WARHAMMER 40,000

THE GOTHIC WAR

EXECUTION HOUR • SHADOWPOINT

GORDON RENNIE

A WARHAMMER 40,000 NOVEL

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

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

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

EXECUTION HOUR

It is to our eternal regret that, whilst many previous—and, dare I say, less academically rigorous—chroniclers of the Gothic Sector Wars have preferred to concentrate their limited scope on the already well-detailed, if admittedly grandiose, events that occurred during the latter stages of that most tumultuous of struggles, there are many notable actions from the earliest stages of the conflict that have not yet received their due and proper examination. Certainly, I do not speak of those justifiably celebrated actions such as Compel Bast's heroic defence of Orar, or Admiral Varus's defiant last stand at Platea, for, Emperor knows, these events have been examined many times already, with seemingly each new chronicler finding something both less interesting and original to say concerning them than the one previous to him. (Although, esteemed and studious reader, pray hope that I do not flatter myself unduly when I tell you now that I intend to defy and reverse this sorry fashion when I come to examine these events myself, in those relevant later chapters.) No, I speak now of several of the many smaller actions which took place in those earliest and darkest days of the war, as the carrion fleets of the Despoiler fell upon the lax and unprepared forces of Battlefleet Gothic. While it may seem perverse to examine actions involving duels between single opposing ships when set against the background of a stellar conflict that would later involve fleet-sized battles on a scale not witnessed since the age of the Horus Heresy, the serious student of the Gothic Sector War will, I pray, come to realise my interest in but one of these smaller actions when I reveal now that it involves two names that would later feature significantly not merely in the history of Battlefleet Gothic, but also in the annals of Battlefleet Segmentum Obscuras itself. I speak, of course, of Leoten Semper and his vessel, the Lord Solar Macharius…

—Scribe Emeritus Rodrigo Konniger,

Into the Jaws of Death, Into the Mouth of Hell: Notable Actions of the Gothic Sector War, 143-149.M41

PART ONE

BAPTISM OF FIRE

“Good Hunting, *Macharius.*”

They were the first words that anyone had heard spoken aloud on the bridge of His Divine Majesty’s Ship, the *Lord Solar Macharius* for hours. There was no such thing as silence on an Imperial Navy warship, where the decks shook with the ever-present rumble of the massive plasma engines and every corridor, work-bay and compartment echoed with the sounds of the more than ten thousand specimens of toiling, sweating humanity that made up its crew. Still, the mood aboard the Dictator class cruiser was eerily quiet, and even here on the bridge the command crew spoke only in muted whispers as they relayed orders and status checks between themselves and over the internal comm-net to hundreds of other points throughout the ship.

Standing at the nave point of the bridge, Captain Leoten Semper heard a polite cough and the shuffle of booted feet behind him, followed by the clipped accent of his flag-lieutenant, the young officer maintaining a carefully neutral tone to his voice.

“Signal from the *Indefatigable,* captain. Do you wish us to acknowledge?”

Semper turned to face the young officer, studying his second-in-command’s refined features.

Hito Ulanti, he thought. A Necromundan aristocrat’s name. Strange to find one of his sort serving aboard a navy ship. And aristocrats are always ambitious. This one may bear watching, Semper noted, wryly remembering that assassination had once been a viable means of advancement for ambitious young navy officers during the dark days of the Age of Apostasy.

Semper snapped back to the situation at hand, remembering that as captain of one of the Emperor’s warships, he now had little time for such moments of quiet musing.

“Acknowledge the signal from the *Indefatigable,* Mr. Ulanti. Our compliments to its captain and officers, and our sincere hopes to see her again when we return home once again to Stranivar.”

The flag-lieutenant clicked his heels in the approved navy style and nodded for

the standard acknowledgement to be returned to the escort vessel.

Semper turned to look out of the command deck viewing bay, seeing his own reflection staring back at him. It was an image almost identical to any one of the dozens of ancestral portraits displayed in the family manor house back home on Cypra Mundi—the same severe and hawk-like features of the elite Cypra Mundian officer class, the same proudly-worn battle scars (the one which marked his face was the result of a boarding action assault he once led on an ork ship as a young junior lieutenant), the same resplendent uniform of a senior officer of the Imperial Navy of the Segmentum Obscurus—but it was to the gleaming captain's stars on the collar of that uniform that his eye was most drawn. There had been Sempers in the Imperial Navy since before the Age of Apostasy. The very latest in the line wondered if, unlike most of his illustrious ancestors, he would ever live long enough to return to Cypra Mundi to see the portrait of himself now hanging there along with all those others. He shook his head, focusing his vision on the starfield beyond, his experienced eyes picking out the tiny moving dot of light that was the *Indefatigable.* As he watched, the light flared brighter as the Sword class frigate fired up its engines and veered away from the *Macharius* to rejoin the picket line of scout ships and defence monitor vessels now patrolling the fringes of the Stranivar system.

He cursed, asking himself yet again where such precautions had been when the Chaos ships had swept out of warp space and caught most of Battlesquadron Stranivar helpless in space-dock. The attack had been devastating—two-thirds of the squadron crippled or destroyed—but it was only in the aftermath that the full extent of the disaster became clear, as reports of similar sudden attacks come flooding in from all over the Gothic sector. This was no isolated event. The Eye of Terror had opened to unleash an invasion armada and all of Battlefleet Gothic was now at war. If they were not to lose *the*whole of the Gothic sector, it was essential that the Imperial Navy counterattacked in force as soon as possible, and Lord Admiral Ravensburg had ordered every spaceworthy ship under his command to assemble for immediate deployment. As the only ship in the squadron to survive unscathed, the *Macharius* was the first to put out of space-dock, on orders to rendezvous with a squadron of Cobra destroyers in the uninhabited Dolorosa system before travelling on to join the battlegroup currently gathering in the Bhein Morr system. It would be there also that the ship would take on its new complement of Fury and Starhawk deep space attack craft

to replace its aged Interceptors and Marauders. Slipping its moorings, the *Macharius* had seemed like a thief in the night as it glided past the drifting hulks of those ships destroyed in the attack and leaving behind the crippled remnants of the rest of the squadron.

His was a troubled ship, Semper knew. There was anger and a desire for revenge, but there was something else too: *fear.*Fear of what was waiting for them out there in the warp, and of their new captain's ability to deal with it. This was Semper's first command, and the onset of war on a scale not seen since the Horus Heresy ten thousand years earlier would scarcely ease the traditional problems encountered by all new captains straggling to master an unfamiliar crew and vessel. This war would be a baptism of fire which would see them either forged together in the heat of battle—or swept away in the firestorm of conflict now raging through the Gothic sector.

Semper turned, seeing the dozens of faces staring at him expectantly. "Astrogation!" he barked, in the same tone of command that had first been drilled in to him decades ago at the cadet training colleges on Cypra Mundi. "Estimated time to the beacon?"

"One-point-three hours, flag-captain," came the reply, the officer at the astrogation lectern checking the flickering symbols on the rune screen in front of him.

"Very good," Semper nodded, gesturing for the nearest signals officer to open up a comm-net channel. "Captain Semper to Magos Castaboras. Warp jump in one-point-three hours. Commence preparations immediately. "Acknowledge."

A pause, and then the reply from the ship's most senior Adeptus Mechanicus tech-priest, his voice distorted either by the hiss of comm-net static or one of the cybernetic implants with which all acolytes of the Machine God equipped themselves. "Acknowledged."

Heads looked up at Semper's next words. "One more thing, venerable Castaboras. I don't know what my predecessor's feelings were on the matter, but as captain of this vessel, I expect the presence of either its Technis Majoris or one of his most senior adepts on the bridge at all times. You and your brethren are part of this ship's crew, and will act accordingly. Do I make myself clear?"

There was a longer pause, and then the tech-priest's reply, the terseness in his voice detectable even over the crackle of the comm-net. "As you wish, my lord. I will join you on the bridge shortly."

Semper noticed the silent nods of approval from many of the officers on the bridge. The navy depended on the knowledge of the Adeptus Mechanicus to operate its vessels, but the relationship between fleet officers and Mechanicus adepts was never an easy one.

A *warship has several would-be masters, but only one captain,* Semper remembered his mentor, Admiral Haasen, once saying. *To be in true command of your vessel you must show your crew that you are the only master that matters.*

Semper's eyes swept the bridge, his gaze passing over the rows of silent servitors manning the console stations in the recessed choirs that lined the raised nave of the command deck. The captain's pulpit lay in the centre of the nave where it met with the bridge's transept wings, and from where he could consult with his senior officers and oversee the vital gunnery, astrogation, ordnance control and surveyor sections of the command deck. Looking up, he saw tier upon tier of busy servitor drones and tech-priests attending to the operation and adoration of the ship's ancient logic engines, each subsection of a dozen or more servitors and their tech-priest overseer responsible for the monitoring of just one small part of the mighty machine-mind which inhabited and animated the battlecruiser's systems.

The monitor galleries stretched almost up to the bridge's vaulted ceiling some twenty metres above, but Semper found the figure he was looking for on one of the lower levels, standing on a walkway which spanned the breadth of the central nave and from where the command deck activity could be closely watched. The light from the nearby screens picked out the gleaming silver skulls on the figure's black uniform, and Semper noticed that few of the other crew members approached that area of the bridge. Having already asserted his authority over the Magos Technicus, it was time to deal with a far more intractable challenge to any captain's command.

"Commissar Kyogen!" Semper called up to the figure in the shadows above. "It is my intention to conduct an inspection of the ship and crew prior to warp jump. Would you care to join me? Mister Ulanti, the bridge is yours."

The Ominous Arrowhead shape of the *Contagion* floated in space near the still-burning wreck of the Cobra class destroyer. Of the other three vessels from the squadron, all that remained were three fading clouds of super-heated gas and dust several thousand kilometres distant. It was dark on the command deck of the *Contagion*—its captain found normal lighting levels uncomfortable after his eyelids and much of his skin had atrophied—but many of the command no longer had need of their eyes anyway. That same captain—Hendrik Morrau, once one of the most famous names in the history of Battlefleet Gothic—passed one withered hand over the rune screen in front of him, his eyes reading the battle report statistics which flickered across it. He grunted in pleasure, satisfied that he could not have fought the battle any better. Closing in on the burning destroyer, its air supply venting out into the vacuum of space in bright plumes of fire, it had been his intention to use the vessel for simple target practice, but then close-range surveyor scans had offered the possibility of a far more diverting pleasure for his crew: prisoners. The remnants of the Cobra's crew were trapped in airtight compartments aboard the doomed ship.

Morrau had immediately despatched boarding parties: chittering daemon-things specially bred for this purpose and usually kept confined in the *Contagion*'s festering hold. Ship-bound by his mutations, Morrau envied the creatures their sport as they searched through the wreck for pockets of life, and he had eagerly listened to the screams and pleading human voices as each group of survivors was found and slaughtered in turn.

Morrau would not deny his crew their spoils of victory, but he gave strict orders that some of the humans be taken alive and brought back for interrogation. The commander smiled at the thought, knowing that those taken alive and delivered into the eager hands of the ship's surgeon-interrogator would soon wish that they had been butchered aboard their vessel with the rest of their comrades.

As if on cue, Morrau heard the distinctive shuffling footsteps behind him. Ever since his body had started fusing with his captain's chair, bony spires and wire-like tendrils growing out of him and connecting him to the daemonic mind of his equally transformed ship, it had become impossible for Morrau to leave his chair. However, he didn't need to be able to turn round to recognise the approach of his surgeon-interrogator, Adolphus Torque. Torque stopped behind his

captain, his heavy foetid breath only adding to the miasmic foulness that passed for a breathable atmosphere aboard the *Contagion.*Morrau was secretly glad that he was unable to turn to face his old crewmate; the nature of some of Torque's mutations were unpleasant in the extreme, even to the captain of one of the Plague Lord's best warships.

"The prisoners were to your satisfaction?" Morrau asked.

