of Word Bearers cultists committing mass acts of self-destruction over pentagrams of their own blood. After that, the enemy's strategy had begun to seem both insane and ominous.

The Word Bearers' war against the Imperial forces had fallen apart in a matter of hours, and thousands of their turncoat Donatosian followers had been abandoned before the resurgent fury of the Imperial guns. Gerraint was an excellent tactician and a practised deceiver, but his entire worldview still hinged upon concepts of duty, discipline and the conduct dictated by the Code. He could never have envisioned so deranged a strategy, and so he had been wrong-footed. It was understandable, but all the justifications in the Imperium couldn't assuage his anger.

Now he found himself before the Word Bearers' stronghold with just eighteen of his own loyal Knights remaining. They had gathered some support from the turncoat Donatosians as they fought their way through the valle electrum's outer districts. Militiamen changed loyalties once again rather than face the iron gods, or else balked at the obvious wrongness of what was occurring at the city's heart.

Yet even with their added support the fight had been a hard one. Word Bearers forces ambushed them at every turn, hammering his Knights with heavy weapons fire and then falling back before they could be exterminated. Too many good Knights had been lost to drive the foe back to their inner defences. More fell when they broke through and tried to finish the fight.

And then Alicia had warned of whispers in the warp.

Tolwyn's son, not dead as they had believed, but marching on the valle electrum with a substantial force. For the first time in Gerraint's memory, his queen had sounded uncertain.

Gerraint had been forced to divide his forces further at that dire news, commanding that Dunkan Tan Wyvorn deal with the boy king while he and Alicia dealt the killing blow to Varakh'Lorr. The Archduke Tan Wyvorn had despatched almost all of his House's remaining strength to lay a trap for the loyalists, while he himself had made for the nearby Angelum Stellar spaceport. Seeing the severity of the situation, Tan Wyvorn had declared it time for him to deploy his House's 'hidden strength', and marched away with his last few Knights in attendance.

By Gerraint's chrono, that had been nearly an hour earlier. Whatever his ally was planning, it was needed very soon for the battle grew desperate.

At last, they fought in the shadow of the generatorum. The Chimaeros Knights had driven a lancepoint through the enemy's defences, Gerraint leading in his Knight Warden, *Therianthros*. He wore Tolwyn's captured crown, and his steed's chainsword had been replaced with the relic energy blade he had claimed from his old comrade's.

Guns thundering, god-like footfalls crushing cultists and flattening weapons emplacements, the Knights were pushing forward unstoppably. Fire rained down upon them from three sides, lascannon beams and krak missiles lashing the Knights' shields from the generatorum windows, and from the tall buildings to either side of the plaza. More came from the last handful of Word Bearers tanks and daemon engines. These used the ruins for cover, hammering shots into the Chimaeros steeds with lethal accuracy.

Gerraint tilted his Knight's shield to deflect incoming las-fire from the right. Two blinks and his targeters had isolated the enemy firing at him, and a mass of onrushing cultists to the fore. Deft twitches of his fingers sent cluster-missiles roaring down from *Therianthros'* carapace housing to engulf the screaming zealots. At the same time, the Warden's battle cannon roared, hurling a pair of shells into a Word Bearers Predator. The first shot deformed the forward hull

plating. The second punched right through, detonating the battle tank from within and entombing it in an avalanche of masonry and rubble.

'Knights,' barked Gerraint in his deep, commanding voice. 'Keep your shields interlocked and your weapons up. Pintle weaponry only against the generatorum. Save your larger guns for the flanking forces.'

Another volley of fire lashed down from the gothic arches of the generatorum, hammering their shields. Sire Deldric cursed as his Knight's right knee joint was mangled.

'Sire, permission to fire upon the generatorum at full effect,' he voxed. 'They're tearing holes in us.'

Gerraint took another striding step forward, uncaring for the insect-like infantry battling about his steed's feet. His targeting reticules locked multiple foes across the generatorum's floors. The building wasn't even heavily armoured.

Kill them… whispered the ghosts of his throne. *Kill… slaughter… give sacrifice…*

Gerraint narrowed his eyes, and drove the voices out. A sparking pressure squirmed and crackled through his neural jacks, nauseating him. Something was wrong, he knew it, but he didn't have time to question it now.

'Denied, Sire Deldric,' he replied angrily. 'We need the generatorum operational. A single stray shell could blow us all into the arms of the gods. And I'm not ready to die here because you couldn't show restraint.'

'Understood, sire,' snarled Deldric, and Gerraint's frown deepened as he heard a susurrus of half-heard words underlying the man's voice. The Lord of Fate's blessings were manifesting themselves quickly, it seemed, and in ways Gerraint had not expected.

'How then do we gain access, my liege?' asked Sire Hectour.

'Gallants, and our turncoat soldiery,' said Gerraint firmly. 'Sires Hectour, Massimo, Vendt, be ready to advance on my signal. The rest of you, keep them shielded – their steeds are our key to unlocking victory.'

To his left, a sudden flare of energy registered through Gerraint's sensorium. Held aloft amidst a protective corona, Alicia unleashed fire. Gerraint's scarred face twisted into a savage grin as he watched the unbridled energies of change engulf the Word Bearers, their armoured forms writhing and melting, powerless to resist the unbridled might of Tzeentch.

Gerraint drank in the intoxicating sense of power that flowed from his queen, her raven hair flying in the etheric winds she had conjured, the cold beauty of her features. Magnificent. Powerful. Gerraint would do anything for her. He

would kill for her, and win her a world, no matter the cost.

'Dunkan,' he voxed, his tone hard. 'What news from your ambushers? Is the boy dead?'

'My king!' responded Dunkan Tan Wyvorn. 'They failed, bloody useless wretches. The last of my Knights are retreating towards you now, with the boy king probably not far behind.'

Gerraint felt his anger flare.

'You sound singularly unrepentant for your Knights' failings, archduke. In case you haven't been watching your strategic overlay…'

'I haven't!' Dunkan cut in. 'Been a little busy applying some new panoply, yes?' The archduke laughed, as though at some joke that Gerraint was missing.

'What is wrong with you, Dunkan? Are you drunk?'

This was met by another laugh, one bordering on hysteria.

'Ha, no, my liege! But then, perhaps yes? Can one be drunk upon a song?'

Gerraint shook his head in bewilderment, blasting shells into a speeding traitor Rhino and turning it into a tumbling fireball.

'What have you done, you fool?' he snarled. 'What is this secret weapon? Thanks to your House's weakness I must now fight yet another foe. Get back here and aid us as swiftly as you can, or if you've lost your mind then stay absent, and pray I don't find you.' Furious, Gerraint severed his vox link.

Now his auspex lit up with fresh contacts as a handful of Wyvorn Knights strode into the plaza. Vox hail runes flickered in his peripheral vision, and he dismissed them with an angry blink. The machines were battle-damaged, several trailing flames and wreckage, but they could still fight. He suppressed the urge to fire upon them, and snarled as he realised the murderous desires were seeping from his throne mechanicum.

'Knights of House Chimaeros,' voxed Gerraint across an open channel, 'look upon shame and failure for what it is. You of House Wyvorn, I don't want to hear your warnings or your excuses. You will stand and fight by my side, and you will repair your honour, or you will die at our guns this moment. Is that understood?'

Fresh runes blinked on his retinal display. Gerraint took them for assent, and ordered his Knights accordingly. They were about to be beset from a fourth direction. This would be a desperate fight.

'My love,' came Alicia's voice across a private channel. His queen drifted down to alight upon his Knight's carapace.

'My queen… You fight with the Lord's blessings. You are as beautiful and

refulgent as a blazing star.'

Alicia's answering chuckle was musical to him.

'My king, if I am a star then you are the questing hero whose path to glory I light. But that path grows darker now, does it not? You need my guidance more than ever.'

'I do, my queen. Has the emissary given you nothing further?'

'It…' Again Gerraint heard that note of uncertainty in his lover's voice, perhaps even fear, and wished he could drive it out. 'It has not,' she said, her voice firm. 'I cannot communicate with That Which Dwells in Darkness at will, my love, you know this. And the cost of summoning the emissary needlessly, of questioning its words… That could go badly for us both.'

'Of course,' said Gerraint, half an eye on his auspex and instruments. Several of his Knights had stepped up to surround him as he communed with his queen, and their shields were bearing the brunt of enemy fire directed at him. 'Then what shall we do? Danial and his traitors will be here in moments, if Dunkan is to be believed. The Duke Tan Wyvorn has gone mad, I fear, though fates know how or why. And I cannot drive out the thought that, whatever Varakh'Lorr is attempting, it nears fruition. If I commit the Gallants to attacking the generatorum that's three less steeds to counter-attack the Tan Draconis whelp, but if we don't break through soon…'

'My lord,' said Alicia, and Gerraint fell silent at her soothing. 'Fear not. You deserve to be High King, and so you shall be. And while you earn that right upon the field of battle, I will deal with the Dark Apostle.'

'I… what?' Gerraint realised he sounded a fool, but he could not believe what he had heard.

'The Lord of Fates has blessed me, Gerraint. You've seen it. Let me help you. Let me be your queen in this dark hour. We will win this fight together, you against the enemy's Knights and I against this false priest.'

'But, my lady,' said Gerraint, suddenly frantic at the thought of Alicia alone in the enemy's lair. 'They are Space Marines, and moreover they are monsters. We don't know what horrors await within their sanctum. I see your power, I do, but…'

'There is no time to debate this, Gerraint,' said Alicia, firmly. 'I have more power than you know, my king. I'll wield it for you this day. And I won't go alone. You stay, face the loyalists and defend the crown that none of them is fit to wear. I will break open the doors of the Word Bearers' citadel and lead the Donatosian charge inside. Let them fight the Word Bearers. I will save my fury

for Varakh'Lorr.'

Gerraint wanted to refuse her. The Code, his sense of chivalry, his love for this woman all compelled him to forbid it. But he heard the conviction in Alicia's voice. She didn't just believe she could do this. She knew it. And he trusted her, more than any other living being.

'Do it,' he said, 'but be safe. Alicia, if I lost you…'

'I will always return to you, my king,' she replied. 'I love you.'

Alicia Kar Manticos rose in a whirling vortex of flame and drifted down to alight upon the steps of the generatorum. She rallied the Donatosians to her, making contemptuous gestures that turned enemy shells to smoke and energy blasts to fluttering crystal insects.

Ambition stoked by his queen's words, Gerraint issued his orders. Victory would yet be his.

A roaring geyser of purple flame engulfed the doors of the generatorum, transforming them to some sort of smoky glass. A single volley from the Donatosians' guns shattered them inwards, and Jennika saw Alicia vanish into the shadows beyond with a howling mob of traitors at her back.

The loyalist Knights had more immediate concerns, however. Ahead, across the plaza, Gerraint Tan Chimaeros was rallying his loyal followers. Ion shields overlapped masterfully as the Chimaeros Knights wheeled, protecting each other as best they could. A scattering of Wyvorn steeds lurked nearby, caught between fleeing or fighting. Their pilots looked to be panicked, firing randomly into whatever threats presented themselves. Cannon shells and thermal blasts leapt from their weapons to rip into building-fronts or rebound from the loyalists' shields, but in return the Word Bearers were picking the Wyvorn Knights to pieces.

'House Wyvorn has fallen,' Jennika voxed triumphantly to her comrades. 'Concentrate on the Chimaeros.'

'Hold here,' ordered Danial over the open channel. 'Engage the traitor Knights. The Word Bearers will want them dead more than they do us, at least for now.'

'Da,' voxed Luk urgently. 'I'm going after him. I'm going to kill that bastard.'

Thunder filled the air as the loyalist Knights opened fire, their shots slamming into the Chimaeros steeds' shields and flaring them blue. Jennika aimed her shots low, looking to trip her targets or cripple their leg actuators. Fire burst all around the enemy engines, and the ferrocrete of the plaza erupted in fountains of rubble and shrapnel.

‘You’re not the only one owed a debt!’ barked Markos, ‘That bastard killed my best friend. If anyone’s taking his head…’

‘Duty,’ voxed Danial, his voice stern. ‘The Code. All of us have a claim to Gerraint Tan Chimaeros. All of us have faced loss because of him. But we have a duty to the Emperor and we will fulfil that first and foremost, or we are none of us fit to be Knights.’

‘Danial,’ said Luk. ‘He’s my father. His sins are mine, and so is his life. You know I don’t have to obey your word.’

‘You’re not obeying me, Luk, you’re fighting at my side. Revenge isn’t enough. This is our Emperor-sworn duty.’

Then there was no more time for talking. One Chimaeros Knight had fallen to their fire, and another two had been wrecked or crippled by the Word Bearers, yet now the traitors had redressed their formation. Shields swivelling with cool determination, they weathered the firestorm and formed lance, with a trio of hulking Gallants at the fore and Gerraint’s machine lurking behind them.

‘That brazen bastard’s taken father’s blade,’ Jennika snarled as her eyes alighted on the weapon.

‘A theft he’ll pay for,’ replied Danial with determination. ‘Knights, be ready. Concentrate fire on their forerunners. Flanking steeds, enfold on my command. Jaws of the dracon. Now we take revenge.’

Danial had spread his Knights out in a single line, akin to that the Wyvorn Knights had formed as the loyalists charged across the bridge. Jennika and Markos held the centre, flanked by the two Minotos Knights. The rest were spread out to either side, with Danial at the leftmost end of the line, and Luk the right. Jennika could see that Lady Eleanat’s Knights and the surviving Crawlers were just minutes behind now – they would reinforce the centre, providing it held long enough against the Chimaeros charge. Meanwhile, Danial and Luk could lead the flanking charges and catch their enemies in a savage vice against which they would not be able to defend themselves.

Jennika punched a gauntlet forward and sent shells whipping across the plaza. They struck the shield of the lead Gallant and blew it out with a thunderclap of overpressure. A second volley slammed into the charging traitor, fired from Sire Garath’s battle cannon. They blasted the Knight’s helm to wreckage and fire surged into the cockpit behind. The Chimaeros Gallant staggered drunkenly out of formation, shoulder-barged unceremoniously aside by the Knights that followed. The machine crashed down on its face with horrible finality.

Gatling fire shredded the right leg of a Chimaeros Knight, the limb buckling

and the war engine collapsing in a cloud of flame. Markos' bellow of triumph briefly sounded across the vox. Lady Tamsane Dar Pegasson's *Saggitaire* ripped the legs out from under another Chimaeros Gallant with a salvo of rockets.

The Word Bearers took their toll as well, felling another two of the charging traitor Knights. The Chimaeros steeds came on, still firing. Jennika's cockpit shook and her ion shield flared as shot after shot hammered against it. She heard Lady Suset curse as a thermal blast melted her steed's chainsword and scorched the right side of its hull. To her left, enemy fire battered the already damaged Knight of Rikhardt Dar Minotos, causing the machine to stagger and vent smoke from its emergency exhausts.

'Come on,' muttered Jennika, one eye on the runes of Lady Eleanat's small force closing rapidly from behind. 'Come on.' Her throne whispered reassurances to her, steadying her aim.

'Now!' barked Danial. Hydraulics whined and generators roared, exhausts snorting fumes as the Knights advanced. Jennika, Markos and the Minotos Knights stepped deftly back. At the same time their comrades swung out and around the Chimaeros charge.

'Draconsfire!' roared Sire Markos. Then the Chimaeros charge slammed home, and everything was grinding metal and deafening industrial din.

The last of the enemy Gallants came at her, vox amplifier booming and lumens glaring as it swung its gauntlet at her Knight's helm. Sixteen tons of adamantium and plasteel crackling with disruptor energies would tear through her armour like parchment. Muscle memory and years of combat experience took over, aided by her steed's wily machine-spirit. Jennika swayed *Fire Defiant* back on its waist gimbal and took a lunging step backwards. It was an evasive manoeuvre that would have seen many Knights overbalance their steeds and crash down on their backs. Jennika performed it perfectly, ignoring the overstress warnings and hazard runes that lit up her instruments. The gauntlet's power field came close enough to raise blisters on her steed's paintwork. Carried by its own momentum, the Gallant bulled on, straight onto *Fire Defiant*'s upswinging chainsword. Jennika screamed in sympathetic pain as she felt the thunderous shock of the impact, the desperate straining of cable-tendons in her steed's legs, waist and blade arm. The brutal collision buckled her left torso plates and crushed several of her steed's actuator motors. Two heat sinks blew out.

Metal churned through metal, chain teeth ripping through the Gallant's torso armour and into the cockpit. She drove the blade deeper, releasing a brief spray of gore from her enemy's cockpit. Snarling, Jennika barged into the enemy

Knight as fire poured from its ravaged innards. With a groan, the enemy war engine tipped backwards into the Chimaeros Knights behind. Its flailing wreck crashed into Gerraint Tan Chimaeros, fouling his charge and forcing him backwards in turn.

'In Excelsium Furore!' cried Jennika, elation racing through her at the savagery of the kill. Her sensorium was full of crashing metal and sparks. The Chimaeros charge had hit hard but the loyalist line held. The enemy stalled, compacted together by the momentum of their huge metal steeds. Danial's encirclement was working, Chimaeros runes blinking out on the strategic overlay. Lady Eleanat's band of reinforcements marched from the mouth of the colonnade, their guns flaring as they added their fire to the battle.

Searing las-blasts ripped out. They riddled a Chimaeros Knight from behind, blowing out its torso and helm, then tore the leg from Sire Percivane's steed and blasted Sire Federich's in two.

'Throne almighty,' yelled Sire Garath. 'What in the dracon's name was that?'

Jennika scanned frantically, following the energy signatures back to their source with her auspex. She zoomed her optic pickups, washing out smoke and electrospiritual interference. Her blood ran cold at the enormous shape she saw lumbering into the plaza from the north, like some giant from primordial myth. It was almost twice the height of a standard Knight and nearly thrice as broad, its arms huge lascannon arrays and its carapace thick with missile racks. The heat bloom from the thing's generator was enormous, the energy wash from its guns scarcely less so as they charged for another volley. The ground shuddered beneath its every thunderous footfall.

'Relic Knight,' she breathed, then louder: 'I didn't think there were any left on Adrastapol.'

'A bloody Porphyrion,' said Markos, grimly, 'in Wyvorn panoply'.

'See your doom!' came a deranged bellow over the vox. Jennika recognised the voice of Dunkan Tan Wyvorn, distorted by madness. 'Abandon your Emperor and bow down to me, for I am the god now.'

Traitors and loyalists alike faltered, staring in horrified awe at the relic Knight marching across the square. A pack of daemon engines clattered towards the titanic steed. Its guns swivelled and blew them apart, one after the other.

'Dunkan, you lunatic,' came a deep voice over the hijacked channel, and Jennika realised with a stab of hate that she was hearing the words of Gerraint Tan Chimaeros. 'What have you done? Where are your warriors?'

'Sacrificed to my glory!' bellowed Tan Wyvorn, and fire blitzed through the

swirling melee once again, killing another two traitors.

A lance of House Chimaeros Knights broke away from the fight, Sire Hectour at their head. They charged the Porphyrion with their guns thundering. The giant Knight shrugged off their fire to part its attackers with contemptuous ease. It came forward over their blazing corpses, its weapons tracking for fresh targets, and the other Knights retreated before it, loyalist and traitor alike fleeing the wrath of a mad god.

'I have stabilised the channel,' voxed Polluxis, and for the first time she could remember, Jennika thought she heard an emotion in the High Sacristan's voice. He sounded angry. 'We do not have much time. That heretic has profaned an ancient engine, and it is rejecting him. Its machine-spirit senses his taint and is attacking his mind. The Duke Tan Wyvorn cannot carry the mental load of piloting such a vast machine alone, not under such conditions. He has been driven insane.'

Jennika raised her blade by instinct as movement flashed in her peripheral vision. The churning teeth of her weapon locked with those of a Chimaeros Knight, and sparks rained across both steeds. It seemed the moment of distraction was over, and the fight was back on.

'If we could get close enough, we could kill it' growled Sire Markos, voice thick with exertion as he ripped his gauntlet through an enemy Knight. 'But we'll be blown apart before we can.'

'I can assist,' replied the High Sacristan. 'The Porphyrion is an ancient and revered tool of the Omnissiah, but its very size and power is its weakness, when piloted by one not sufficiently attuned. I shall reverse the binharic cant of my data wards and strip away the engine's protections while its machine-spirit and pilot are at odds, opening the Porphyrion up to our enemy's scrapcode, and exacerbating its disorientation. I cogitate this will significantly improve the chances of successful hostile approach.'

'Jennika,' said Danial across the vox, over the roar of stubber fire. 'You, Markos, Lady Eleanat, kill that thing.'

'Danial?' replied Jennika. 'What are you planning?'

'We still have to silence the scrapcode,' said Danial. 'Luk and I will finish the job.'

'I understand,' she replied. 'We won't let them stop you. And one way or another, Gerraint Tan Chimaeros dies.'

'Make him suffer,' voxed Luk.

'On my oath,' she replied vehemently.

Danial and Luk's Knights broke away from the fight, loping across the plaza as Word Bearers fire whipped around them. The two loyalist steeds pounded up the steps of the generatorum and, in a shower of rubble and wreckage, ploughed headlong through the sundered doorway.

Jennika spotted Gerraint Tan Chimaeros, his steed pouring smoke from one cracked shoulder guard. His back was to her as he fired shells at the oncoming Porphyrion, all semblance of a battle plan destroyed by the giant Knight's rampage. Tolwyn's stolen blade crackled at his side.

'You'll suffer for that insult,' she hissed. 'For House Draconis and the Emperor.' Blade raised, power surging through her steed's motive actuators, Jennika charged.

Fire Defiant lunged forward at Jennika's mental urging. It growled deep within its primal engine-heart, sensing its pilot's anger and hate. The ghosts of her throne had receded into the depths, recognising that this fight, this moment, belonged to Jennika alone. She was going to kill Gerraint Tan Chimaeros.