"Most satisfactory," Torque slurred, his writhing worm-tongues finding difficulty in forming the normal sounds of human speech. "And one of them revealed something most interesting, lord. The ships we ambushed were not recharging their warp drives as we imagined. They were waiting to rendezvous with an Imperial capital ship."

Morrau's nostrils flared with excitement, savouring the myriad stenches that circulated through his ship. In the aftermath of battle, when the ship released the waste products of its own spent power emissions into the air systems, the atmosphere aboard the *Contagion* took on its own distinctive and highly charged aroma. To Morrau, veteran of hundreds of space battles, it smelled of nothing less than victory.

"The name of this ship?"

"The *Lord Solar Mac… Macharius,* captain," Torque replied, his Chaos-altered speech patterns stumbling over the name of one of the Imperium's greatest heroes.

"The *Macharius*…" Morrau breathed, resting back in his chair and searching his long memory. He dimly remembered fighting alongside a ship of that name in a fleet action against a force of Fra'al raiders in the Osiris cluster. The *Contagion*had still been called *Vengis* then, and the name of the captain of the *Macharius* had been Rutgen Jago, but that had been over six hundred years ago as the humans of the Imperium reckon time, and so much—oh yes, so very much indeed!—had changed since then. Whoever the master of the *Macharius* was now, he could never match the ability and experience of the *Contagion*'s captain.

"And the record of the prisoners' interrogation?"

“Preserved for your entertainment, captain,” rasped Torque, a taloned hand snaking out to offer his captain the data crystal, still slick with human blood. Morrau fed the crystal into one of the weeping blister ports on his command console, which opened to accept it with a wet sucking noise. He would review and enjoy the scenes recorded on it while he planned the ambush and destruction of the *Macharius.*

Leoten Semper could feel the sharp beginnings of a headache, always a sure sign of an approaching warp jump as the vessel’s ancient warp field generators powered up and sent out unpredictable psychic vibrations into the minds of its crew. All around him, preparations were underway for the jump into the immaterium. In their engine section sanctum the tech-priests would be striking runes upon the workings of the ship’s mighty warp drives, while Semper could smell the sickly-sweet scent of burning incense that told him the Adeptus Ministorum confessors were at their work, moving through the ship and bestowing protective blessings upon the crew in anticipation of their journey into the daemon-haunted realm of the immaterium. From their position on the gantry platform overlooking the metal cavern of the forward starboard gun-bay, Semper and Commissar Kyogen could see work teams of hundreds of sweating ratings hauling the massive gun batteries back along the tracks to their standby positions or turning the huge gear wheels to close thick blast shields over the bay’s viewing ports.

Semper looked at the brooding shape of Koba Kyogen standing beside him. The commissar was a giant of a man, well over two metres tall. Semper knew that the uniform of a fleet commissar—gleaming black leather jackboots and pistol holster, thick black felt overcoat with polished silver skull buttons and laurel wreath insignia and high peaked cap with burnished Imperial eagle emblem—was designed to intimidate and inspire, but even without it the commissar would still have struck an imposing figure. Semper glanced at the row of decorations on Kyogen’s chest, noting the distinctive bright starburst cluster of the Order of the Gothic Star, identical to that pinned to the breast of Semper’s own tunic. The skin of the commissar’s face was disfigured with the tell-tale marks of white-hot plasma splash, and one half of it was twisted into a permanent snarl by a crude skin-graft which Semper recognised as a typically makeshift piece of battlefield surgery.

Medals and battle scars worn proudly, Semper thought to himself. He's no coward, this commissar, but how far can I depend on him?

Semper gestured at the activity below. "Your opinion, commissar? Your assessment of the ship and its crew?"

"We have a good cadre of command crew and petty officers familiar with the ship and its operations, but too many gaps have been filled amongst the lower rankings by untried recruits who haven't even made their first warp jump yet. Too many press-ganged convict scum as well, although they'll soon be wishing they were back in the work camps on Lubiyanka once they get their first taste of space combat."

Semper nodded, already impressed with Kyogen's straightforward way of talking. Maybe, he thought, I might actually have a useful officer here and not just another Schola Progenium-created automaton.

"And your assessment of the ship's captain?"

Kyogen looked Semper straight in the eye as he answered. "Your service record shows you to be a highly capable officer, and it is difficult to argue with Admiral Haasen's decision to promote you to your first full captaincy." There was a scream from the deck below, abruptly cut off, as one of the gun crew stumbled and was instantly crushed beneath the weapon carriage's huge rolling wheels. If Kyogen noticed, he gave no indication. Deaths amongst the lower ranks were so common on an Imperial warship that they passed unnoticed. "You acquitted yourself well in the attack on Stranivar, but in view of your basic inexperience and the threat now facing the Gothic sector fleet, there must remain some doubts about your ability to captain a vessel of this size during the present crisis."

A loud warning chime sounded over the comm-net—fifteen minutes to warp jump—and Kyogen shifted impatiently, obviously keen to be attending to his duties elsewhere.

"One last thing, commissar," Semper said, sensing the other man's impatience. "In the event of my death or injury, who would you choose to replace me as captain?" It went unsaid that one cause of Semper's death might be Kyogen himself, since any fleet commissar could summarily execute a captain for

anything they judged to be a serious dereliction of duty.

“Flag-lieutenant Ulanti is next in the chain of command,” replied the commissar, the fixed snarl carved into his face deepening at the mention of Semper’s second-in-command. “But, noble title or not, he’s still nothing more than Necromundan hive-trash. Hive-trash have their place on a warship, but only as press-gang conscripts. No senior officer would take orders from such a captain, no matter how high-born they claimed to be.”

Semper took all this in without reaction. “I see. Then who would you nominate instead?”

“Myself, captain. In the event of your death, I would consider it my proper duty to appoint myself in your place. Now, if that is all, I have to oversee the final security arrangements for the transition to the warp.”

And with that, Commissar Kyogen saluted smartly and turned and walked away, leaving the captain of the *Macharius* to wonder about the man who held the power of life and death over even him.

On the gun-deck below, Maxim Borusa glanced up at the two officers on the walkway above before a vicious kick from Gogol brought him sharply back to the business at hand.

“Back to work, Borusa, before I finish that piece of handiwork I started back on Lubiyanka!” spat the crewboss, giving the new conscript another swift kick for good measure. Maxim fell into step once more with the other members of the work gang as they hauled one of the huge gun carriages along the track. He winced, remembering the scars all over his back from the time Gogol and his gang had caught him, and the boss had gone to work on him with a fire-heated blade. He had escaped, and once again Maxim cursed the fates which had brought them together again years later: Maxim press-ganged into service aboard the *Macharius*, only to find the gloating Gogol waiting for him.

Maxim had been born into the lawless underworld of the hive cities of Stranivar and had survived the gulag hell of the Lubiyanka prison moon, but even he had few illusions left about his survival chances aboard an Imperial warship. Not

with Gogol here too.

“Spiritus Machina,” intoned the metal-masked figure of Magos Castaboras, resplendent in his glittering robes of woven silicon. “Prepare to engage warp drives on my mark.” The vital task of taking a ship into warp space could only be done by the most senior tech-priest aboard, for only he could conduct the proper rituals or knew the correct Tetragrammaton code—the true secret name of that aspect of the Machine God which inhabited the *Macharius*’s systems—which allowed access to the ship’s warp drives. Standing on the bridge and surrounded by a phalanx of adepts, the tech-priest waited for the silent nod of assent from Leoten Semper before completing the ritual.

“Quinque…”

“Quattuorum…”

“Tres…”

“Due…”

“Unus…”

“Engagus!”

At the magos’s command, the truly stellar levels of energy contained within the ship’s plasma reactors were released into the warp engines, ripping a hole in the fabric of space and pushing the cruiser forward into the immaterium. The Geller Field—the teardrop-shaped bubble of reality which protected the ship and its crew from the full fury of the maelstrom—crackled with power as waves of warp energy lashed against it, rocking the *Macharius* from prow to stern. Inside the ship, the new recruits cringed in terror, their screams and cries almost drowning out the traditional litanies of protection chanted by their more experienced crewmates. Confessors, junior commissars and shotgun-armed petty officers walked every deck, encouraging the crew to keep good faith in the divine protection of the Emperor, but meanwhile keeping a close vigil for any sign of daemonic intrusion into the minds and bodies of their shipmates.

On the bridge, the magos stepped away from his control lectern and bowed silently to the captain, signalling that his task was over. As of now the fate of the entire ship was now in the hands of another.

Sealed off in his pilaster dome and guarded by fanatically loyal Navis Nobilite retainers who would not even allow the ship's captain himself to enter without their master's permission, Principal Navigator Solon Cassander closed his eyes and removed the warding band from around his head, allowing him to open up the mystic third eye centred in the middle of his forehead.

Looking out on the true face of the maelstrom with his mystic warpsight, he could see most of the length of the ship extended out before him. Aft lay the engine section, comprising fully one third of the ship's three kilometre length, but below him was the main body of the *Macharius,* bristling with crenellated gun turrets, observation domes and spires, antenna arrays and other baroque features of the vessel's superstructure. On each side of the hull were the heavy weapon batteries and the tiered ramparts of the cruiser's launch bays, each bay capable of unleashing wave upon wave of fast attack fighters and bombers. Ahead of him was the fearsome armoured beak of the prow, its metres-thick solid adamantine armour designed to smash through the hulls of enemy vessels in a full head-on ramming attack. There, too, was the ship's main frontal armament: six missile tube tunnels, each firing a thirty-metre-long plasma torpedo.

The firepower of the *Macharius* was formidable, but Solon Cassander knew that it was insignificant in comparison to the power contained in the merest flicker of warp energy in the maelstrom raging around them. The navigator paused, clearing all thoughts from his conscious mind and extended his gaze into the higher realms of the warp, using the psychic signal of the astronomican as a beacon to plot a safe course through the currents and tempests of the immaterium. Course changes and navigation instructions would be relayed down to the command deck for immediate implementation, but for the next few days, while the ship was in transit through the warp, Navigator Cassander would be the true master of the*Macharius.*

Standing immobile on the bridge, Semper stared in fascination at the complex and ever-changing energy patterns of the warp as they were electronically

interpreted on one of the command deck's opticon screens. Navigators claimed to be able to sometimes see glimpses of the future in the swirling patterns of the warp. Watching the images of the ebb and flow of the currents, Semper wondered what the future held for the men and ships of Battlefleet Gothic.

"Good hunting." It was the traditional greeting hail between ships of the fleet as they left on patrol or encountered each other in the warp, but now, with the warfleets of Abaddon the Despoiler pouring out of the Eye of Terror and a dozen navy bases already fallen to the sudden onslaught of the Chaos attack, Leoten Semper was left to wonder exactly who would be the hunter and who the hunted in this war.

The *Contagion* drifted inert and seemingly lifeless on the solar tides, its power systems reduced to such a low output as to make it to all intents invisible to the electronic senses of another vessel. His own reactions deadened by the low power levels trickling through the ship's systems, it took Morrau some seconds to realise that the ship's navigator-seer was standing before him. The flesh of the navigator's face bubbled and suppurated as he spoke.

"Your pardon, flag-captain, but—"

"I know," Morrau said, cutting off the sibilant hiss of the voice of his daemon-possessed navigator. "I have sensed it too. The powers of the warp warn us of the approach of our prey." Morrau settled back into his chair, contemplating with pleasure the prospect of the coming battle.

On the fringes of the Dolorosa system, a miniature second sun suddenly blossomed in the vacuum of space, its light outshining that of the real star at the far distant centre of the planetary system. Waves of energy cascaded out of the extra-dimensional breach as a three-kilometre-long metal leviathan ripped its way back into the normal universe, its shields straining at near-overload point to withstand the terrible energies surging around it. His Divine Majesty's ship the *Lord Solar Macharius* had completed a successful exit from the warp.