'Sire Markos,' she voxed as her steed slammed past two Chimaeros Knights and struck sparks from their armour.

'Yes, milady?' came Markos' gruff voice in return.

'I will kill Gerraint,' she said. 'You eliminate the Porphyrion.'

'Gut that grox-loving traitor like the swine he is.'

Jennika fed power into her motive actuators, and her steed lumbered through the grinding, crashing melee. The target-distance tally in the corner of her vision sped downwards. Lock runes shimmered and choral notes chimed through her cockpit, announcing that her battle cannon had a clean shot. She ignored them. She would meet him blade to blade, as the Code demanded.

Three hundred yards to Gerraint's Knight.

A Chimaeros Knight Warden loomed up, hammering gatling fire across her path into Lady Eleanat's shields. Jennika sidestepped her steed, smashing its shoulder guard into the traitor Knight. Sheared metal crashed to the ground, then

she was past, still loping towards her target.

Two hundred yards.

The Porphyrion crushed a Chimaeros Knight into the flagstones with one huge foot, its shield flickering as shots rebounded from it. More Chimaeros steeds fired upon it, desperate to bring down the monster that was butchering them.

One hundred yards.

Dunkan fired again, blitzing shots through the Crawlers, blowing two of the machines to pieces and detonating Sire Rikhardt's Knight.

Forty yards.

Jennika decreased her speed to a steady stride, opened her vox, and hailed her hated enemy.

'Gerraint Tan Chimaeros,' she barked, blaring the challenge through her vox amplifier. 'Turn and face me, traitor.'

'Lady Tan Draconis,' replied Gerraint, sounding disappointed. 'Still fighting your brother's battles for him? You would have made a worthy queen.'

Despite everything, he sounded calm, assured. Jennika felt the draconsfire flare hot.

'No, sire,' she replied, slowing further and approaching carefully. 'My brother trusts me to win this battle, while he attends to the war. Were you any kind of real king, you would understand that. But instead I name you heretic, traitor and outcast. Not just from your House, but from your world. I name you Gerraint Kar Adrastapol, and on my brother's behalf I sentence you to death for your crimes.'

Gerraint had turned to face her, but had prudently kept his shield angled rearwards in case the Porphyrion's erratic fire should come their way. Around them the Knights of their two Houses blasted and battered at one another, but Jennika and Gerraint stood alone for the time being. None would interfere with their duel.

'Dramatic,' said Gerraint dryly. 'But ultimately meaningless, little girl. I have the crown. I am High King of Adrastapol, not your whelp of a brother.'

Jennika bristled with anger.

'My brother is the rightful heir to the throne of Adrastapol, firstborn son of–'

'Firstborn son of a liar and a thief,' roared Gerraint, cutting Jennika off. 'He took my brother's life. He took the throne. He took…' Gerraint stopped himself, and when he spoke again he was calm and assured once more. 'But then, all this happened when you were but a squireling, and barely even that. These are not your crimes, my lady, and for what it is worth I am sorry that it is you and your

brother who must pay for them.'

Jennika felt her desire for knowledge war with her need for revenge. Like her brother, this conflict had left her with a great many questions about the father that she thought she had known. This man, for all that he was a traitor, had been Tolwyn's friend once. She could ask him, and had a frightening sense that he would answer truthfully, whether she wished him to or not. Shaking off the sick temptation, Jennika remembered the desperate fight going on around her. Answers were not why she had come here. She had a duty to discharge.

'Perhaps your words are tainted with heresy,' she replied coldly, 'perhaps shame and dishonour have broken your mind. Or perhaps every word you speak is true. I honestly don't care. You murdered my kin, broke the Code, and damned your House. You have rained such shame upon Adrastapol that it will take us years to recover from your perfidy, while the names of House Chimaeros and House Wyvorn will be scoured from history forevermore. And you killed my father in cold blood, you traitorous dog. The only crimes that I care about are yours, and now I'm going to kill you for them.'

'So be it,' began Gerraint.

A sudden volley from Gerraint's battle cannon almost caught Jennika by surprise, but she was ready for his treachery. She brought up her Knight's shield and took a backwards side-step, deflecting the shots into the ground. *Fire Defiant* rocked back with the kinetic force of the impacts, and attitude warnings shrilled in Jennika's ears, but she smiled fiercely all the same.

Gerraint Tan Chimaeros had broken the Code. Just as she hoped he would.

'My thanks, sire,' she snarled, and opened fire. Two shells whipped across the intervening space to strike her enemy, whose shield was still angled arrogantly away from her. The first explosion blossomed at *Therianthros*' shoulder joint, ripping the Warden's battle cannon from its arm mounting. The second hammered into Gerraint's torso plates, causing his Knight to stagger backwards with flames licking from its ruptured chest.

It looked as though the pretender king would fall there and then, but Gerraint was a veteran pilot of many wars. He swung one foot back, bracing his steed and preventing it from overbalancing.

'Very good,' growled Gerraint, 'but now I'm going to kill you.'

Jennika smiled coldly.

'You are going to try,' she replied, before spurring her steed and charging.

Markos marched out across the plaza with Suset Dar Draconis and Tamsane Dar

Pegasson in a widely dispersed arrowhead formation, affording them slightly more protection from Dunkan's immense firepower.

The Word Bearers had disengaged and were returning to the generatorum. Consolidating while their enemies tore each other apart, he thought, or worse, perhaps aiming to stop Danial and Luk.

Ahead, the last two Wyvorn Knights fled their mad archduke's wrath. Dunkan turned his guns on them in a blaze of light. The Porphyrion's magna lascannons blew the legs from beneath one, while the second staggered, its generator riddled with flaming holes. The green-hulled Knight twitched, stumbled, and then exploded like an orbital warhead.

'All right, my ladies,' said Markos grimly. 'We've seen what this thing can do. Try not to let that be you, eh?'

'My thanks, Sire Markos,' voxed Lady Tamsane dryly. 'The thought hadn't crossed my mind.'

'How are we going to fight this thing?' asked Suset, her voice tight with fear.

'We outnumber our enemy, my lady. Also we're of sound mind and body, while it sounds like whatever brains that idiot Tan Wyvorn had are leaking out of his arse. We surround him, fight as a pack.'

The Knight Porphyrion stomped around to face them, and Markos felt its footfalls even through his Knight. He could hear Dunkan bellowing and screaming like an animal in pain.

'I'll go up the centre, keep the bastard's eyes on me. Suset, flank left, try to get around its shield and burn its knees out with your thermal cannon. Polluxis has unbound its data wards, so watch for any system weaknesses on your auspex. Tamsane, you go right, get in close with your thunderstrike gauntlet. Hobble it.'

The two Knights voxed their compliance and swung their steeds out to the flanks, loping wide around their gigantic foe. Markos fed power into his steed's actuators and prepared to open fire. Looking at the war engine looming over him, clad in the panoply of those who – until a few days ago – he had believed to be allies, he felt a moment of intense sorrow. He had walked his steed through the firestorms on Terrathos; he had hunted giant beasts and witnessed mindless ferocity during the Ork Wars; he had stormed the walls of the Stygiopolis during the battle for Hador's Sorrow. But in all his years of warring, Markos had never seen a conflict as costly or as cruel as this one.

His instruments shrilled a warning as crackling energies built around the barrels of the Porphyrion's magna lascannons. Markos swore and angled his shield, unleashing both his gatling cannon and Icarus array. Shots stippled the giant

Knight's ion shield, sending blue ripples flashing across its surface, but not a single round struck its target.

'Oh bloody hell…' grunted Markos.

The Porphyrion opened fire.

Ruby beams hammered around him, flash-blasting the ferrocrete to glassy craters and pummelling his shields. One bolt slammed through and tore into *Honourblaze*'s right shin, sundering the armour plates and damaging his actuators. Another blast ripped the Icarus array from atop his steed's carapace, before two more punched through his Knight's torso. The herald swore profusely as systems burned out and sparks rained down upon his throne. The second salvo ripped through his cockpit, destroying his right instrument bank and scorching the flesh of his arm through his bodyglove. Alarms screamed. Plasma vented from somewhere behind him, burning through the cockpit floor behind the throne. Markos gritted his teeth against the pain of las-burns, eyes flickering across his instruments as his power readings fell and damage warnings lit up across the board. *Honourblaze* was badly torn up, limping on one damaged leg, reactor pushing the amber line towards an overload. His heat sinks were labouring, but he'd lost at least half of them. Still, thought Markos grimly, he was still alive, his steed was still up, and his ion shield still functioned.

So did his weapons.

'Sorry, old girl,' he muttered as his Knight shuddered in pain. 'I feel it too. I know.'

'Sire Markos, do you live?' crackled Tamsane's voice through Markos' damaged vox-speakers.

'Apparently,' coughed the herald, trying not to inhale too much of the smoke that was starting to fill the cockpit. He fumbled for the rebreather hooked to the side of his throne, and pulled it painfully over his scalded face. 'Not sure I can take another volley like that though, my lady.'

'I fear you may have to, sire,' came Tamsane's terse reply. 'It seems your steed's survival has angered the beast.'

Ahead, through a stuttering veil of static, Markos saw the looming shape of the Porphyrion stamping forwards to meet him. The screams and howls coming from the engine's vox amplifiers were a terrible amalgam of pain, rage and madness.

'Oh Throne,' growled the herald. 'My overlay's unravelled, and my sensorium's reconsecrating. I can barely see a bloody thing. Tell me you're in position.'

'Almost,' replied Lady Tamsane. 'We're drawing level with it now. Just hold

the monster's attention a little longer.'

Markos barked a mirthless laugh through his rebreather.

'Certainly, my lady. I'm sure the spectacle of my Knight going up like a feastday pyre will keep Tan Wyvorn occupied, eh?'

With a dolorous chime, Markos' sensorium returned to full clarity. Despite his bravado, the herald felt his insides clench in cold terror of the immense, armoured monster. Squealing power was already building around its lascannons.

'My ladies, it has been an honour,' he voxed, punching his gauntlet forward to strafe the monster's shields. 'Do me the courtesy of making my death worth it, eh?' For a second he heard again his fateful words to Tolwyn on the day of the war council.

'Let us both die bloody in battle,' he muttered. 'Got my wish, didn't I, fool that I am? I'm sorry, my liege, I really did try.'

Markos shut his eyes as the howl of the giant Knight's weapons built to a crescendo.

'Sire Markos,' crackled Suset's voice suddenly through his vox, her voice urgent. 'Fire on this segment of its shield, now!'

The herald's eyes opened and he saw, flickering through his targeter, a rune-lit point on the Porphyrion's shield. Instinctively he punched his haptic gauntlet forward even as the monstrous engine opened fire. Gatling shells ripped through a flicker of weakness in Dunkan's shields, a keyhole that Suset Dar Draconis had located with her augmented sensors. Markos' shots shattered his foe's targeting imagers and caused the huge Knight to recoil.