Leaving the tech-priests and confessors to their prayers of thanks, Leoten Semper took up position in his captain's pulpit. A ship was at its most vulnerable

in the moments immediately after re-entering normal space, when its power levels were still in flux and the energy burst of its warp exit broadcast its existence and position to any other vessel in the system.

“Astrogation!” Semper barked. “Determine our course and position. Surveyors! Locate the position of Destroyer Squadron Mako and check for presence of any other unknown vessels. Captain to all decks! Raise blast shields and make ready all weapons.”

There was a pause while the crew moved to carry out his orders, and then the responses started coming back.

“Astrogation reporting. Position confirmed as the Dolorosa system. Estimate we are within 89.7% accuracy of intended exit point.” Semper made a mental note to commend his navigator. Any jump that hit its intended exit point with more than a 70% level of accuracy was considered the mark of a master.

“Surveyors reporting. Heavy interference from warp energy residue. Unable to locate Squadron Mako at the rendezvous coordinates.”

“Communications reporting. No response to our coded hailing signals. Dead air on all standard fleet frequencies.”

Semper turned to look at the empty starfield revealed beyond the viewing bay’s now-raised blast shields. Never mind long-distance surveyor reports, with the bridge’s enhanced viewing devices they should actually be able to see the waiting escort squadron.

Emperor’s throne, where were they?

Several hundred thousand kilometres directly behind the *Macharius*, the *Contagion* closed in on its prey. Power flowed through the Chaos vessel as its energy levels were gradually brought up, and Hendrik Morrau fought to keep the growing excitement out of his voice as he stared at the bright target blip on the surveyor screen.

“Maintain course and increase speed by mark point two. Stay in his warp trail. Bring the prow batteries and dorsal lances up to half power. Void shields to

remain down until I give the order."

Morrau watched the target blip grow brighter on the screen in front of him. It was an ambush tactic he had long ago honed to perfection—using the energy trail of a craft recently emerged from the warp to mask his own approach from directly behind it. Before the time the enemy even knew he was there, the *Contagion* would already be in position to deliver a crippling strike to its power systems. The defenceless Imperium ship would then be boarded and seized, and Morrau looked forward to the prospect of more prisoners, particularly if the *Macharius*'s captain was amongst them. The Chaos captain had already given Surgeon-Interrogator Torque careful and highly specific instructions on what he wanted done, should his opposing number be foolish enough to allow himself to be taken alive.

"Possible surveyor scan anomaly detected." The toneless voice of one of the servitors rang out, followed by Semper's urgent reply.

"Identify!"

Officers converged on the drone's position, knowing that their captain wanted the crucial information from a human rather than one of the soulless man-machine things that operated many of the command deck's monitor systems. Hito Ulanti leaned over the console, quickly interpreting the surveyor scan symbols which flashed across the screen. "Still a lot of warp energy interference, but possible target blip fifteen to twenty thousand kilometres immediately behind us and closing… Could be another ship!"

Semper didn't hesitate. "Helm control—hard to port! Engineering—open port vent valves and engage plasma reactor emergency release systems!"

"Target veering to port. Energy surge in his power systems," croaked the *Contagion*'s toad-bodied helmsman.

"He's detected us!" Morrau snarled with a curse. "Full power to forward weapons. Fire when ready!"

"Flag-captain! The void shields! We should—" bleated a heretic tech-priest,

before one of Morrau's Plague Marine bodyguards savagely cut him down in response to the curt gesture from their master.

"No time!" bellowed Morrau in fury. "Lock on with forward weapons and open fire!"

The *Macharius* swung round in space, gargoyle-faced vents opening up along its port side to bleed gaseous clouds of broiling plasma out into space. The expelled energy cloud appeared as a hazy after-image on the *Contagion*'s surveyor screens, confusing the Chaos ship's targeting systems and sending its opening weapons fire blazing harmlessly past the Imperial cruiser.

"Engage void shields!" Morrau bellowed, already knowing that the *Macharius*'s manoeuvre would bring its port batteries into firing alignment before enough energy could be diverted to the *Contagion*'s void shield generators. At this range, the damage would not be critical, but the Chaos cruiser sustained several hull-deep hits as it passed through the sights of the*Macharius*'s weapons batteries, before its void shields finally powered up sufficiently to absorb the energy blasts and macro-shell impacts.

The moment of danger over, Hendrik Morrau sat back in his chair, grudgingly impressed by his enemy's unexpected resourcefulness. Perhaps this engagement might be even more enjoyable than he anticipated.

Semper watched the target blip on the scanner screen move out of weapons range for the time being. The initial exchange of fire over, both ships would now withdraw to manoeuvre for the best possible advantage in their next attack runs. They would also use this moment to learn as much about their enemy as possible.

"Surveyors: identify enemy vessel by class and name, if you can."

The Officer of Surveyors consulted the readings on his lectern, calling up centuries-old data from the vast repositories of information held in the ship's logic engines. "Vessel is a Hades class heavy cruiser. It's broadcasting a modified form of an old Segmentum Obscurus fleet identification code, but we should be able to—Vandire's oath, it's the *Vengis?"*

A murmur of shocked disbelief rippled round the command deck, cut short by the urgent words of a junior signals officer. “The enemy vessel is hailing us, flag-captain. The enemy captain wishes to speak with you!”

“On audio,” Semper ordered, warily noting *the* way Kyogen unsnapped the fastenings on his holstered bolt pistol. “Have faith, comrade commissar,” the captain remarked, smiling grimly. “Perhaps he merely wishes to discuss the terms of his surrender.”

Even over the interference of the ship-to-ship link, the inhuman nature of the voice that suddenly filled the interior of the*Macharius*’s command deck was all too apparent. It was a voice thick with decay, each word bubbling obscenely up from a body bloated full of its own poisons. “My congratulations, captain,” gloated the voice. “It has been some time—several centuries, in fact—since I last saw an immerman Manoeuvre implemented so well.”

“This is Flag-captain Leoten Semper of his Divine Majesty’s Ship the *Lord Solar Macharius,”* Semper said. “Identify yourself!”

The voice on the link gave a sick wet laugh. “I regret we cannot see one another, captain, but I imagine that you would find my appearance much changed from whatever portraits and statues of me still exist on Port Maw. I am Flag-captain Hendrik Morrau, master of the vessel once known to you as the *Vengis*.”

“Impossible!” snapped Semper. “Morrau and his crew were lost to the warp after the defeat of the Bligh Mutiny renegades six hundred years ago!”

“Lost?” choked the voice of Morrau. “Perhaps it might have seemed, when we were marooned in the immaterium, and madness and disease took so many of us, but how could we be lost when our suffering led us to find salvation in a power far greater than the withered thing which sits even now upon the Golden Throne? This ship is called *Contagion* now, captain, and we gladly serve the glory of the Great One who found us there in the warp and remade us in his own pestilent image.”

On board the *Contagion,* Morrau contemplated the glowing icon marking the *Macharius*’s position on the opticon screen and savoured the hiss of dead

static over the now silent comm-link. “They have closed communications, lord,” reported one of his nearby crew-things. “Enemy vessel now changing course and breaking away from engagement zone.”

“Let them try and run. They won’t get far,” said the rotting figure in the captain’s chair. “Power up the engines. When they try to escape into the immaterium we’ll be ready to take up the chase.”

“Opinions?” asked Flag-captain Semper, looking at the senior bridge officers assembled before him and aware that some of them might take this unorthodox command tactic to be a sign of weakness in their new captain. It was Remus Nyder, the ship’s stolid veteran Master of Ordnance and the longest-serving officer aboard the *Macharius*, who was first to speak.

“Without our payload of attack craft our offensive capabilities are limited. Even if we already had our new Starhawk squadrons aboard, we would still be outgunned against a Hades class ship. I am satisfied that your decision to disengage from contact with a more powerful enemy vessel is the best course of action under the circumstances.”

There was a murmur of assent from many of the other officers present, although Semper noticed no such sign of agreement from his second-in-command.

“You have a different opinion, Mister Ulanti?” Semper asked.

“Forgive me, captain, but if the enemy vessel truly is the renegade *Vengis* and its captain exactly whom he says he is, then we are not out of danger yet.” The young lieutenant paused, gathering his thoughts, before continuing under the steely gaze of his captain.

“Morrau’s treatise on tactics is still required reading for all collegium cadets, and he was known to be a most determined and tenacious opponent. Indeed, his relentless pursuit and harrying of the eldar cruiser *Changeling* is now part of fleet legend. It seems unlikely that Morrau—if that is who he truly is—will give up the chase so easily, and may even be willing to take the battle against us into the warp itself. After all, we have long known that the daemon-things which helm such renegade vessels have warp-senses superior even to those of our own

Navis Nobilite. There can be no guarantee that we would be able to evade them in the warp as we would any other normal vessel."

All those present waited on the captain's response, but if their new captain had an answer to his second-in-command's points, he chose to keep it to himself.

"Enemy contact detected. Vandire's oath, he's found us again! All decks, brace for impact!"

It had been three days since their initial encounter with the *Contagion* in the Dolorosa system. Three days of emergency warp jumps and constant skirmishing with the Chaos vessel, the *Macharius* unable to shake off its pursuer. Unable to match its opponent's firepower, the Imperial vessel had retreated into the warp where, as Flag-lieutenant Ulanti had predicted, it had still been impossible to evade the daemon-piloted Chaos ship amongst the storms and tides of the immaterium. Time and again the Chaos ship had emerged, weapons firing, from one of the swirling energy storms, forcing the *Macharius* to crash-jump back out of the warp to emerge in the empty interstellar void between star systems. Morrau's ship would either follow them, not allowing them sufficient time to properly recharge their warp drives, or would wait in ambush for them to re-enter the warp again, the *Contagion* holding position on the ever-changing warp currents in a show of skill that no human navigator could ever match.

It had become a battle of energy levels and crew stamina instead of firepower and ordnance attacks, Leoten Semper grimly realised—and one which his ship was losing, its power systems and human crew overloaded to the point of exhaustion by the effort of so many emergency jumps.

Now the *Contagion* was coming at them once more, its now-familiar energy signature emerging from out of the random chaos of the warp currents which it had up until this moment been using to mask its presence. Even though the viewing bay blast shields were down, Semper could almost imagine the scene outside: the sinister delta shape of the Chaos cruiser gliding towards them through the warp, its tall and distinctively narrow-shaped command tower cutting through the stuff of the immaterium like a shark's fin, its massive lance battery turrets crackling with energy as they swung around to bear on their target. The *Macharius* rocked violently as the Chaos ship raked it with a primed

volley of massed energy weapons fire and for a moment the Imperial ship's command deck, its blast shields lowered for warp travel and many of its opticon screens switched off for maximum energy conservation, seemed more like a besieged underground bunker than the bridge of a warship as it shook under the impact of the enemy broadside.

"Void shields penetrated, starboard side," judged Master of Ordnance Nyder impassively, drawing on the experience of a long and battle-scarred naval career. "No critical damage, but probably at least one of the starboard gun-bays knocked out of action." It would be at least another minute before the official damage report confirmed the veteran officer's opinion, neither dry-toned damage appraisal containing any hint of the awful devastation inflicted on the hundreds of crewmen in those gun-bays as the barrage of lance beams, mass-reactive explosive shells and white-hot plasma streams ripped through the *Macharius*'s metres-thick armoured hull.

At Semper's command, the *Macharius* locked on with its remaining starboard weapons, both ships firing simultaneous broadsides as they came abeam of each other. Combat in warp space was up-close and deadly, the range of scanners and weapon targeters so limited here that engagements took place at distances measured in hundreds rather than tens of thousands of kilometres. The area between the two ships was saturated with energy as enough firepower to level a city was unleashed across it. Void shield strikes registered as bright blossoms on surveyor screens, and both ships shuddered under the impact of on-target hits.

"Warning! Power systems failure!" a tech-priest adept signalled as alarms went off on the bridge. Semper swore, realising that they had either overloaded their dwindling energy levels or had taken reactor damage in the last broadside. Either way, his short captaincy of the *Macharius* was about to come to an ignominious end. The ship's ancient auto-systems would maintain the Geller Field's own emergency generators, but before they exhausted themselves the *Contagion* would long ago have come about to blow his defenceless ship into drifting warp debris.

Everyone aboard the *Macharius* was already dead—and Semper suddenly realised that dead men have nothing left to lose.

"Lower Geller Field to 60% of normal safety level!" he yelled. "Channel excess

power into manoeuvring systems and hold it there in reserve!”

“No!” It was the voice of Magos Castaboras, the tech-priest reacting in shock to Semper’s order. “Commissar Kyogen, stop him! Without the protection of the Geller Field we will be torn apart by the forces of the maelstrom!”

Semper looked up to see the commissar bearing down on him, sidearm already drawn, when the figure of Hito Ulanti interposed itself in front of the commissar, the flag-lieutenant calmly staring down the barrel of the bolt pistol now levelled at his face. “As second-in-command I concur with the captain’s order, commissar. Shoot us both if you must, but our deaths will only precede your own by a matter of minutes. At least this way the captain is giving us a fighting chance.”

Kyogen’s aim never wavered as he called out to the nearby tech-priest. “Magos Castaboras: is such a stratagem possible?”

“Yes, perhaps… If the enemy can be lured close enough. But the greater chances are that—”

“Thank you, magos. That is all I need to know,” said the commissar, stepping aside and lowering his pistol. “You may proceed, flag-captain.”

Semper watched the image readings on the main surveyor screen. The *Contagion* had come around and was now standing off their port bow, from where it could safely finish them off with its long range batteries.

Come on, you arrogant bastard, thought Semper. This is what you really want. This is what you’ve been fighting so hard for these last few days. Come in close and gloat on your moment of victory.

“Enemy vessel’s power systems failing. Warp field now at less than two-thirds integrity,” reported the slithering voice of one of the *Contagion*’s heretic tech-priests.

Morrau leaned forward in his chair, staring through the command deck’s main viewing port at the distant shape of the stricken Imperial warship. The servants of the Powers of Chaos had no fear of the true face of the warp. He tried to read

his enemy's intentions in the flickering patterns of the maelstrom, sensing a possible trap. But surely only a madman would risk the eternal damnation of his soul to the hungry forces of the immaterium with such a desperate gambit? The Chaos commander had witnessed the spectacle of total warp field failure several times in his centuries-long career, and it was a sight never to be forgotten: the very structure of a ship being unravelled as the daemon-things of the warp coalesced into physical form to feed on the souls of its doomed crew.

Morrau smiled at the memory and passed a fleshless hand over the activation rune on his lectern screen, looking to find the truth in the surveyor symbols displayed there.

He's not taking the bait. We must raise the stakes higher!

"Lower Geller Field level to 40%," Semper ordered, trying to keep the tremor out of his voice. There was a deep groan from all around them—the ship's hull starting to buckle inwards as the forces of the warp pressed in all around the weakened Geller Field—and many of the Adeptus Mechanicus adepts on the bridge cried out in fear, believing it to be the angry voice of the Machine God spirit inhabiting the *Macharius.* Magos Castaboras led his adepts in fevered prayer, knowing that the warp field could not maintain its integrity for more than one or two minutes at such a low energy level.

Semper stared at the image of the *Contagion* on the flickering green screen, willing it to move closer. Hendrik Morrau was a tenacious and determined opponent, yes, but Semper remembered reading of another side to this Battlefleet Gothic legend. Morrau had been a cruel and capricious martinet who had once ordered over three thousand mutineers to be fed out of an open airlock. This was a man who had enjoyed the suffering of others, even before throwing in his lot with the Emperor's enemies. How could he resist the lure of the spectacle now being offered to him?

"Enemy vessel closing!"

As the surveyor finished speaking, Semper was already issuing orders: "Engage reserve power systems and reinstate Geller Field integrity. Helm control—engage starboard manoeuvring thrusters and bring us about hard to port! Mister

Nyder—”

“Torpedoes, flag-captain?”

Semper’s savage smile of triumph matched that of his officer. “Oh yes, Mister Nyder. Torpedoes.”

“Target coming to new heading!” Hendrik Morrau didn’t need the helmsman’s warning to understand the trap he had fallen into. With sickening realisation he saw the Imperial ship’s armoured prow swing round to face the oncoming Chaos vessel. To the veteran captain, it was like staring down the barrel of a loaded boltgun. Or six loaded boltguns, as the*Macharius*’s six torpedo ports gaped open, exhaust gases streaming out of them as the missiles within fired up their launch engines. The Dictator class cruiser had used its torpedo ordnance before in the previous few days’ engagements against the *Contagion*, but every shot fired had lost itself in the currents of the maelstrom before it could reach its intended target.

These could not be lost. Not at this range.

Launched in close spread, all six found their target, hitting the *Contagion* amidships on its underside, the combined explosion all but wrenching the renegade cruiser in half. One unexploded warhead continued on and up through a dozen deck levels, detonating several seconds later inside the *Contagion*’s field generators.

Hendrik Morrau was ripped out of his chair by the impact of the first salvo of explosions. He had just enough time to feel the agony from his severed bio-link tendrils before the last torpedo destroyed the warp shields and all the daemons of hell, it seemed, rushed in to claim the soul that he had unknowingly promised to them so long ago.

“Vessel destroyed!” confirmed the surveyor officer. Leoten Semper looked at the tell-tale readings which indicated the destruction of the *Contagion* and tried to imagine the incredible scene happening right now on the other side of the*Macharius*’s sealed viewing ports—the renegade cruiser being wrenched apart by the fury of the warp as hungry things fought over the souls of its crew.

He deactivated the lectern screen and turned to see Ulanti, his second-in-command, standing expectantly before him. Semper hadn't slept in days, a fact he suddenly became acutely aware of. Suddenly he felt tired, very tired.

"Orders, flag-captain?"

"Assess battle damage and use whatever power we have left to exit the warp. We'll recharge our generators and make any necessary repairs before continuing on to Bhein Morr. You have the bridge, Mister Ulanti."

Maxim Borusa picked his way carefully through the still-burning metal and human wreckage of the gun-bay. The bay adjacent to this one had taken a direct hit in the battle, and the blast doors hadn't sealed fast enough to stop the wave of fire that came roaring along the gun deck. Maxim had acted fast, pulling two of his fellow press-gang conscripts down on top of him to act as human shields as the wave of fire rolled over them.

Crawling out from under their heat-blasted bodies, he'd thought he was the only one left alive in the entire bay. And then he found Gogol.

The crewboss was pinned beneath a collapsed gantry beam, his legs crushed. The beam had sheltered him from the worst of the firestorm that had swept through the bay, but the heat flash had left him blind. Gogol stared up at him with sightless eyes, sensing that someone else was close to him. "Who's there?" he cried. "Don't just stand there. Help me. Go fetch the ship's surgeon!"

"Wait here," Maxim told him, thickening his voice in disguise, and went off to sift in the nearby wreckage. He came back with something that suited his purposes exactly. A metre and a half of engineer's wrench used to make repairs to the gun track.

Gogol never knew what hit him.

Three swift blows followed by a final satisfying crunch of bone, and Maxim's chances of surviving life in Battlefleet Gothic had just increased immeasurably. Happy with the way things had worked out, he sat down and waited for the rescue crews to arrive.

Six days later, His Divine Majesty's Ship *Lord Solar Macharius* emerged from the warp on the edge of the Bhein Morr system, its comm-net systems instantly picking up the reassuring sounds of dozens of different Imperial coded channels of busy radio traffic. A squadron of defence monitor ships were on patrol nearby, one of them breaking off to escort the cruiser through the minefields recently sown around the warp jump beacon and on towards the battlegroup armada now assembling in-system.

"Good hunting, *Macharius,"* signalled the defence ship captain, noticing the recent battle damage scarring the hull of the Dictator cruiser.

"Good enough," replied the captain of the *Macharius.* "Good enough."

Again, and at the risk of infuriating those critics who seek pleasure in taking me to task for my many personal academic preferences and peccadilloes, I return once more to the subject of the cruiser Macharius and its commander, Leoten Semper. Those readers less well-versed in the details of the later events of the Gothic Sector War may wonder why I have involved myself to such an extent in the events surrounding one vessel—which was, to he sure, just one of hundreds such warships amongst Battlefleet Gothic—and its so far unknown captain. To those readers, I ask that they indulge me for a time yet, although the next action which I intend to examine is remarkable (and so far unmentioned and overlooked by previous chroniclers) in that it serves as prologue to the unimaginable events that were soon about to change the nature of the Gothic Sector War. Leoten Semper, serving in the front line of the conflict, could not be aware of the true meaning behind the mutiny and desertion of the crew of the scouting cruiser Bellerophon *or of the stolen prize they were taking with them over to the enemy—but others serving in Battlefleet Command could and perhaps should have seen the events surrounding the* Bellerophon *for what they truly were: the final piece of a puzzle trail that began some four years earlier, before the start of the Gothic War proper, with the devastation of the Imperial outpost guarding the Arx Gap in 139.M41. Had this and other events been recognised for what they were, the Despoiler's intentions—and the reasons behind his incursion into the Gothic sector—could have been divined earlier, saving the lives of untold billions of the Emperor's subjects and averting a terrible danger that still threatens the Imperium of Mankind to this very day.*

—Scribe Emeritus Rodrigo Konniger,

Into the Jaws of Death, Into the Mouth of Hell: Notable Actions of the Gothic Sector War, 143-149.M41

PART TWO

MATTERS OF HONOUR

All over the ship, the clamour of combat was dying away. The sounds of gunshots and the clash of steel on steel were now being replaced by cheers and screams. Cheers, as the victors hunted the last few enemy survivors through the labyrinth of the ship's decks and passageways; screams, as they found each of them in turn.

Flag-lieutenant Pava Magell walked the length of the main chancel leading to the ship's arsenal, accepting the salutes of the weary but victorious fighters and stopping to offer praise and words of comfort to the injured and dying. It was here that their enemies had made their final stand, barricading themselves inside the main arsenal hold and attempting to detonate the munitions stored there in a last desperate act of defiance—and it had been Magell himself who had led the assault to clear out this last pocket of resistance and prevent the enemy destroying the entire ship.

A new wave of cheering, louder than any of the others he could hear, rang out from along the broad passage. Magell saw an excited scrum of his men running towards him. They were tossing something ragged and bloody up into the air and catching it on the ends of their cutlasses and bayonets. Magell watched as something smaller but just as bloody was kicked along the deck towards him. It landed at his feet with a sick wet sound. He looked down in curiosity. It was lumpen and misshapen—kicked to a bloody pulp by the heavy work boots of the gunnery crew gangs—and with one eye gone, but Magell still recognised it as the head of Ship's Commissar Brandt.

"Sir?"

Magell turned. Acting Officer of the Watch Kelto was standing to attention before him. Kelto was young and inexperienced for such a veteran position, but Magell judged that the ambitious young officer had earned the post when he executed the previous holder of the rank during their initial violent take-over of the command deck. Kelto's uniform was torn and bloodstained from the fighting, but Magell noticed with approval that this keen youngblood had already ripped off the silver Imperium eagle crest and epaulettes from his stained tunic.

"All decks report victory, sir," grinned the young officer. "There'll still be a few stragglers hiding out in the remotest sections or even in our own ranks, but we'll

find them all soon enough."

"Abaddon be praised, captain, the ship is ours."