Las-blasts hammered *Honourblaze*'s shield, blowing it out with an implosive boom. They tore through the Knight's fist, reducing it to dangling scrap metal. They ravaged its chest plates and left thigh, crippling the machine entirely and leaving it immobile. They punched through the cockpit, and Markos screamed in pain as power surged and metal melted around him. Steam burst from ruptured conduits, and with a terrible wail the ghosts of his throne mechanicum vanished from his mind. Markos gasped into his rebreather, limbs spasming and eyes rolling as his neural connection was violently severed. Then everything went dark as the Knight's power failed, and Markos knew no more.

Jennika parried furiously as the whirling teeth of her blade met the energised edge of Gerraint's with an explosion of lightning. Shattered metal sprayed from the clash as the traitor's weapon ravaged her own.

Cursing, Jennika wrenched at her controls, stepping deftly back before her

enemy ruined her chainsword altogether. Black smoke billowed from its vents, and the Lady Tan Draconis scowled at its sudden grinding whine.

'This sword,' voxed Gerraint mockingly. 'It's a fine weapon. You should have taken that arm instead, girl.'

'It was my father's,' replied Jennika through gritted teeth, circling her steed warily around her foe. 'You're not worthy to wield it.'

'And yet, here I am doing just that,' said the pretender king. 'And wearing your father's crown, also, just so that you know.'

'Bastard,' snarled Jennika, loosing a shell at her enemy's helm. The shot exploded against *Therianthros'* shield, angled now towards her. Since her initial shots, Gerraint had not allowed Jennika to land another blow. *Fire Defiant*, by comparison, was marked with deep, glowing gashes where the traitor's blade had ripped through its hull. By giving her enemy an honourable fight Jennika had put herself at a severe disadvantage, and she fought not to rise to his taunts.

The pretender king stormed forwards and swung his energy blade in a scything arc. Jennika backpedalled, firing a second shell from her battle cannon. The round struck Gerraint's shield, causing it to spark and flicker, stalling his attack. As *Therianthros* stumbled, Jennika stepped *Fire Defiant* in close and carved her roaring blade into her enemy's torso. The blade's teeth bit into armour plate, screaming with the effort of chewing through to the delicate systems behind it. Fire and smoke gouted, but Jennika swore vehemently as her damaged blade stalled. Caught in the thick metal of *Therianthros'* hull, the damaged chainsword sputtered and smoked, unable to restart its engines, or to pull clear. *Fire Defiant* and *Therianthros* were locked together, helms almost touching while the battle raged around them.

Thinking fast, Jennika swivelled her heavy stubber with a haptic twitch. Staccato hammer blows rang out as a stream of shells battered the renegade Knight's hull.

'That won't help you, lady,' snarled Gerraint, his Knight straining to tear free of the weapon lodged in its chest. His energised blade crackled as *Therianthros* tried to bring it to bear, servo-motors whining as they were pushed beyond their limits. Jennika gritted her teeth as her stubber's ammo counter dropped and the humming energy blade inched closer to her hull. She thanked the Emperor that she had severed her foe's battle cannon early in the fight. If not, he would have disembowelled her with a single shot by now.

Sudden explosions shook Jennika in her throne. Warnings flashed and shrilled, and with a thunderous jolt her Knight was smashed away from Gerraint's. The

savage separation ripped metal tendons and snapped locking bolts, leaving her Knight's blade wedged ponderously in her enemy's chest. Jennika stepped rapidly back, angling her shield to absorb the hammering fire of an incoming Chimaeros Knight.

The Crusader limped in towards the fight. The traitor had lost one arm and its carapace weapon, and its torso was a mangled mess. Still it dragged itself closer, firing a sawing hail of shots from its gatling cannon. The Lady Tan Draconis' shield flashed as it absorbed the impacts.

'This is how you traitors fight duels now, is it?' she spat over an open channel.

'No,' said Gerraint as his Knight raised its blade and stepped in close. 'It's how we win them. You have wasted enough of my time, girl. I've a war to conclude.'

Jennika could see, through the flashing hail of impacts, that *Therianthros* was pacing unsteadily around her flank, struggling to compensate for the weight of the weapon lodged in its chest. With weapons fire hitting her from the front, Jennika was hard pressed to turn and address her foe, but she had to do something before she was surrounded and torn apart. Her ghosts were muttering insistently in her mind, and amongst their words she saw a sudden chance for victory.

Swivelling her battle cannon, Jennika punched shots towards the Chimaeros newcomer. Both were aimed low, detonating at the Knight's feet and gouging craters before it. Her assailant stumbled as the ground tore open, his hammering barrage interrupted as the Knight wrestled to control his steed. In that moment Jennika poured every ounce of power she could into *Fire Defiant*'s actuators. Dropping one of her Knight's shoulders, she took three swift paces and crashed into Gerraint's steed. Surprised, the traitor swung his energised blade and managed to carve a gouge in Jennika's armour, but it couldn't stop her momentum. Already thrown off balance by the broken blade jutting from its chest, *Therianthros* could not compensate for the ferocious impact. Explosions stitched the Knight's legs and waist gimbal as overloaded actuators and compensator motors blew out, and with a terrible groan of stressed metal Gerraint toppled sideways. His steed crashed down upon the ferrocrete, its stolen blade pinned beneath it, and the traitor king was forced to frantically deactivate his weapon before it carved him in two. Bellowing in anger, Gerraint Kar Adrastapol was left sprawled where he lay, his steed twitching with secondary explosions.

Jennika angled her shield in time to catch another hail of fire from the wounded enemy Knight still standing. The limping engine was no match for her, yet the

pilot mindlessly kept firing, kept dragging his steed closer. If this was the madness that had possessed House Chimaeros, thought Jennika in disgust, then it was no wonder they had turned on their allies. Shield raised, the Lady Tan Draconis marched her steed at an angle around her attacker, firing one shell after another into its flickering shield. Her ammo count was low, but she had enough shells remaining for her purpose. Jennika's first volley battered the traitor steed and slowed its turn. The second collapsed its shield with a flat boom. By the third, she was on its flank, close enough to press her battle cannon's muzzle to her enemy's helm even as it tried to turn and face her.

'Stop. Shooting. Me.' Jennika punched her gauntlet forward. Two shells blew out the other Knight's torso in a shower of spinning wreckage. The gatling cannon barrels whined to a stop at last, as the gutted war engine toppled backwards spewing flame and smoke.

Turning her steed away from the mad dog, Jennika strode back to Gerraint's fallen Knight. She had half expected to see her enemy already squirmed from his carapace hatch and running for his life, but he remained within his fallen Knight.

'Well fought, Lady Tan Chimaeros,' said Gerraint, his voice grating through the vox. He sounded pained, and Jennika realised that he must be trapped, most likely injured and pinned in his throne.

'I don't want your praise, you murdering traitor,' she spat, looming over his fallen steed. The Knight sprawled on its side, one shoulder guard crumpled to wreckage, legs tangled. Defeated.

'I can't blame you,' he replied, half coughing, half laughing. 'How you must hate me. But I had my reasons.'

'I don't want your reasons, either,' Jennika replied, her tone icy. 'After all you've done to my family, to our people, all I want from you is this.'

Bracing its feet, *Fire Defiant* took aim at the fallen Knight.

The first shot dented *Therianthros'* armour. The second tore clean through, detonating its torso and hurling shrapnel against *Fire Defiant*'s hull. Jennika fired again, and again, the traitor Knight convulsing and coming apart as the Lady Tan Draconis blasted it. With only a few last shells remaining in her weapon's magazine, she stopped. Jennika breathed out, a long, wavering breath, and turned away from the blazing funeral pyre.

Her comrades were all but victorious. Chimaeros Knights sprawled in wreckage around the plaza, interspersed with a handful of fallen loyalist Knights. Jennika's first concern was the Porphyrion, but even as she turned towards it there came a bright flash. The Relic Knight was falling, one knee blown out by Lady Suset's

thermal cannon. It fell like a sundered mountain, explosions tearing it apart as it slammed down with catastrophic force.

Elation filled her. Then she saw the ruin of Sire Markos' Knight, and her heart fell. *Honourblaze* was a mangled, blackened ruin. The Knight still stood, but it was a wreck. Flame billowed from huge rents in its torso and carapace. Nothing could survive such devastation.

'Markos,' she breathed, sorrow welling within her.

Then she saw a small figure drop from the last dismounting rung of the ruined Knight, and stagger drunkenly away from it. Burned, blackened and bleeding, stumbling away from his ruined steed, the herald managed a few more steps, then collapsed in a heap.

'Markos,' she said again, voice urgent. 'High Sacristan Polluxis,' she voxed. 'Sire Markos Dar Draconis is dismounted but badly injured in the vicinity of his Knight. I would request that you recover him immediately, and see to his wounds.'

'Yes, my lady,' replied Polluxis at once. As she watched the Crawler rumble towards her fallen comrade, Jennika prayed to the Emperor that he would be all right.

Overhead, the pulsing column of daemonic fire thundered into the sky. House Chimaeros and House Wyvorn had been defeated, albeit at a staggering cost, but the Emperor's work upon this world was not yet done. Battered and savaged, only a handful of loyalist Knights remained standing. They would have no chance in an assault upon the Word Bearers' position, and Jennika would not get the last of Danial's loyal followers killed for the sake of reckless heroism. Instead, she ordered the survivors to retreat to the far edge of the plaza and ensure best cover in case the traitors should attack again. The last few Crawlers were tasked with extracting thrones mechanicum from fallen Knights where they could. The last loyal Knights of Adrastapol would wait for their High King to return in victory, or not at all.

'Danial,' she said, forming the aquila over her chest with her folded hands. 'Emperor protect you, brother, it's up to you now.'

Alicia spat syllables of pure madness, twisting her fingers before her. A Word Bearer grunted in pain as he was lifted off the floor by etheric forces, boltgun dropping from his hands as his limbs splayed out. Alicia flashed him a cold, beautiful smile then clenched her fists. Armour crumpled. Bone snapped. Flesh tore and ancient, tainted organs burst as the Chaos Space Marine was crushed into a bloody mass of meat and metal.

Alicia flicked her wrists and tossed the mangled remains aside, before sweeping up the marble steps to the balcony above. She paused at the top of the steps, extending her senses into the building around her. She could hear the Donatosians bellowing war cries and firing wildly, their courage buoyed by her subtle psychic manipulations. Still, the Word Bearers were immensely powerful warriors. Though the Donatosians outnumbered them, the Traitor Space Marines were tearing them to pieces with contemptuous ease.

None of that mattered to Alicia, for she sought a different sort of victory entirely. Soldiers and guns, territory and losses, such prosaic concerns were beneath one so enlightened as she. The sorceress sensed the warp churning beyond the veil and hungered for that power. In reality, Gerraint's queen had never shared his belief in a purely military solution to victory upon this world.

She knew more of Chaos and its true nature, and of the terrible powers that the gods' worshippers could wield. Varakh'Lorr was not to be underestimated, and nor were his followers. Yet, blinkered by residual concepts of honour and dutiful conduct, her lover had done just that. Gerraint was the man that he was, whether he walked the Lord of Fate's path or not.