The clash of steel on steel rang through the metal cavern of the flight deck. The deck, the largest open space aboard the*Macharius,* would normally be full of noise and activity: the scream of revving engines, the shouts of officers barking out orders to sweating ground crew, the rumble of missile-laden loading bay elevators arriving from the arsenal section deep within the ship's hull, the chanting of choirs of tech-priests as they blessed the rows of attack craft suspended in their launch cradles before the start of a combat mission. But today all normal activity on the flight deck had been brought to a halt. Flight officers and ground crew mingled together around the space cleared amongst the deck's maintenance bays. Of the hundreds of crewmen crowded around or watching from the gantry walkways above, only the machine-like servitor drones had not paused from their pre-programmed duties to watch the spectacle now taking place in the centre of the deck.

Lieutenant Hito Ulanti danced back out of reach of his opponent's blade, mindful of the patches of spilled fuel and lube-fluid that covered the floor of the flight deck. Back home in the towering cities of Necromunda, duelling had been elevated to almost an art form amongst the ruling clans of the upper hives, a worthy pastime for every ambitious young blade keen to prove himself in the harsh and unforgiving world of Spire politics, where assassination and violent inter-clan rivalry were as much a part of life as the suffocating layers of aristocratic ritual and etiquette. But in the Imperial Navy things were different. Here, when one faced an opponent in close combat, it was not in the rarefied atmosphere of the duelling chamber, where well-executed moves and flourishes were greeted by a polite chorus of appreciative hisses from the assembled onlookers. In the navy, close combat came as the result of vicious and bloodily-fought boarding actions, hundreds of participants slaughtering each other within the close confines of a ship's passageways and holds, fighting with whatever weapon or heavy tool came to hand.

Ulanti hefted the sabre in his hand, its blade cutting the air in a series of precisely practised parry moves which caused his opponent to pull back from his intended counterattack. Heavier than the Necromundan duelling foil he was used

to, Ulanti's sabre was a concession to the different combat style demanded by the facts of space warfare. Hand-crafted to his own specifications, it was a weapon fit for both a Necromundan aristocrat and an officer in His Divine Majesty's Navy, and this was the first time that Ulanti had used it in combat. A weapon's first blooding was an important ritual for any warrior and the fact that it was to be conducted here at the expense of the blood of a fellow officer rather than an enemy of the Emperor was not a problem that much troubled the young nobleman.

"Hive-trash! Convict press-gang fodder!" sneered his opponent, prowling around the edge of the other side of the circle. "Why don't you come over here within reach of my blade and I'll give you a much-needed lesson in how a real fleet officer fights!"

Ulanti feinted forward, the expression of exaggerated anger on his face not matching the coolly calculated manner in which he made his attack. Spotting a pool of spilled lube-fluid on the deck in front of him, he pretended to slip, stumbling awkwardly into the path of his opponent, who quickly took the bait, moving forward to finish the duel. Ulanti closed the trap, easily side-stepping his opponent's lunge, bringing his own blade up to bear, its point punching through the heavy material of his opponent's flight suit and through into his body. Ulanti slipped the blade with practised ease through the ribcage and into his opponent's heart. He stepped back, withdrawing the blade contemptuously and allowing his opponent's body to slump to the ground, its blood pooling out to mix with the other fluids staining the floor of the flight deck.

Ulanti turned, raising his bloody sabre in salute to the stolid figure of Broton Styre, the ship's Officer of the Watch, acting here as the captain's representative supervising the proper conduct of the duel. Styre mutely nodded his assent and Ulanti turned and walked away, followed by the young junior officer whom he had selected as his second. The only sound in the entire flight bay was that of the two officers' jackboot heels echoing loudly on the metal decking, and Ulanti could feel the simmering resentment of the hundreds of crewmen around him as they stared silently at the retreating figure of the slayer of one of their own.

Behind him, acting on a tech-priest's gestured command two servitors paced forward to remove the dead squadron commander's body, their lobotomised machine-minds uncaring of the details of the human drama that had just taken

place.

“You disapprove of my duel with Squadron Commander Luccian, captain?”

“I disapprove of the loss of an able and experienced Starhawk squadron leader, lieutenant. I expect the killing of the Emperor’s loyal servants to be the task of our enemies, not my own second-in-command.”

Ulanti was standing to attention before the seated figure of his captain, Leoten Semper. It was dark in the captain’s private quarters, but Ulanti’s experienced hive-born eyes could pick out the details of the place. What he saw was a room decorated in a strict spartan style, far less luxurious than Ulanti’s own quarters. Even the bed was little more than a simple pallet of *the* kind given to the lowliest Schola Progenium cadet. Tellingly, there were none of the small but important details to suggest that the captain enjoyed any female company in his quarters. No ornamentation or frivolous pieces of decor.

Nothing to relieve the starkness of grey bulkhead walls and bare metal decking. It was permitted for officers of Battlefleet Gothic to keep concubines aboard ship; indeed, it was rumoured that Lord Admiral Ravensburg kept a harem of fifty or more in his staterooms aboard the fleet flagship, *Divine Right.* Ulanti himself had kept a particularly energetic example of fiery Stranivar womanhood with him in his quarters, until tiring of her recently and deliberately losing her in a game of dice with one of Remus Nyder’s junior ordnance officers. Ulanti couldn’t imagine Semper allowing himself to be distracted by base pleasures, and the look of Semper’s private quarters only confirmed the flag-lieutenant’s opinion of his commanding officer.

A career officer, he lives and breathes only for the Imperial Navy, Ulanti thought. Every minute wasted relaxing in his quarters is a minute not spent overseeing the running of his ship.

Ulanti’s gaze fell on the large and ornate desk before him, the only object of any real note in the entire room, its surface cluttered with star maps and report files. Ulanti recognised the captain’s characteristic High Gothic scribbled handwriting. With an effort, he looked away from the pile of sealed holo-script scrolls marked with the sigil indicating they were for the captain’s eyes only, until he noticed an

object very much out of place amongst all the other detritus of the captain's burden of leadership. It was a skull, larger than any human's, its heavy jutting jawbone crowned with two savage-looking upturned tusks. The eye sockets were small, sunk deep beneath the thick bony plate of the sloping forehead, and Ulanti saw that the top of the skull's inches-thick dome had been smashed open long ago by what must have been a blow of some considerable force.

Semper followed his second-in-command's gaze, reaching out to touch the grisly object with what seemed to Ulanti a certain amount of fond regard.

"A souvenir of the first boarding action I ever led," he said by way of explanation, picking up the skull and weighing it in his hands. "A disabled ork raider, part of a pack operating out of the fringes of the Cyclops cluster. I was terrified, but more afraid of failing in my duty than in dying gloriously in battle. At the height of the battle, I found myself face to face with this brute, one of the creatures' leader breeds. He gave me this—"

With his other hand, Semper touched the long jagged scar that cut down one side of his gaunt face and smiled grimly to himself. "As you can see, I gave him something even more memorable in return. We took the ship and I was awarded my first combat honours. It was only the Medallion Crimson, but to me then it felt as if I had won the Obscuras Honorifica itself."

Semper laid down the trophy and looked sharply at his second-in-command. "You see, Mr. Ulanti, I do still remember something of what it is to be an ambitious and hot-blooded young officer. But understand this: while this sector is still at war, there will be no more death duels amongst my officers. Both the Emperor and I would prefer if you killed the enemy instead of each other."

"I was defending my honour as an officer in His Divine Majesty's Navy," Ulanti answered stiffly. "As second-in-command of this vessel, my authority is derived directly from your own, captain. If any member of the crew does not respect that authority, then they are challenging not only my position but yours also. I did what I had to in accordance with Lord Admiral Ravensburg's own edicts on duelling to defend my honour and maintain respect for this vessel's chain of command."

Semper sat back in his chair, pausing before answering the flag-lieutenant. Like

Ulanti, the commander of Battlefleet Gothic was a highborn aristocrat, but while Lord Admiral Ravensburg came from the finest blueblood stock of Cypra Mundi's naval cadre elite, Ulanti came from one of the noble clans of one of the most notorious hive worlds in the Imperium. According to the ancient and hidebound traditions of the Imperial Navy, all hive worlders were scum, trash, a source of mass conscript labour suitable only for use as Imperial Guard cannon fodder or to fill the most lowly and menial positions amongst the vast expendable scrum of press-ganged ratings and indentured workers that made up the bulk of any navy vessel's crew. Officers originating from any of the hundreds of hive worlds within the Imperium were rare within the ranks of Battlefleet Gothic, and almost unheard of at anything approaching the senior rank now held by Hito Ulanti. His second-in-command's battle was not with his individual brother officers, Semper knew, but with the millennia-old traditions and prejudices of the Imperial Navy itself.

Semper leaned forward to regard his second-in-command, deliberately hardening his voice as he spoke. "I do not know how things are done on Necromunda, but here in the Segmentum Obscurus, here in the ranks of Battlefleet Gothic, respect from one's brother officers is something to be earned, not won as a duelling arena blood-prize. It is earned by loyalty. Loyalty to the Emperor, to the fleet, to one's own comrades. It is earned in action against the enemies of the Emperor. It is earned by leadership and sacrifice; by the often hard decisions we must make in the course of our duty to the Imperium of Mankind. Ravensburg's edicts be damned! He may be lord admiral of Battlefleet Gothic, but I am captain of this ship, and I say there will be no more duels fought aboard the *Macharius.* I have consulted with Commissar Kyogen on this matter, and he concurs with my judgement. Brawling and fighting are punishable offences amongst the lower ranks and now so shall it be amongst officers too, no matter what form it may take."

Semper leaned back again, seeing something cold and hard come into his flag-lieutenant's eyes. I've insulted him, Semper realised. On his world, any comparison between the conduct of a noble and that of the teeming billions living below him in the hive must be an insult of the gravest sort. Well, so be it. I've read him the page from the Book of Judgement, so maybe now I should offer him something from the Litanies of Contrition and Compassion.

"If it is blood and glory you seek, lieutenant, if it is a chance to prove yourself to

your brother officers, then it is fortunate indeed that you are standing before me now. A short time before I sent for you, Chief Astropath Rapavna arrived bearing an urgent astropath-sent message from Battlefleet Command at Port Maw. The message was sent for my ears only, but I would like you to hear it too. Adeptus Rapavna?”

Semper suppressed a smile as Ulanti visibly stiffened with shock at the sound of soft footsteps behind him and the green-cloaked figure of the astropath shuffled forward out of the darkness behind him. Ulanti had not known that the astropath had been in the room with them all along, Semper realised. Technically, it might be though of as poor protocol to have another present at what had essentially been a private reprimand of a senior officer, but Semper did not consider that such niceties applied in the case of Adeptus Rapavna. Astropaths were a vital part of the Imperium, found by the side of every fleet commander, every Space Marine Chapter Master, every planetary overlord. They stood in the shadows at gatherings of the mighty Council of the High Lords of Terra, waiting silently as their masters debated on issues which would affect the fates of untold billions. There were few secrets in the Imperium that had not first passed through the mind of an astropath; Semper judged that the dressing-down of one impetuous young flag officer would be of little interest to one of these eternally silent keepers of the Imperium’s deepest secrets.

The astropath took his place before the captain’s desk, nodding briefly in acknowledgement of Ulanti. The lieutenant shifted slightly, clearly uncomfortable to be in such close proximity to the psyker. The very existence of the Imperium depended on psykers such as astropaths and the mutant Navigators, but on a million inhabited worlds within its far-spread borders, the citizens of the Imperium were taught from birth to hate and fear the mutant and the psyker. The higher one rose in Imperial service, Semper noted, the more one was forced to consort with the likes of astropaths and other such officially-sanctioned abominations.

Rapavna’s already mask-like features settled into a fixed waxen image as he entered a trance state, his enhanced mental senses reaching down into his subconscious to find the psychically-transmitted message hidden there. The dark skin of his face was covered in an intricate webwork of tattoos: psychic wards favoured by many of his kind to protect themselves from warp daemons. His eyes were sewn shut—his sight long ago destroyed as a side-effect of the

agonising ritual of soul-binding with the Emperor—but two painted eyes were tattooed onto his closed eyelids, these false eyes staring blindly ahead as the astropath opened his mouth and delivered the message. The voice which emerged was not solely Rapavna's and in its eerie whispering tones Semper knew he could also hear, not only the voice of the other astropaths in the chain that had psychically relayed the message from Port Maw to the *Macharius*, but also the distant echo of the voice of the senior command officer who had originally given the message to the very first astropath in the chain.

"Imperial Standard 0274143.M41. Ship of the line *Bellerophon,* Dauntless class light cruiser assigned Battlegroup Fularis, Bhein Morr subsector, has attacked and destroyed Adeptus Mechanicus way station, Oreicha system. Assumed *Bellerophon*crew forsaken the Emperor's light and gone over to side of enemy. Believed important technical information stolen from Oreicha way station. His Divine Majesty's Ship *Lord Solar Macharius* to intercept and destroy *Bellerophon.* Mission priority highest. Ave Imperator."

Rapavna paused, a look of slight confusion on his face. Then his features shifted subtly again as he came out of the fugue state, before he bowed to Semper and glided away from the two officers. Semper glanced at Ulanti, the two of them sharing the same look of sharp anticipation. The *Macharius* had been assigned to escort duty on the Bhein Morr Run for the last few months since the onset of the Gothic Sector War. It was a vital task, they knew, keeping the supply routes open to the front line systems and protecting the desperately-needed convoys from the pirate raiders of the wolf pack fleets, but both officers yearned for a chance to engage directly with their main enemy.

"It would seem that our victory over the *Contagion* has not been forgotten after all," said Semper, unrolling a large chart across the expanse of his desk. "We have finally been given a mission worthy of our devotion to the Emperor. The recovery of the stolen technical data is a vital task, certainly—but to allow a mutinied crew to escape unpunished or one of His Divine Majesty's ships to join the ranks of the enemy would be to bring dishonour on the entire battlefleet. Make no mistake about it, the successful completion of this mission is matter of honour for all of Battlefleet Gothic."

"Of course," he added, indicating the spread-out starchart, "to bring vengeance to the enemies of the Emperor, we must first find them. Your opinion, Mister

Ulanti?”

The captain indicated the map and Ulanti leaned forward, inspecting the complex network of star system positions, interlinking warp passages, tide patterns and time-dilation estimate equations that made up any normal Imperium starchart. The ability to read such charts, to absorb and understand the multi-layered levels of information contained within them, was just one of the many skills required of a senior officer in His Divine Majesty’s Imperial Navy.

Ulanti ran his fingers across the surface of the chart, tracing out the *Bellerophon*’s most likeliest course headings. “They’re probably without any navigator capability,” he suggested, looking up to see Semper nodding in agreement. The Navis Nobilite was one of the oldest and most crucial cornerstones of the Imperium, and a ship’s navigator traditionally chose death rather than giving himself up to the Emperor’s enemies.

“That means they can only make short blind warp jumps of no more than a few light years at a time,” continued Ulanti, one finger marking out a cluster of star systems in the upper corner of the chart. “Their last reported position was in the Oreicha system, but the nearest enemy-occupied territory is here in the Killian-Ator group. That’s where they’re probably making for. But to get there they have to make six or seven separate warp jumps, avoiding Imperium-controlled systems and standard fleet patrol routes on the way.”

Ulanti looked up at his captain, who silently nodded for him to continue. “Given our current position and the renegades’ most likely course towards the enemy lines, I believe we will still be able to intercept them—” Ulanti’s finger moved across the rough surface of the chart. The finest and oldest starchart parchments were supposed to be made from human skin, but this felt like some lesser substitute; animal hide, perhaps.

“Here.” His finger stabbed down on a remote single star well off the normal warp travel routes. The accompanying chart icons identified it as a dying red dwarf star orbited by four barren and uninhabited planetoids. “Delphi. We can intercept them in the Delphi system.”

Semper leaned back in his chair, smiling. “I concur, and so did Navigator Cassander when I consulted him earlier. To your station, Mister Ulanti. We make

the ascent into the immaterium in forty minutes."

"Half speed, Mister Kelto. Keep our power emissions down and maintain full outward surveyor scanning," Pava Magell ordered. The *Bellerophon* was moving forward cautiously into the star system, its long-range surveyors probing for the tell-tale energy signatures of any other ships in the area. Delphi was a barren wilderness system, just one of the hundreds of such groups within the vast area of space encompassed within the Gothic sector, but the new captain of the *Bellerophon* was not in the habit of taking unnecessary risks. Those few short but intensely bloody hours of mutiny which had swept through the ship had taken long and careful planning by him and the small circle of other like-minded officers aboard the*Bellerophon.* The Imperium was losing the Gothic Sector War, Magell had realised, and it had been surprisingly easy to find other young officers who had come to the same conclusion and who were equally frustrated with the stultified thinking and hidebound traditions of the Imperial Navy. Anyone with true insight could see that the power of Warmaster Abaddon and his followers was in the ascendancy. The living corpse imprisoned on the Golden Throne would be powerless to stop the forces now sweeping out of the Eye of Terror. First the Gothic sector, soon the whole rotting body politic of the Imperium itself, Magell thought with a smile—and the Imperium's new masters would remember and reward those who had been first to realise in which direction the tides of fate were moving throughout the galaxy.

Magell remembered his own moment of such realisation, recalling the dank stench of the *Bellerophon*'s ship's brig and the whispering voice of the captured enemy prisoner who, out of what had then seemed a feeling of morbid curiosity, Magell had gone down to the brig to interrogate. He had made a point of personally executing the prisoner afterwards, mostly to allay the suspicions of the ever-watchful Commissar Brandt, but by then the seeds of insurrection had already been planted in the ambitious young flag-lieutenant's mind. The prisoner —one of the sorcerer-navigators of Abaddon's fleets—had cunningly seen the doubts already there and had revealed to him something of the ways and secret recognition signs used amongst the covert groups of followers of the powers of the warp, and it was on a regular stopover on an Imperium mining world that Magell had first made contact with a coven of Chaos worshippers. Again Magell smiled to himself, remembering how shockingly easy it had been to find the servants of the Ruinous Powers, and wondering what Lord Admiral Ravensburg

would say if he knew just how many Chaos covens flourished on every inhabited world in the Gothic sector and even in the furthest reaches of the holds and crew decks of many Imperial Navy vessels.

After that, Magell and his fellow conspirators had set about secretly encouraging and nurturing discontent amongst the crew; not a difficult feat to achieve, considering master of the *Bellerophon* Captain Aagen Blothe's harsh and zealous attitude to all matters relating to discipline aboard his vessel. Magell had bided his time, waiting for word from his new-found masters within the Eye of Terror. At last it had arrived, telling him what they required him to do before he would be welcomed into the ranks of the reaver fleets of Warmaster Abaddon.

Magell settled back into his captain's chair, his hand touching the control lectern in front of him and the patina of dried blood—belonging to the chair's former occupant, presumably—which still stained the rune icons there. That old fool Blothe had still been alive when Magell handed him over to the crew, and Magell idly wondered if they had been able to make good on their promise to keep their former commanding officer alive but begging for death for days to come. Magell ran his hand across the pattern of glowing rune icons, thinking of the stolen tech-priest secrets now safely stored within the memory banks of the ship's logic engines. He had done as his masters had bidden, and when the *Bellerophon* reached the safety of Chaos-controlled space he would present the information in person to Warmaster Abaddon. Of course, the majority of his crew knew nothing of the true nature of their new allies, but Magell cared little about their fate after—

"Rearward surveyors detecting an unknown vessel approaching on an intercept course: distance 840,000 kilometres." The blank emotionless voice of the servitor drone rang out in the quiet of the undermanned command deck, instantly snapping the *Bellerophon* s new captain out of his reverie.

"Officer of the Watch, confirm and identify!" barked Magell, not trusting the word of one of the machine-men slaves. Lieutenant Kelto bent over the lectern screen in front of him, the light from the rows of rune-signs scrolling across the screen casting a sickly glow over his nervous young features.

"Energy output shows it's a capital vessel. It's jamming its own vessel recognition codes, but from the reactor signature, I'd say it was an Imperial ship,

almost certainly cruiser level or better."

Despite the obvious danger, Magell allowed himself to relax somewhat. As a light scouting cruiser, the *Bellerophon* would be heavily outgunned by any of the standard Imperial cruiser types, but even with the internal damage and heavy crew casualties caused during the mutiny Magell was confident that his faster and more manoeuvrable vessel could still outrun its larger lumbering cousin. In fact, the only way that the other Imperial ship could successfully cut off their escape would be if—

"Change in the enemy vessel's energy signature!" Kelto said, panic clear in his voice. "Multiple smaller energy signatures breaking away from it. It's an attack craft carrier! It's sending bomber squadrons after us!"

Squadron Commander Milos Caparan surveyed the instrumentation panel in front of him, intoning a silent prayer of thanks as the status runes representing each of the ten Starhawk bombers under his command glowed a healthy green. Glancing out of the cockpit window, he could see his wingmen taking up position to his port and starboard, each of them tens of kilometres distant but with the bright flares of their multiple mass-reactive engines starkly marking their position against the blackness of space. To his rear the seven other Starhawks of his squadron would also be manoeuvring into attack formation, he knew, and somewhere beyond them the Starhawks of *Firedrake*, Harbinger and Mantis squadrons would be doing the same, joining up with his own squadron and forming up one large attack wing as they closed the distance on their target. Forty Starhawks.

Ave Imperator, he thought to himself as he keyed open a comm-link channel. Let the enemies of the Emperor beware.

"*Nemesis One* to *Macharius.* All systems are green. Distance to target: 200,000 kilometres, and closing."

+Understood, *Nemesis*+ came back the reply.

Caparan recognising the craggy-toned voice of Remus Nyder, the *Macharius*'s formidable master of ordnance.

+Macharius bids you good hunting+

Taking his accustomed place in the central nave of the command deck, Leoten Semper watched with his usual hawk-like intensity as the pattern of glowing icon markers on the main scanner screen displayed the Starhawk attack wave's progress towards their target.

"Squadrons within attack range of target," reported Remus Nyder, his ordnance control area of the bridge now buzzing with activity as teams of junior officers and grey-cloaked tech-priests monitored the streams of data being fed back from the Starhawks. "They're reporting incoming defensive fire from the target."

Semper looked over to where his flag-lieutenant stood. "Mister Ulanti?"

The Necromundan activated a rune on his lectern console, glancing over the information now displayed there. "They may be firing at us, sir, but they've not as yet hit anything. We're His Divine Majesty's Imperial Navy, not the groundpounder rabble of the Imperial Guard, and we don't panic at the first sign of danger. Recommend that attack wave proceeds on to close strike distance from target, and deploys missiles from there for optimum effect."

Semper nodded in agreement at his flag-lieutenant's forthright response, and gestured to the waiting master of ordnance.

"Signal all squadrons to proceed as ordered. Mister Ulanti will give the launch order at his discretion."

"Vandire's teeth!" Milos Caparan cursed, triggering his starboard thrusters and jinking the two hundred tonne attack bomber out of the path of a kilometre-wide explosive starburst which filled the view out of the cockpit's main viewing port. All around the lead Starhawk, the hard vacuum of space was filled with similar explosions and energy bursts. At this range—still almost one thousand kilometres away from the target—a direct hit was almost impossible, but each energy blast emitted a burst of widespread and high-intensity radiation lethal to both a bomber's crew and control systems, while each exploding anti-ordnance missile warhead or mass-reactive shell threw out a hail of shrapnel that could cover a volume of space tens of kilometres across.

Caparan activated one of the runes on his comm-link console, sending out an automated status request to the rest of his squadron. Elsewhere, he knew, the other squadron commanders in the attack wave would be doing likewise. The cockpit's open-channel comm-link squawked to life as the responses came flooding back.