She was at no such disadvantage. Varakh'Lorr was summoning immense transformative powers, inviting the regard of the gods themselves in an attempt to transcend the mortal plane. He would be vulnerable at his moment of ascension. It was then that she planned to strike, and to claim his gifts for her own. Blessed with the true power of the Lord of Fate, she would become a veritable goddess in her own right. The prophecy she had followed had proven false, or so it seemed, but then she knew from cruel experience that daemons lie. Gods, though, they rewarded those who earned their gifts, and if she could not aid her king's victory through prophecy and foresight, she would do so with raw power. Perhaps, she would even let him be *her* consort when all this was done.

A sudden malaise of grief blossomed in her chest, and the strength fled from her limbs. She snatched at the balustrade for support. Alicia threw back her head and screamed as she felt something vital torn from her.

'Gerraint,' she gasped, sagging against the railing, tears welling in her eyes. 'Oh no. Oh my love. No, no, *no*!'

Alicia wailed in misery and horror as she felt the soul of her brave Knight torn from his body and flung into the warp. She couldn't breathe. She couldn't think. The man who had rescued her from the death of her House, who had understood and loved her when all others shunned her as a witch, was gone.

Murdered.

Madness broke free in Alicia's mind, poison seeping from the cracks that spider-webbed her broken heart. For a few bleak seconds, she considered following him, taking her own life so that her soul might plunge after Gerraint's into the depths of the immaterium. If she had believed for even a moment that she could save her lover in that way, Alicia might even have done it. But he was dead, gone into a realm of eternal torment.

Slowly, Alicia realised that she had collapsed, slumped on the edge of the balcony. A cacophony of ripping and tearing sounded from nearby, as of something massive smashing its way through the building. She could smell the stink of sulphur and brimstone spilling from a looming arch ahead of her. She could feel the salt trickle of her tears tracking through the soot and blood that smeared her face, and the slow, sick thud of her heartbeat. With an effort, Alicia

fought down the bile that threatened to surge up her throat. She slowly pulled herself to her feet, and took a deep, shuddering breath as something new swelled within her. Anger. More than that: rage, psychotic fury flowing up from the darkest depths of her soul to eclipse all reason and hope.

They had taken him, the Knights, the Donatosians, the Word Bearers, all of them. They had taken him from her, and they would pay for that not just with their lives, but with their souls. Alicia opened her eyes and blue firelight poured from them. The energies of the warp flowed around her, stirring her black hair and billowing her torn robes. Where she still gripped the balcony's balustrade, the metal melted and ancient wood roared into bright blue flame.

Three Donatosians burst onto the balcony through a side door, yelling in fear and firing into the darkness behind them. Alicia's head snapped round and all three men turned to crystal in an instant, tumbling forwards to shatter upon the floor. The sorceress stepped through their remains, jagged shards crunching underfoot. A pair of Word Bearers pushed through the doorway, halting at the sight of her. Both raised their weapons, well enough versed in the ways of the warp to recognise a dangerous psyker when they saw one. Bolters thundered, spitting self-propelled shells. Alicia raised a hand, palm outwards, and the shells detonated against an invisible shield of energy. The detonations grew larger, and larger still, expanding impossibly into a roiling purple firestorm. Jabbing her fingers forward, Alicia sent the flames surging back at the Word Bearers and engulfed them.

Purple fire poured through the eye lenses of their helms as the two warriors convulsed and twitched. Steam rose from their armour as Alicia urged the fires of change into them, and adamantium groaned and creaked as rampant mutation took hold. Seals burst, spilling scaled, purple flesh through the rents. Horns and tusks deformed their helms from within as the traitors melded with their corrupted armour. Tentacles slithered through pulsating skin to flail and slap mindlessly. Bones warped and twisted, ripping their way out to form twisted, osseous limbs. Maws yawned wide in armour and flesh, giving vent to agonised screams.

Twisted and degenerated into monstrous spawn by the sorceress' magics, the two former Word Bearers writhed and roared. They had become huge, bloated and revolting, things of mauve flesh, rolling eyes and snapping fangs that scuttled on an insane profusion of insectile legs, bone hooves and clawed limbs.

'Go,' spat Alicia, and the abominations squirmed away on the hunt for their former brethren. They would wreak terrible carnage before they were slain, no

doubt, but Alicia didn't care. She was wasting time, and the true prize lay beyond the archway. Turning on her heel, Alicia Kar Manticos strode through the arched portal and into an upper gallery of Varakh'Lorr's inner sanctum.

Lurking for a moment in the fire-lit shadows, the sorceress took in the scene below. The sacrificial pyre blazed, vast and terrible, at the sanctum's heart. Cultists, slave magi and chained psykers stood in a crowd eight-deep around the blaze, swaying and chanting with their arms raised to the kaleidoscopic fires. Millions of ghosts writhed amidst the flames, revealed to her second sight. Those fires rushed up through the ceiling like a river, and the sorceress tasted the surging power they carried aloft. Here, she thought, was the Dark Apostle's sacrifice to the gods. But where was the Dark Apostle himself?

She quickly found him, stood in the data-pulpit at the far end of the corrupted shrine. Varakh'Lorr's arms were raised, his cursed crozius held high as he roared out words in the dark tongue. Shimmering energies played around the Dark Apostle, and his outline seemed to blur where they enveloped him. Alicia could see the potential that lurked within her enemy's flesh, so close now to breaking forth. Bat-like wings had already spread from the Dark Apostle's shoulders, and his stature had become far greater than that of his brothers, taller and broader even than the Terminator that she saw sprawled in a slick of blood at the base of the pulpit's steps.

'Your last sacrifice,' she whispered venomously. 'He that was closest to you, murdered against his will. You and I have that much in common, at least.'

A dozen Word Bearers stood before the pulpit, their backs to their chanting master, weapons at the ready. She saw baroque flame throwers, spike-studded boltguns and larger, heavier weaponry down there. Moreover, she sensed some huge presence lurking close by, something resentful and full of hate, but enslaved to its master by empyric bonds as strong as steel.

None of it gave Alicia pause. The warp energies screaming through the shrine were phenomenal. She felt sure that she could bind them to her will, and use them to utterly destroy all those who had killed Gerraint. They might destroy her in the process, but at that moment the sorceress didn't care. Revenge was everything.

Raising her arms, Alicia stepped off the gallery. Opening her mind to the tides of the warp, she drank in the power that flowed through the shrine, weaving it into streamers of incandescent energy that held her aloft. Letting her fury take form, the sorceress blazed bright as she drifted through the air towards the Dark Apostle.

Below, Alicia heard the swaying mass of cultists cry out at the sight of her. Their chant disrupted; some scrabbled for their firearms while others wailed. The sorceress swept her merciless gaze across them and dozens fell screaming, the fires of change reknitting their flesh into new and monstrous forms. Others were transmuted, becoming statues of glittering gold or collapsing into swarms of crystal insects.

Some of Varakh'Lorr's mortal worshippers turned and fled the terrifying apparition above them. Others opened fire, or scrabbled for their own, pitiful psychic energies. Alicia cared little for their efforts, shielding herself with coruscating flames as she swept on.

The Word Bearers, too, opened fire. A storm of bolts, shells and energy blasts engulfed Alicia. The anger that drove her faltered as a lascannon beam hammered her psychic wards hard enough to shatter them. Two bolt shells struck her in the chest, and only with a frantic effort was she able to turn them both to light and air.

'No,' she hissed, clawing more power from around her. 'You can't stop me. I won't let you.'

Alicia wove her stolen power into a storm of flaming orbs, hurling them down upon the Word Bearers like an artillery barrage. The blood-stained flagstones were blasted to shrapnel, and her tormentors hurled off their feet.

She saw them stagger upright, leaving only two dead. The rest resumed firing, and Alicia screamed with frustration as she was driven back. Veiled behind fresh shields of sorcerous flame, she stared hatefully at the Dark Apostle. Through his stitched mask of flesh, Varakh'Lorr gazed back at her triumphantly.

His chant was reaching its crescendo. Desperately, the sorceress thrust her mind into the beacon of soul fire, drinking deep of its energies. It was like swallowing molten metal, and she screamed as the raw power flayed her skin and drove blazing needles into her mind. Her body threatened to burst asunder as uncontrolled power raced through it, but Alicia Kar Manticos retained control, and prepared to unleash her spell.

Surrounded by the screaming of daemons, his flesh writhing amidst the furious energies of his ascension, Varakh'Lorr watched through feverish eyes as the floating witch drew power towards herself like a tidal wave. The coherent part of his mind realised that here was the true servant of Chaos in House Chimaeros, just as he had suspected. His mortal self raged at her interruption of this sacred rite, even as the infernal being he was becoming knew only contempt. His rise

was ordained. The blood of worlds had been shed to ensure it. He had done everything the gods asked of him and more. Now, at the last moment, this feeble creature sought to steal that which was rightfully his?

Varakh'Lorr altered his chant, his fanged maw stretching unnaturally wide as he bound energies of his own to counter those wielded by the witch. The Dark Apostle was no psyker, but the being into which he was transforming could shape the warp as though it were wet clay. A few more syllables, and he would turn her energies against her, send them raging out of control to burn her very soul from existence. So would fall all those who challenged the might of Varakh'Lorr, Daemon Prince of the Dark Gods and master of…

The Dark Apostle's thought went unfinished as, with a thunderous boom, the far wall of his sanctum exploded inwards. Rubble fell in an avalanche. Metal shrapnel whipped through the shrine, ripping more cultists apart as two Knights emerged through venting steam and crackling energy.

For a few precious seconds, Danial Tan Draconis stared in horror at the charnel chamber. A hiss from his throne spurred him to action.

'Word Bearers,' barked Danial, blinking through optic filters as he fought to make sense of the insanity before him.

'And Alicia,' gasped Luk. 'What in the Emperor's name has she become?'

'No time,' urged Danial. 'Shield fore and slay those traitors.'

A moment later, the High King flinched as a lascannon beam slammed into his ion shield. More shots followed, plasma blasts and bolt shells impacting furiously as the traitors reacted to this sudden incursion.

'Look at her,' said Luk. 'She's gone mad or something... She could be just as dangerous as them!'

'Deal with her, but make it swift,' ordered Danial, conscious of the monstrous figure in the pulpit. Whatever evil ritual was occurring here, it had to be stopped. But first he had to kill the Word Bearers who were firing upon his steed.

He opened fire, blasting three of the traitors into drifting ash. Danial cursed as the rest of his targets dived aside from the shot and came up with their guns blazing. His shield flared as the traitor with the lascannon hit it again.

Danial stepped *Oath* sideways, firing a hail of stubber shells at a running Word Bearer. The traitor was plucked off his feet mid stride and flipped onto his back. He skidded to a stop and didn't rise. Another two of the Chaos Space Marines were annihilated as Danial caught them in the sights of his thermal cannon, before a salvo of krak grenades exploded against his steed's shin.