+*Nemesis Three* to *Nemesis Leader.* Surveyor systems taken offline by that last radiation burst. Missile targeting systems also gone. Tech-Adept Eliphas is attempting to effect repairs now+

+*Nemesis Five* reporting. Heavy energy bleed from our power plant. Shrapnel hit must have severed a feed line somewhere. Unable to effect repair. We'll make it to the target, *Nemesis One*, but it'll be a slow and scary ride back to the*Macharius*+

+*Nemesis Nine.*.. heavy damage… starboard engine gone… reserve air supply …ty percent crew casualties… luck, *Nemesis One.*.. kkkkkkkkkkkkkk+

Caparan stabbed a rune on his console, switching comm-link channels. "*Nemesis Leader* to *Macharius,"* he snarled, unable to keep the anger out of his voice. "I'm losing bombers here. Request permission to launch missiles!"

+Macharius to *Nemesis*+ came back the irritatingly calm-voiced reply. +Proceed to target. Launch order will be given as and when *Macharius* deems necessary+

Caparan shared a look with his co-pilot, both men recognising the voice on the comm-link.

"It's Ulanti," nodded his co-pilot, Madik Torr, a solid and dependable veteran with more than sixty combat missions to his credit. "That hive-trash killed Luccian, and now it seems he's determined to wipe out the rest of us as well."

Both men grimly turned their attention to the task before them, trying to second-guess the gunners aboard the *Bellerophon*as they piloted the powerful gull-winged deep space bomber through the crop of starburst explosions that blossomed in the void between them and their target.

Eight hundred kilometres. A flare of blinding energy off their port wing. Caparan

checked his console readout, seeing the icon representing *Nemesis Two* stutter and fade out.

Seven hundred kilometres. A piercing scream rang out over the open comm-channel, a terrified and nameless voice gibbering out a hurried prayer commending his soul to the Emperor before being finally cut off in a scream of static followed by the telling static hiss of dead air.

Six hundred kilometres. Caparan's craft was rocked by the concussive blast of an explosion somewhere off its starboard wing. He fought to bring the bomber under control, his mind only barely registering the flashing red icons lighting up all over his instrumentation panels and the ugly klaxon alarm sounding over the craft's internal comm-net.

"Hull breach," warned the eerily calm voice of Tech-Adept Shanyin Ko, sounding barely more human than the four onboard servitor drones under his control. "Recommend you switch to flight suit emergency oxygen supplies until breach has been sealed."

Five hundred kilometres. In space combat terms, this was considered near suicidal, a point-blank range. Down in the nose cone section housing the navigator and bombardier, the whine of the payload's locked-on targeting systems rose to an insistent scream audible over the bomber's comm-net.

+Macharius to attack wing. You are granted permission to launch missiles+

Thirty-five remaining Starhawks launched half their full pay-load at once from a distance of just over four hundred and eighty kilometres. Three of them suffered missile launch failure due to damage sustained in flight, one of them transforming into an cloud of vaporised gas when its activated missiles detonated whilst still fixed in their wing mounts.

The guns aboard the *Bellerophon* suddenly fell silent, the ship's surveyor systems requiring a scanning field free of the radioactive static of explosions and energy bursts as the information they gathered was fed back to the ship's logic engines. All over the ship, non-vital technical systems slowed to a crawl or temporarily blacked out entirely while the logic engines devoted the greater part of their processing capacity to calculating speeds, trajectories and interception

points as the oncoming wave of missiles rushed towards their target at a speed of tens of kilometres a second.

As the energy levels fluctuated all through the ship, the crew could only cower in the semi-darkness and pray to whatever powers they now followed as they blindly consigned their fate to ancient and barely-understood technology from an era millennia before their own birth. With the missile cluster now only a hundred kilometres and scant seconds away, the*Bellerophon* activated its final anti-ordnance defences, the logic engines feeding targeting co-ordinates and firing solutions through to these last-ditch automated defences. A gridwork of multilaser turrets, autocannon batteries, plasma throwers and flechette launchers studded the outer hull of the *Bellerophon* and these activated now, throwing out a short-lived but concentrated curtain of firepower between the vessel and the missile wave.

Each Starhawk had launched half its full payload of ten plasma warhead missiles apiece. Of these, over thirty per cent had, even at such close range, malfunctioned or failed to acquire their target. Another twenty per cent would be destroyed by the *Bellerophon*'s anti-ordnance systems. Of the one hundred and sixty launched in the bomber wave, less than eighty would reach their target—and only a fraction of these would penetrate the ancient vessel's metres-thick armoured hull and do any damage that really mattered.

It would still be more than enough to achieve the desired effect.

"Starhawk attack wing reports target well struck," announced Master of Ordnance Nyder with more than a hint of pride in his voice. "Surveyor scans confirm this—the enemy's reactor output is fluctuating wildly and its void shield power levels are as naught. Target is crippled and drifting powerless in space. Starhawk wing requests permission to make a return sweep and expend all remaining payload."

Nyder looked expectantly at his captain. By long-standing fleet tradition, the honour of the final kill should go to his Starhawk crews, but such a decision was the captain's privilege alone. It would not be unusual for a captain to choose to finish off a crippled enemy ship with torpedoes or massed weapon fire from the ship's main batteries, a diplomatic decision which would allow a navy vessel's

bitterly competitive flight and gunnery crews to share equal honours in the victory. If Nyder was at all taken back by what his captain said next, it never showed on the veteran officer's impassive face.

"Mr. Ulanti, you have tactical command in this engagement. What is your decision?"

If Hito Ulanti was at all surprised by the captain's choice, he showed no sign of it in his immediate and unhesitant response. "Signal Starhawk squadrons to return to the *Macharius*, captain. At present Battlefleet Gothic is still seriously under-strength, and the loss of one ship to the side of the enemy hardly helps the matter. But why compound the damage, when instead we can do something to redress the balance in our favour again?"

"Explain yourself, Mister Ulanti!" Semper barked. "What exactly are you suggesting?"

Ulanti looked up at his captain, a distinct gleam of excitement evident in his eyes. "A boarding assault, captain, which I volunteer to personally lead in the first assault wave. We board the *Bellerophon*, reclaim it for the service of the Emperor and retrieve the stolen technical information!"

"Boarding action! Look lively, you scum! Find yourselves weapons and form up into boarding parties!" Bull-necked petty officers stormed up the narrow aisles of the crew decks, savagely kicking or clubbing anyone not moving fast enough for their liking. Maxim Borusa roused himself from his meagre pallet, scratching at the fresh bitemarks from the parasites that infested his bedding, and spat out a well-aimed stream of brown-stained mixture of saliva and tajii juice that narrowly missed the polished boots of his latest nemesis, Petty Officer Dobrzyn.

"On your feet, Borusa," Dobryzn grinned down at him. "Time to do your duty for the Emperor and put that magical invulnerability of yours to the test!"

Maxim sat up, force of habit causing him to rub at the scars on his wrists. It had been months since his status as the sole survivor of a direct hit that had wiped out the two hundred other convict slave ratings in the gun-bay where he had been assigned had turned him into almost a talismanic good-luck figure amongst

his fellow crewmen, but Maxim swore he could still feel those metal cuffs cutting into his flesh.

He spat again, clearing the vile aftertaste of the intoxicating tajii root juice out of his mouth. Let those prayer-babbling idiots think what they want, Maxim decided. He knew that the only luck that counted for anything was the kind you made yourself.

He stood up, reaching under his pallet to bring out his own good luck talisman, a metre and a half of solid metal engineer's wrench. Petty officers and crewbosses were issuing weapons—axes, gaffs, cutlasses—to everyone assigned to the boarding assault, but for his own personal reasons Maxim preferred to use this. He smiled to himself as he took hold of the heavy tool, remembering the satisfying crunch of bone as it stove in the skull of the last man who had underestimated Maxim Borusa.

The first rule of space combat is to always know the exact position of the enemy but Pava Magell didn't have to check any of the surveyor screens around him to check whereabouts the *Macharius* was in relation to his own stricken vessel. Looking out of the command deck viewing port, he could see the shape of the Imperial cruiser—vast and imposing at such close range—blotting out the starfield as it slid into position port side of the crippled *Bellerophon.* The batteries on that flank of the *Bellerophon* were gone, obliterated by the hail of missiles that had punctured the warship's armoured skin, but Magell could see the *Macharius*'s own gun batteries trained on his ship—just as he could see the tiered openings of the attack carrier's launch bays, ready to unleash another wave of bombers at their helpless target. Magell knew that the *Macharius*could destroy the *Bellerophon* at will, but he also knew that by moving in this close, the captain of the *Macharius* had already signalled his real intent.

"They're launching a boarding assault!" Kelto said, his voice ragged with panic and fear. "We don't stand a chance. We should signal our surrender now. The punishment for mutiny is death, I know, but with the rate of casualties the fleet is suffering, Ravensburg can't afford to throw away an entire crew. Perhaps we could—"

Magell reholstered his laspistol and stepped contemptuously over the body of his

former officer of the watch. With so many other corpses littering the decks of the *Bellerophon*, one more shouldn't make any difference. He drew his sabre and strode towards the doors of the command deck, signalling for the other remaining officers to join him. He didn't have to turn round to look out the viewing bay to know about the swarm of shuttles and assault pods now exiting the *Macharius* as they swiftly bridged the void between the two ships. Soon they would be attaching themselves to the outer hull of the*Bellerophon*, breaching airlocks and entry ports and unleashing their battle-hardened occupants into the interior of the ship.

Magell knew that his short-lived command of the *Bellerophon* was over. He had gambled, and he had lost everything. Now all he had left was his honour.

For the second time within a few scant days, the decks and sections of the *Bellerophon* rang with the sounds of combat as its crew battled with the boarding parties from the *Macharius* for control of the stricken ship.

Hito Ulanti sidestepped the chainsword blade which buzzed through the air in front of him. A dangerous weapon, he knew, but a clumsy one as well, with many of those who wielded it depending too much on the weapon's fearsome destructive capabilities rather than their own fighting prowess. Ulanti knocked the blade aside on its return swing with a casual flick of his weapon and then thrust the point of his sabre into his opponent's throat. The enemy—some kind of ship's engineer, judging by the armoured suit he wore—collapsed to the ground, gurgling. Ulanti moved swiftly on, grinding one booted heel into the face of his still-twitching opponent for good measure.

In front of him, he saw another wave of the *Bellerophon*'s defenders charging down the corridor towards him. He drew his laspistol, sending volley after volley of searing laser fire into their packed ranks, only stopping when the weapon's power-pack critically overheated, scorching the flesh of his hand. Ulanti threw the pistol away with a curse, taking up his sabre again and urging forward the remains of his boarding party who filled the corridor behind him. A stray shotgun blast took off the head of the man next to him, adding another corpse to the carpet of bodies that lined the passageway. A hand scrabbled at his legs from down amongst this litter of dead and wounded and Ulanti stabbed his sabre down in a short killing thrust, not even glancing down to check whether his

victim had been from the crew of the *Macharius* or the*Bellerophon.* Blood flowed down the young officer's face from a head wound he didn't remember receiving and the creeping numbness in his hand told him that the burn wounds there would require treatment after the battle.

Ulanti had heard of the tactics perfected by the warriors of the Adeptus Astartes for such boarding actions: small well-armed squads of Space Marines penetrating deep into the interior of enemy craft via teleport assault or manned boarding torpedoes and waging a rigorously-coordinated battle plan with each squad seizing control of a specific vital part of the ship.

This was nothing like that; this was simple brute slaughter, a bloody scrum in which the only victors would be the side which succeeded in putting all of the enemy to the sword. There were other senior command officers from the *Macharius*aboard the *Bellerophon*—Ulanti knew that Commissar Kyogen had taken command of the second assault wave from the*Macharius*—but he had no idea where they were or how they were faring in their own separate battles.