His attackers fell back. Seizing the opportunity, Danial fired his thermal cannon at the data-pulpit. His shot was on target, but struck a shield of eldritch energies.

The surviving Word Bearers had gained cover around the choristry pit and were firing on him again. He closed with them, cogitating firing solutions.

Foolish, whispered his ghosts, *a dead end – they will have nowhere to run*. That thought alone gave Danial pause, for even in such dire straits he couldn't imagine his enemies being so inept. A presentiment of danger flashed through his mind and he reined his steed back sharply. A second later, vast life-sign readings blossomed across his bio-imager manifold, and something huge and terrible burst up from the pit with a deafening scream.

Luk had thought that he would feel anger when they met again. Instead he found himself horrified at the sight of Alicia. Where once had been memories of warmth and reassurance, now all he felt was revulsion at the screaming, flame-wreathed banshee that hovered high above the sanctum floor.

'Mother,' he breathed, and was surprised to hear such sorrow in his voice. 'I'm so sorry.'

Impacts rippled his ion shield as the scattered cultists fired at him from the circuitpews. Slaving his heavy stubber to an auto-targeting data-spirit, the Freeblade let *Sword of Heroes* strafe the minor irritation. He centred his targeting reticule on Alicia for the clearest possible shot.

'Quick and clean,' he whispered to himself. 'I won't let her suffer.'

Alicia looked down at him, her features hellish. Blue fire glowed from her eyes and mouth. Luk wasn't sure what he had expected in that moment, perhaps some kind of recognition or softening. Maybe even for her to stop this madness. Instead he recoiled as Alicia's face twisted into a daemonic scowl, and her voice spilled as overlapping whispers from his vox.

'They killed your father,' she said. 'And yet still you fight for them? For their corpse god?'

'Father turned traitor,' Luk replied angrily. 'And you tried to kill me. Who else should I fight for?'

'Yourself,' came Alicia's voice, even as her mouth worked at other, darker words. Her power flared, as Varakh'Lorr's curses hammered at Alicia's sorcerous wards. 'Fight for yourself. I knew you had the strength to survive the blackened tower. Join with me, Luk, and claim the rewards your father sought.'

'After everything, you think you can win me back?' asked Luk. 'Heresy truly has driven you mad. Father received the only reward he deserved, and so shall

you.’

Alicia screamed in fury. Realising the danger, Luk hauled his shield up just as a column of blue and purple flame roared from Alicia’s hands. He cried out as heat warnings spiked, and *Sword of Heroes* staggered with the force of the attack. An image rose in his mind’s eye then, the horrific fate of Gustev Tan Minotos. His own mother was trying to do the same to him, and the thought broke his spirit all over again, even as it fuelled his resolve. Luk heard the surging roar of his steed’s machine-spirit around him, and he roared with it.

‘For the Emperor and Chimaeros!’

Luk Kar Chimaeros, Knight of Ashes, drove his haptic gauntlet forward, fist clenched. Energy cells and microwave impellers within his thermal cannon awoke, glowing bright as suns as they funnelled a column of destructive energies into being. The air ignited with a thunderous roar. At the last moment, the sorceress screamed and crossed her arms over her face, dragging a shield of empyric energy before her. Luk’s shot blasted Alicia backwards in a blazing explosion, driving her through the stone and metal of the shrine’s wall as she vanished from sight.

Luk cursed; he was about to go after Alicia to make sure she was dead when he heard Danial’s voice.

‘Luk! Throne, help me!’

Luk wheeled his steed towards Danial, and his eyes widened in horror.

The monstrosity smashed bodily into *Oath of Flame* and drove it back with its weight and ferocity. Danial had an impression of surging, stitched-together flesh and muscle, slick with slime and busy with flailing appendages. He saw a fanged maw the size of a Sacristan Crawler, a freakish cherub mask, and crackling metal spikes, moving as fast as a speeding mag-train. Danial’s steed was rocked back on its heels, servo-motors howling and sparking as they strained to keep it upright. Frantically, Danial worked his controls, stepping back, giving ground. Metal groaned with pressure as hundreds of tons of flesh, muscle and flab pressed against it, while despite the data-wardings worked upon them, his systems flickered and spat gibberish.

‘What in Thro… name is… at thing?’ fuzzed Luk’s voice through the vox.

‘I don’t know,’ gasped Danial, revving his steed’s chainsword and swinging it into the monster’s flank. ‘But we need to kill it, now!’ A deafening scream erupted from the monster’s maw as *Oath*’s chainblade bit through its flesh. Ropey strings of gore splattered in all directions, and Danial winced as binharic

feedback flooded his systems. The vast monster squirmed away from him, its body bunching and flowing like sludge as its myriad limbs skittered and flailed.

'Luk, I think this thing is the source of the scrapcode,' shouted Danial, but his vox spat nothing but static. Sparks were drizzling from his cockpit systems, and his auspex was full of gibberish. Fighting stuttering power surges, Danial tried to bring his thermal cannon to bear, but the limb wouldn't respond.

A thunderous impact rang against his steed's hull, deforming the front of his cockpit and bursting rivets from their seams. Danial flinched as one of the metal projectiles rang from his throne, less than an inch from his head. Through his jerking optic feed the High King could see that the monster had slammed one of its huge, muscular limbs into his steed. It was drawing back a bunched fist formed from cartilage and intertwined human limbs, and was about to strike again.

The blow didn't land. A searing blast from Luk's thermal cannon ripped past *Oath of Flame*, close enough to set alarms shrilling in Danial's ears. The shot bored into the fleshy abomination, eliciting another shriek that caused Danial's cockpit lights to flicker and his generator to cut out for one heart-stopping moment. The monster recoiled, a massive, crisped-black crater burned into its flesh.

As Luk strode to his side, and the monster backed away, Danial saw some of his systems restoring themselves.

'How do… kill it?' asked Luk.

'Keep firing,' replied Danial, working furiously to reconsecrate the spirits of his own thermal cannon. As its runes lit green he loosed a shot that bored another hole in the monster's flesh. Luk did the same, and the beast flailed and screamed, waves of scrapcode pulsing from the metallic spines on its back. The High King felt a flicker of satisfaction as he saw the thing roll over the last few Word Bearers, crushing the warriors with its immense bulk.

Fleshy limbs lashed out, staggering *Sword of Heroes*. Luk sawed off one with his blade, only for three more to snake forward and batter at him.

Danial stabbed at the monster again, driving his chainsword deep in a spray of ichor. He ripped it free as black lightning crackled down its length and stalled its whirring teeth.

'We're not doing… nough damage,' said Luk.

Danial shot another glance at the Dark Apostle. Streamers of fire were leaping from the pyre now, twining around the traitor as he grew bigger and more monstrous by the second. 'I have an idea. Follow my lead.'

Strafing the monster with stubber fire, Danial backed away as fast as he dared. Luk followed suit, and with an enraged roar it followed them. Fleshy tendrils and osseous fists crashed against their steeds, threatening to topple them, but the Knights kept up their fighting retreat.

The huge pyre blazed at their backs, closer with every step.

'Da,' said Luk. 'We're getting awfully close to… e fire.'

'Close enough,' replied Danial, halting his steed. The monster was gathering itself for another lunge, rearing up to its full height and scraping the shrine's ceiling with its spines.

'It… oing to come down on us… ike an avalanche,' shouted Luk. 'We've got to kill it!'

'Fire on my mark and be ready to step aside,' said Danial, locking targeting runes at the point where Luk's first shot had torn into the monster's underbelly.

Howling, the abomination surged towards them.

'Mark,' said Danial, and as one they loosed their thermal cannons.

Twin streams of superheated energies converged. They tunnelled through flesh, turned ectoplasmic blood to super-heated steam, burst unnatural organs and melted metal and bone alike. The killing energies ripped into the immense creature and tore right through it, exploding from its hunched back in a rain of sizzling fat and glowing ash.

Danial swung *Oath* away, gritting his teeth as a tide of flesh and muscle swept down on him. The thing's metal spines struck sparks from his hull as it ploughed past and straight into the ritual pyre. Soulfires and black lightning leapt and merged, corrupting the energies flowing into the data-pulpit. The Dark Apostle and the dying abomination screamed in unison, shaking Danial's Knight around him. A final pulse of scrapcode exploded from the monster like a shockwave, and the High King of Adrastapol was plunged into pitch darkness as *Oath of Flame*'s generator was extinguished like a candle flame.

Danial fought to remain calm in the pitch black. He had only a limited amount of air before he would have to disconnect and release his steed's carapace hatch. Assuming the locking bolts would even disengage without power. He had no idea what was happening outside. Had Luk evaded the monster's fall? Was the Dark Apostle alive or dead? Had they stopped the ritual?

Setting his panic aside, Danial shucked off his haptic gauntlets and pressed the cooling metal above his head. Going by touch alone, he tried to locate the pressure-seams of the emergency awakening hatch. Swathed in darkness, his

breathing shallow and loud in his ears, Danial felt panic trying to smother him. He knew where the seams were, yet irrationally his mind tried to tell him that they had been damaged in battle. He felt a surge of relief as his little finger brushed the edge of the familiar groove, and he realised that he had been searching just a few inches too far to the left.

Cursing himself for a fool, expecting a killing blow at any moment, Danial pressed and twisted as he had practised a hundred times. Air hissed and bearings squeaked as the panel rose and turned, then swung open. As it did so, blessed light shone out, a single, small candle bulb with its own auto-igniter meant for just such emergency situations. Blinking in the sudden glare, Danial located and folded out the igniter handles. He chanted the mantra of awakening as he did so, following the ritual steps printed in illuminated script beside the handles. Imploring the draconsfire to surge within his steed and bring it back to blessed wakefulness, Danial finished the chant, and twisted both of the heavy metal handles clockwise at the same moment. Wrenching metal clunks rang out as the handles turned, and a series of thrumming groans ran through his Knight. The cockpit lights flickered and died, flickered and died, and for a horrible moment Danial was sure that the damage was irreparable.

Then, with a snort and a snarl, *Oath of Flame* awoke. The High King was glad that his subjects were not there to see him punch the air and shout in a thoroughly undignified victory display. Hurriedly, he pulled his gauntlets back on and performed the rites of reconsecration across his instrument panel.

Danial's sensorium lit up before him and he saw the hellish inner sanctum of the Word Bearers.

The scrapcode beast was slain, its monstrous body ruptured and burning on the pyre. Danial's eyes widened as he saw the Dark Apostle. Streaming up from the corpse of the beast were trails of ghostly energy, spirits with cherubic masks intertwined with the pyre's unnatural flames. They whirled around the huge figure in the pulpit like a storm, screaming in hatred as the Chaos Space Marine struck out at them frantically with his mutated limbs. Varakh'Lorr was diminishing, shrinking like a receding mirage even as his flesh twisted with the gods' displeasure.

The first of the spirits plunged through the Word Bearer, ripping a ragged, bloody hole through armour and flesh alike. Another of the spectres arced high, its cherub mask staring down with idiot intensity, before ripping through the Dark Apostle's chest and bursting out of his back in a spray of blood. Over and over again. Blood sprayed across the data-pulpit and sluiced down the steps to

baptise the corpse of the Terminator at their feet. Varakh'Lorr gripped the side of the pulpit, screaming in agony and rage. He stretched one hand towards the column of flame, as though beseeching his dark gods. In response, the flame sputtered out, dying with unnatural suddenness and leaving churning smoke billowing in its place. The Word Bearer collapsed then, dropping to his knees as one of the spirits plunged through the back of his skull and tore through the other side, ripping the macabre mask he wore to shreds.

'The wages of heresy,' breathed Luk, and Danial nodded, relieved when he saw his friend's Knight had survived the fight. There was no time to celebrate their victory, however. With the scrapcode eliminated, the Imperial Navy would be on their way to destroy the generatorums. The plasma blast wave would turn everything in the valle electrum to ashes.

Bringing up his vox, Danial scrolled frantically through his channels, his cockpit flooding with clipped voices and the drone of distant engines.

...adjust heading to coordinates one-one-seven-two, over….

...understood, all squadrons, the lantern is green, repeat, lantern is green….

...bloody hell, they actually killed the scrapcode….

...that they did, Flight Lieutenant. Now we strike, before the enemy can rally…

...understood, sir. Squadron, form on my tail and be prepared for flak and metal dragons and Throne knows what else…

'Luk,' voxed Danial urgently. 'We need to leave. Now.'

'Throne, the bombers,' replied Luk. 'They won't wait, will they?'

'No,' said Danial, already hauling his steed around and feeding power into his motive impellers. 'They can't risk our enemies getting their air defences back in place, or one of the Word Bearers ships intervening.'

'Come on then,' urged Luk, accelerating *Sword of Heroes* back towards the ragged tunnel they had torn through the generatorum.

'And may the Emperor protect us,' said Danial, and followed his friend out.

The column of fire blinked out with breath-taking suddenness and Jennika muttered a prayer of thanks to the Emperor. Eight Knights remained, including her own, and four Sacristan Crawlers, all loaded up with wounded. They could not have stood up to a serious fight, battered as they were, but fortunately they had seen not a single foe since the fall of the Porphyrion. The Word Bearers had gone, though she had no idea where. Fled, she hoped. None of the rebels had been stupid enough to come within range, and to Jennika's knowledge there wasn't a single renegade Knight left alive within a hundred miles. All that

remained was to wait for the High King and his closest friend to return to them, and then they could depart.

That wait became increasingly trying, however. Every distant thump of an explosion, every twitch of a signal of Jennika's auspex tested her patience almost to breaking point. When, less than three minutes earlier, a massive pulse of scrapcode had buffeted their systems and almost shut down *Fire Defiant*'s reactor, the Lady Tan Draconis had considered breaking ranks and plunging into the generatorum after her brother. She'd waited for him once already in this campaign, and had barely survived that time. Now, with her vox channels full of Imperial Navy communications and an air armada inbound, Jennika realised she had no choice. She couldn't just leave her little brother to die. But neither could she defy his orders to get his warriors out alive.

'Lady Eleanat,' she voxed. 'Sire Garath, I'm going in after the High King. I expect you to get everyone else to safety.'

'My lady,' began Sire Garath, but she cut him off.

'I don't want to hear your protestations, sire. Just your compliance. I will not leave Danial to die and take the line of Draconis to the grave with him. Now follow my orders.'

'…Consider them countermanded, sister,' came a voice across the vox, and Jennika felt something unlock in her chest.

'Danial,' she said, smiling and fighting back tears of relief. 'You eliminated the scrapcode?'

'It was both of us,' came Luk's voice, and she was glad to hear a little of his old cocksure grin behind it. 'And a bloody great horror it was too!'

'We stopped the ritual,' said Danial. 'The Dark Apostle is dead, and the horrors he wrought have died with him.'

'And Alicia?' asked Jennika.

'Gone,' replied Luk, the ghost of his bravado fled. 'But I don't know if I killed her.'

'We'll speak of it later,' said Jennika. 'Right at this moment the might of the Imperial Navy is on its way to fill this entire valley with fire. We would do well to be elsewhere when they strike.'

'Agreed,' voxed Danial. 'Let us keep the draconsfire on the inside. We're almost out, sister. Start the retreat and we'll catch you up. Polluxis, can you show us how long we have?'

In reply, the High Sacristan transmitted a synchronised chrono-count of the Navy's drop time to everyone's retinal displays. The margin for error was

vanishingly small.

Jennika fed power to her motive actuators and wheeled her steed back the way they had come. As she did, she saw movement in the generatorum's ruined doorway. *Oath of Flame* strode from within, *Sword of Heroes* close behind. Both Knights looked badly battered but as they broke into a loping run across the plaza both steeds appeared to be fully operational.

'Fast as you can, Da,' Jennika voxed to her brother on a private channel, riding out the thump and sway as her own steed accelerated into a run. 'This is going to be close.'

'I see that,' came his reply, his voice jolting along with the heavy jouncing of his steed's footfalls. 'Jen, is that *Honourblaze* dead in the middle of the plaza? Markos, is he…?'

'Your herald lives,' she replied, glancing behind her loping Knight to where the Sacristan Crawlers were gunning their engines and gathering speed. 'At least for now.'

'Thank the Emperor and the dracon,' came Danial's relieved reply. 'Now let's keep it that way. And in Throne's name, let's hope the bridge over the manufactorum omnissi hasn't collapsed yet.'

Jennika blipped an acknowledgement through her vox, then turned her full attention to piloting her running steed. There was nothing to say to that; if the bridge had fallen, they would all be dead. All they could do was pray to the Emperor that their route to safety remained intact, and move as quickly as they could.

Danial's heart thumped in his ears, even over the piston-like pounding of his running Knight. He concentrated on his steed's footing with fierce intensity, avoiding fallen wreckage and weaving around blazing mounds of rubble. The last servitor-cherubs of the Heavenly host skimmed overhead, doing their best to expand the Knights' auto-senses and aid them in picking out their paths. Danial and Luk had almost caught up to their comrades, alarm lending them speed as the chrono counted steadily down. The last of the Crawlers were just clearing the Square of Martyrs. Adrastapolian Knights loped around them, the few brave warriors who had survived this desperate battle. Gloom veiled his steed's sensorium as *Oath* pounded up behind them between towering, ruined buildings. His vox was awash with the chatter of the incoming pilots, but thankfully his auspex remained empty of foes.

'If the bridge is gone,' he voxed to Luk, 'I just want you to know that I'm damn

proud of you. You're more than a friend, Luk Kar Chimaeros. You're a brother.'

'That's appreciated,' replied Luk, voice shaking with his steed's thunderous motion. 'And reciprocated. But, Da, shut up and keep running eh? We're not dying after a tale like this. The Emperor wouldn't weave a tapestry that grim.'

'You know he would,' said Danial, negotiating a scattering of burned-out Chimera. 'How many die every day? This isn't a merciful galaxy, Luk, and it's not a fair one. But whatever happens, we did our duty.'

'That we did, my liege,' said Luk.

Ahead, a vast pall of smoke boiled up the street towards them. Amidst its fumes lay the scattered wreckage of loyalist and renegade Knights.

'Keep going,' Danial ordered. 'Full stride.'

'Are you mad?' voxed Suset. 'King Danial, look at that smoke! Even if we don't trip over the wrecks, we can't see if the bridge is there! We'll run right off the edge if it's fallen!'

'A fiery death now, or in twenty-three minutes' time,' said Jennika, her voice resolved. 'Either way it's a death amidst the flames. It's fitting.'

'As you say, milady,' said Suset. Then they were gone into the looming cliff of thick smoke to Danial's fore. One by one the Knights vanished into the pall, still running as fast as they could despite the wreckage that covered the road surface. Sparks flashed amidst the murk and Sire Garath cursed over the vox.

'I'm all right,' grunted the Knight. 'Near miss.'

'Jennika?' voxed Danial, urgently. He was almost on top of the bridge already. His sister must surely have crossed over the edge. His heart beat in his ears once, twice, three times. Finally his vox crackled.

'Confirmed,' came Jennika's voice. 'Wanted to sight the full span first. Thank the Emperor. The bridge is still up.'

'All right, then move,' urged Danial. 'Everything you've got into your motive systems. For the Emperor and Adrastapol, my friends – we're getting out of here.'

They ran, the Crawlers speeding and bouncing along in their midst, the Knights shaking the ruins. Across the bridge, through the burned-out swathe of buildings, up and over the ridge. Danial's chrono spun relentlessly downwards, diving into single digits as he and his comrades passed the point where they had first made contact with the enemy's sentry guns. Lady Tamsane nearly stumbled her Knight as its trailing leg caught a spar of rubble, but she stayed upright. Luk cried out as wild weapons fire whipped from a side-street and sparked off his steed's hull. No one saw who fired the shots, whether friend or foe. They were gone in moments,

and Luk reported only superficial damage.

The Knights gained a broad processional, passing between outer worker habs when the imposing thunder of engines filled the air. Danial cast a glance at the chrono count. Three minutes to go. Overhead, sweeping in above the mountains below the high-altitude void shields, came a great swarm of dark specks. The shapes flowed closer by the moment. The cruciform shapes of wing after wing of Imperial Navy aircraft were framed against the sky, lightning crackling around the bulky silhouettes of bombers and fast-moving attack fighters.

'There must be hundreds of them,' he breathed, feeling the throb of the planes' engines in his chest. Desultory flak spat up at the onrushing aerial armada, fired by servitor-turrets beyond the Knights' corridor of advance. It was like hurling stones at a bull grox. A few planes bucked with impacts, or burst into flames and fell from the sky. In return, the ground attack craft dived down and obliterated the offending turrets. Blossoms of fire rose from distant streets.

'Almost there,' voxed Jennika. 'We're approaching the mouth of the valley. If your steeds have any more speed to give, now is the time!'

'You heard her,' muttered Danial to his Knight. *Oath*'s heat readings were spiking, its actuator damage runes darkening towards red. Knights were heavy combat engines, not intended to run so far at such speed, but by the grace of the Emperor not one of their steeds had blown a motive impeller or suffered a topple. The dark mouth of the nortus maximal loomed ahead, the immensity of the mountains rearing to either side. The valley's dark confines promised safety, so tantalisingly close now. Overhead the armada thundered on, wing after wing of planes sweeping over the valle electrum towards the plasma generatorums at its heart.

'The first aircraft waves are dropping their payload… now,' voxed Polluxis, and Danial marvelled that, despite everything, the High Sacristan still sounded calm. 'Likely chain detonation within two minutes.'

'Come on, come on,' Garath urged, as behind them the horizon lit with flashing explosions. Mega-tonnes of explosive ordnance fell upon generatorums one, two and three. Rockets hissed down from wing mounts to rip through the buildings' superstructures and detonate deep within. Lascannon volleys stabbed through armour plating and ripped into tangles of pipes. Huge, bunker-busting bombs smashed through floor after floor to detonate deep within the plasma generators' volatile hearts.

Danial's warriors and the Crawlers passed into the shadow of the valley, and a moment later he and Luk plunged in behind them.

‘Keep going!’ shouted Danial. ‘Get as far through as you can!’

As his steed charged through the remains of the pass’ inner defences, a titanic flash lit the horizon. The thunderous roar of the explosion came a second later, its shockwave a phenomenal hammer blow that struck *Oath* in the back and almost hurled the Knight onto its face.

‘Go! Go!’ he urged, muting his aural pickups as the bellow of the detonation filled the valley. The mountainsides shook, scree and rocks tumbling. The floor shook beneath his feet, bedrock cracking with the ferocity of the blast. Everything behind his steed was white fire, rushing up to enfold Danial in its lethal embrace. He had a fleeting impression of black specks climbing frantically away from the explosion, and wished the air crews the Emperor’s own luck evading the blast.

Then he was rounding the sharp bend in the pass, putting thousands of tons of solid rock between himself and fiery annihilation.

‘Shields rear!’ shouted Jennika. ‘Shields rear! Protect the Crawlers!’

Danial wrenched his ion shield around as fiery light filled the valley. Funnelled between the mountainsides, the plasmic fires rushed up like dracon’s breath, striking with monumental force. *Oath of Flame* shook madly around him, stumbling as it was pummelled by shockwaves. Danial’s sensorium filled with blinding light, and the last thing he saw was the closest Crawler being lifted slowly off the ground and tipping ponderously onto its side. Then his hull receptors burned out in the fires of destruction, and Danial saw nothing more.

Sheik Halna’sir peered through his magnoculars, trying to pierce the clouds of smoke boiling from the nortus maximal. Imperial banners flapped and snapped in the furnace wind, and many of his men had hunkered down behind the blasted ramparts for cover.

Beside him, Commander Korgh shielded his eyes, leaning on a metal crutch as he stared in awe at the mushroom cloud rising above the mountains.

‘Any sign of them, sir?’ asked the commander.

Halna’sir shook his head in response.

‘I see nothing moving, save the smoke,’ he said, frowning.

‘A tragic loss, then,’ sighed Korgh.

‘Wait,’ breathed Halna’sir, adjusting the magnification and squinting hard.

‘What?’ asked Korgh. ‘What do you see?’

A fierce grin spread across the sheik’s features as huge figures strode from the murk, their lumens lit.

‘I see gods…’ he replied.

EPILOGUE

With the destruction of the valle electrum, and the deaths of all the primary traitor leaders, the war for Donatos was effectively won. Although a number of petty rebel warlords arose to fill the power vacuum, and although a small number of Word Bearers and renegade Knights remained at large upon Donatos Primus, the loss of the Adamant Citadels crippled the traitor war effort. Able once more to coordinate and link their forces, our armies renewed their assault upon their heretic foes and drove them back on every front.

Special commendation must be given to Mubraxian Sheik Halna'sir, who, at the head of a coalition of Astra Militarum and Donatosian militia forces, successfully defeated the last rebel Knights at the battle of Sevenspires. An additional note is made of former Militia Commander Korgh who, in the eyes of the Commissariat and Segmentum Command, earned redemption through exceptional heroism in combat on no less than five separate occasions. Though heavily wounded during the battle of Sevenspires, Korgh was awarded his full pardon. As soon as the commander's augmetics had taken, he was afforded the honour of leading a retaliatory expedition into the Crimson Stars at the head of a substantial Imperial force, in pursuit of the remaining Word Bearers that escaped the Donatos warzone.

The Emperor offers his thanks to the loyal Knights of Adrastapol for their commendable heroism in defeating the heretic scourge upon Donatos. It is with regret, therefore, that I must conclude this report by providing an advisory that a representative of the Emperor's holy Inquisition is now on route to Adrastapol. Though your astropaths have informed us that all holdings and chattel of Houses Chimaeros – reductum hereticum extremis – and House Wyvorn – reductum hereticum extremis – have been liquidated, still an investigation is unavoidable at

this time. All possibility of further corruption must be eliminated, to the satisfaction of the Holy Ordos. I would ask that you provide Inquisitor Massata with your full cooperation, and that of your Noble Houses, and I assure you that your exemplary conduct and selfless sacrifices during the conclusion of the Donatosian war will be taken into consideration at this time.

The Emperor protects,

– Lord Governor Hullis, formerly First Administrator,
Medallion Mendaxis 3rd Class,
Defender of the Populi Factotum

'The list of titles goes on, my liege,' said Sire Markos, coughing to clear his augmetic vocal emitter as he read from the report. 'And there's… let's see… yes, a thought for the day. Would you like to hear that?'

Danial Tan Draconis sighed wearily.

'I think not, my herald. I believe we have heard all from Governor Hullis that we could possibly wish to.'

A ripple of laughter ran through the courtiers that clustered around the colonnaded edges of the throne room. Some of the chuckles were genuine, some sycophantic or forced. Such was the way of court, thought Danial ruefully. Give him *Oath of Flame* and a battlefield any day over such stultified nonsense.

'An inquisitor is on his way,' said Sire Percivane from his place to the right of Danial's towering, draconine throne. 'That does not bode well, my liege. The Holy Ordos are not known for their forbearance, or their understanding.'

'We have nothing to hide,' replied Lady Jennika from her place at Danial's left. The Lady Tan Draconis wore the gilt-edged cloak of First Knight, a promotion that Danial had been only too glad to award his sister. Some had whispered of favouritism, but again, such was the nature of courtly politics. Danial knew no fiercer or truer warrior than Jennika. He was glad to have her as the nominal commander of his Exalted Court.

'That's true,' said Lady Suset, who stood one step down from the throne, in the most junior position of the Exalted Court. She had been made Gatekeeper at Danial's insistence, and despite High Sacristan Polluxis' obvious displeasure. In the six months that had passed since they had returned from Donatos, the High King had found that he very much enjoyed Suset's forthright company. Far more so than any of the elaborately outfitted consorts and courtly ladies who flocked

in his wake, and whispered knowingly together whenever he passed. If he could survive their predatory attentions, thought Danial, he could hopefully handle an inquisitor. But there were those who might not fare so well, which brought him to his final order of business. Seven hours at court, plus two more of ritual observances before his hearings even began for the day. The grasslands were calling, a ghurgol hunt across the open plains in his mighty steed.

But first, this sad matter must be seen to.

'Markos, call forth the Knight of Ashes,' he commanded.

The herald turned and adjusted a dial in his vox-emitter to amplify his grating voice.

'Danial Tan Draconis, High King of Adrastapol and Victor of Donatos, calls Luk Kar Chimaeros, the Knight of Ashes, to attend upon him at this hour.'

Markos' voice echoed up to the vaulted ceiling, with its magnificent murals of fire-breathing dracons and Imperial angels battling the forces of darkness. Across the vast throne room, over the heads of assembled Knights of Houses Draconis, Minotos and Pegasson, past throngs of courtiers, functionaries, courtesans, petitioners, priests and servitors, the huge bronze doors swung open. Danial tapped discreet controls set into a bracelet on his wrist, summoning his three servo skulls to hover above him. The dracon, the minot and the pegassus, each inscribed with the image of the same crown that he wore upon his brow. Between them, the servo-skulls projected a flickering hololith that magnified his view, and showed Danial his oldest friend striding through the opening doors.

Luk Kar Chimaeros walked with his head held high, ignoring the mutters that rolled through the crowd. His long, black hair was tied back in a simple ponytail, and his tabard bore his newly chosen Freeblade heraldry. A chimaer, fallen upon its back with a blade driven through its heart, set upon a field of ashen grey.

The crowd might have shouted abuse, thought Danial, had he not been there in person. But his friendship with Luk was well known, a fact that had done neither of them any favours in the wake of House Chimaeros' rebellion. He would no sooner distance himself from his friend than from his own sister, so let them mutter.

Luk completed the long walk to the throne, dropping to one knee before Danial and bowing his head.

'My liege,' he said, voice solemn.

'Rise, Knight of Ashes,' replied Danial, equally sombre. 'I believe it was you who reminded me that, as a Freeblade, you have no need to call me king.'

'I will always call you my king,' replied Luk sincerely, standing and placing

one hand on the hilt of the draconblade he wore there. A symbolic gift from his friend.

'I am glad,' replied Danial. 'You still mean to go through with your vow then, sire?'

'I do, my liege,' said Luk. 'You have heard the whispers just as I have. Reports that cannot be ignored. We both know that she might have survived. I cannot take that chance, and I will never recover my honour while the witch still lives.'

'If she still lives at all,' said Danial. 'If you make this vow then it may take you from this world forever, on a quest without an end.'

'If that is the Emperor's will, so be it,' said Luk Kar Chimaeros. 'I vow to you on my honour as a Knight, I shall not rest until I have slain Alicia Kar Manticos with my own blade, or else proved beyond all shadow of doubt that she is dead, and her heresy punished justly.'

'And I accept your oath,' replied Danial, standing and drawing his draconblade. Stepping down to stand level with Luk, he rapped the flat of the weapon firmly upon his friend's left shoulder. 'By this blade, I bind you to your oath. Return in victory, and upon your other shoulder shall I knight you anew. So do I vow, as High King of Adrastapol, and in the sight of the Emperor.'

A few hours later, Danial and Jennika sat enthroned within their steeds, waiting upon the edge of the grass ocean that spread away from the Draconspire's feet. They were blessedly alone, freed from the demands of court with only the wind and the sighing of the grass for company.

'We lost so much to that world,' said Jennika. 'We did our duty to the Emperor despite everything, and now they send an inquisitor. As though we had dark secrets to hide.'

'I wonder,' said Danial. 'Markos has been reluctant to divulge father's history since we returned, and out of respect for his loss and his injuries I let him keep his peace. But with this Massata on his way, I fear we must press for answers. Perhaps we hide more than we know, sister.'

Jennika sighed.

'Perhaps,' she said. 'It's hard to know how far the corruption of House Chimaeros – of Alicia – spread. Father always said that the business of peace was more exhausting than any battle. At least we have the hunt to soothe our minds for a time.'

'We do,' agreed Danial.

'But where is Luk?' asked Jennika. 'He said he would join us for one last ride

before he departed, did he not?'

Danial blinked a rune onto her retinal display, drawing her attention upwards. High above them a lander was climbing away from the Draconspire's eyries, its contrail a dark streak against the cold blue of the sky.

'I don't think Luk will be joining us, sister,' said Danial. 'His hunt has already begun.'

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Andy Clark has written the Warhammer 40,000 short story ‘Whiteout’, the Age of Sigmar short story ‘Gorechosen’, and the Warhammer Quest Silver Tower novella *Labyrinth of the Lost*. Andy works as a background writer for Games Workshop, crafting the worlds of Warhammer Age of Sigmar and Warhammer 40,000. He lives in Nottingham, UK.

For Sarah, Mum and Dad. Thanks for believing in me, supporting me, and always putting up with my over-enthusiastic nonsense...

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