The blast doors at the end of the corridor rumbled open, disgorging another wave of the *Bellerophon*'s crew. Defenders and boarding party attackers met in a savage clash of arms. Ulanti rushed forward, catching a glimpse of a familiar crimson braiding on a uniform worn by the figure at the head of the enemy counter-attack. It was the uniform of a flag-lieutenant, identical to Ulanti's own, and so far it was the most senior rank Ulanti had seen amongst the defending crew. Ulanti lashed out with his sabre with a newfound vigour, cutting a path through the press of bodies towards his enemy counterpart from the *Bellerophon.*

Maxim Borusa spat into his opponent's face, the rebel screaming as the stinging tajii juice came into contact with his eyes. He followed up with a brutal headbutt, breaking the bones of the rebel's face. The crewman reeled back, giving the Stranivar underhiver space in which to use to use his wrench. One blow and the rebel's head opened up in a red gush.

"*Macharius!* To me, *Macharius* crew!"

Maxim looked round to see Petty Officer Dobrzyn struggling against a trio of attackers. Maxim didn't hesitate, shoulder-charging into the back of the nearest

one and smashing him against a thick iron bulkhead. He stumbled, his feet becoming entangled amongst the limbs of the downed man and he was a split-second late in blocking the attack from the next enemy in line. He hissed in pain as the rebel's sword blade sliced into the muscles of his upper arm, retaliating with a short punch into the rebel crewman's neck.

The man staggered back, trying vainly to staunch the blood fountaining from the hole that Maxim had opened in his jugular with the narrow-bladed stiletto secreted in his fist. The third rebel came at him with a hooked boarding gaff. Maxim took it off him with dismissive ease, snapped the man's arm and gave him his weapon back by carving it through his stomach.

Maxim bent over the prone form of Dobrzyn, checking him for signs of life and finding a weak pulse. Good, he thought, hoisting up the petty officer and carrying him towards the nearest knot *of Macharius* crewmen.

"Help me!" he yelled at the top of his voice. "Help Petty Officer Dobrzyn!"

Hands reached out to take the weight of the injured petty officer. In the confusion Maxim deftly withdrew the stiletto blade from between Dobrzyn's ribs and slipped away before anyone noticed that the injured man was already dead.

Looking down, he noticed that Dobrzyn's dark blue rank sash had come away in his hand. Distractedly he tied it round his arm wound as a makeshift field dressing, then headed back into the thick of battle.

Feint. Block. Cut. Parry. Riposte. His opponent's fencing style had elements to it that were dangerously unfamiliar to Magell, but in its basics it differed little from the thousands of other styles of swordsmanship as practised on countless violent warrior culture worlds throughout the Imperium. He and his opposite number from the *Macharius* were well-matched. The enemy flag-lieutenant was probably the better swordsman, Magell realised, but he still had an advantage over the Imperial officer. He had nothing left to lose, and a man who has already accepted the fact of his own imminent death was a dangerous opponent indeed.

All around them, men were fighting and dying, and it was impossible to tell which way the battle was going, but Magell knew that victory would eventually

go to the *Macharius*. The *Bellerophon*'s standard crew complement was several thousand less than the larger Dictator class vessel, and Magell knew that over a third of the rebel cruiser's crew had died in the mutiny, and probably a thousand or so more in the bomber attack. They were doomed, but he was determined to acquit himself well before the end.

One of his own crew rushed forward, wild-eyed with blood-lust as he bore down on the Imperial officer. Magell ran him through without a moment's thought, not willing to be robbed of the honour of the enemy flag officer's death. But the delicate balance of the duel had been broken. His opponent was the first to take advantage of the moment with a lightning-fast thrust. Magell twisted his body, deliberately not parrying the blow, and he felt hot bright pain as the blade slid deep into his side.

Magell fought down the wave of pain. He knew that, with his blade impaled inside Magell's own body, the enemy officer was effectively disarmed. Magell brought his own sabre down on the shoulder of the Imperial officer's sword arm, the heavy blade cleaving into flesh and bone. The Imperial officer cried out, falling back and leaving himself defenceless against Magell's follow-up killing blow.

Magell swayed on his feet, the sabre still piercing his side, and raised his arm to strike. A grip as implacable as the massive docking clamps used to hold a vessel in orbital dry dock descended on his wrist, crushing the bones and causing his sword to slip from suddenly nerveless fingers. He felt something sharp and cold punch him in the lower back, the coldness penetrating deep into his body. Once, twice, three times, in rapid succession. His legs gave way beneath him but Magell remaining standing, dangling like a puppet in the grip of that vice-like pressure on the wrist of his still upraised-arm. Then the pressure went away and Magell collapsed to the deck, his vision dimming.

Through a haze of pain and shock, Hito Ulanti looked up to see the stoop-shouldered giant standing over him. The giant leaned down over him, rough hands lifting him up. Ulanti's eyes saw but didn't register the hive world gang ritual scar patterns and prison world tattoos and brands which covered the giant's arms and face.

“Maxim Borusa, sir,” growled a voice in an accent that could only have come from the depths of the Stranivar underhive. “Crew of the Mach, sir. You’re in safe hands now.”

“I… I owe you my thanks,” Ulanti mumbled, his eyes fixing on the bloodstained rank sash. “I owe you… my thanks, Petty Officer Borusa.”

Maxim Borusa grinned. He didn’t recognise the officer whose life he’d just saved, but he knew what all that fancy braiding and uniform ornamentation meant. Command deck brass, and his ticket away from the miseries of life on the lower decks.

“If you say so, sir. If you say so.”

+*Bellerophon to Macharius.* Prize crew aboard and in position. We have restored engine and warp jump capability. Ready to move out on your mark+

The squadron of Chaos scout ships, three Idolator class raiders, drifted inert on the fringes of the Delphi system, listening to the intercepted radio chatter between the Imperial vessel and its captured prize. They had arrived too late to rendezvous with the renegade Imperial ship and escort it safely back to enemy space, and they could only watch from hiding as the Warmaster’s prize was snatched away from them. The commander of the raider squadron knew that his ships would have stood no chance against an Imperial cruiser and its accursed bomber squadrons, but he doubted that the Warmaster would see it in such terms. Standing on his vessel’s command deck, the dark shrouded captain watched as the target icons of the two Imperial cruisers moved away towards the outer edge of surveyor range. He turned towards the cultist astropath standing nearby.

“Send the signal to the Warmaster. Inform him that the technical information the rebel vessel was bringing to us remains in the hands of our enemies.”

The daemon-thing living inside the flesh of the possessed Chaos cultist hissed in displeasure, its body warping into twisted new shapes as an almost physical foretaste of the Warmaster’s own anger at the news he would soon be receiving.

All over the bridge, the command crew busied themselves with their appointed tasks, none of them daring to look their doomed captain in the eye.

“My thanks, Magos Castaboras. Please continue with your work.” The haughty tech-priest nodded in acknowledgement, his expression hidden behind the mask he wore, and turned to join his entourage of servants waiting outside, leaving Semper alone in his quarters.

Captain Semper leaned forward on his desk, one hand rubbing the jagged ork-blade scar that marked one side of his face. It was force of habit, he knew, one that he was particularly prone to whenever he was troubled. He cleared his mind, thinking through what he had just learned.

The stolen technical information had been removed from the *Bellerophon*’s logic engines and transferred to the jealous guard of the Adeptus Mechanicus tech-priests aboard the *Macharius.* An astropath message had been sent acknowledging the safe retrieval of the data, together with his recommendation that his injured flag-lieutenant receive an official commendation for his actions in the battle, but Battlefleet Command were anxious to know the exact nature of the stolen information. As the vessel’s most senior tech-priest, Castaboras had already completed a partial analysis of the coded data and had presented his findings to Semper. The two men were the only people aboard the starship who knew what the stolen data files contained, but what they had learned posed more questions than it answered.

The files were a technical overview of the mighty Blackstone Fortresses, the six massive and ancient alien constructs which formed the backbone of *the* Imperial Navy’s strength in the Gothic sector. Each Blackstone was base to its own battlegroup fleet—and each possessed more than enough firepower of its own to fend off an attack by any of the Warmaster’s current reaver fleets. The information in the files was highly sensitive, yes, but never in *the* history of Battlefleet Gothic had a Blackstone Fortress fallen to the enemy and Semper found it hard to believe that the Warmaster would consider wasting his strength in such a foolhardy move.

“Emperor’s oath!” he swore to himself as he studied the marked-out positions of the Blackstone systems on the star-chart in front of him. What did it all mean?

Somewhere within the Eye of Terror, where space and warp space merged together as one, Warmaster Abaddon, Despoiler of Worlds and Dread Vessel of the Legacy of Horus, stared out at the eternally shifting patterns of the maelstrom. What he saw there, what mysteries and secrets of the powers of the warp revealed to him, only the Warmaster alone knew.

He turned back to the scene before him in the audience chamber, dismissing the mutated messenger thing with a curt gesture. It scuttled away gratefully, all too aware that a subtly different gesture would have caused any of the dozen terrifying figures in Terminator armour standing around the room to cut it down in an instant. The sword in the scabbard at the Warmaster's side made a low keening sound, sensing its master's dark mood. Abaddon laid a hand on its hilt, murmuring a few words of blasphemous reassurance to quiet the daemon-spirit bound into the weapon.

In truth, the Warmaster's anger would soon be assuaged. Orders had been despatched, and the commanders and crews of the escort squadron would soon know the price of their failure. Abaddon knew that the loss of the Blackstone data was only of temporary significance and would not affect his carefully-laid plans.

He turned back to the viewing bay, staring out the wide daemon-mouthed portal in the flank of his temporary flagship and into the maelstrom beyond. He could see shapes moving out there in the warp, innumerable small vessels and construction platforms. Through the moving warp patterns he could see the spires and pinnacles of the object of their labours, a vast and threatening shape hanging motionless amidst the tides of warp space. It was almost complete now, he knew. His new flagship. His new terror weapon. His "planet killer", thought the Warmaster, enjoying the crudeness of the name—so simple, but so apt—that many of his lesser followers had already bestowed upon the device.

His thoughts returned to the six secret prizes that were the only objectives in the entire war that truly mattered. Soon this new weapon, this planet killer, would be unleashed on his enemies. The followers of that withered corpse on the Golden Throne would tremble in terror at the destruction it would cause.

Let them be afraid, gloated the Despoiler. Let them think this will be the worst they have to face. When the time is right, when all the pieces are in place, they

will soon know there is far worse to come.

Planet killer! Even now, these many long years after the resolution of the Gothic Sector Wars, when the details of even that most notable of struggles has passed from living memory and become perhaps, in the minds of many, just another terrible and glorious chapter of Imperium history, the name still evokes a shudder of fear and horror whenever it is uttered. I have heard tales that on worlds far outside the borders of the Segmentum Obscuras, worlds where the events of the Gothic Sector War have little or no impact or meaning, the very mention of that name fills the inhabitants with an almost superstitious dread. I once met a wise and worthy member of the Missionarus Galaxia who told me of his travels and adventures amongst some of the many savage and barbarous worlds within the vast and scattered Diaspora of this mighty Imperium of Mankind, and of how the primitive inhabitants of one such world still kept careful vigil of the star-filled night skies above their tribal dwellings, praying to the All-Father (which, my learned brother-adept told me was their term for the Divine Emperor, blessed forever be his holy name) to protect them from a particular terror which they called "the Sword of Abaddon". How these backwards peoples, unaware of even the most elementary truths concerning the Imperium and their insignificant place within it, came to know of such things is a puzzle which we can only conjecture at, but my friend assured me that he had little doubt that it was the Despoiler's terrible weapon to which they were referring.

In coming to this, one of the darkest chapters of the history of the Gothic Sector Wars, when the true extent of the destructive power of the Despoiler's terrible new secret weapon first became apparent to the beleaguered forces of Battlefleet Gothic, I am reminded of the missionary-brother's story, and in particular of a fragment he recalled from one of the myth-cycles that the inhabitants of that feral world had constructed around this cosmic terror. Their fear of it is evident, and I find the following couplet strangely evocative when considering the similar dreadful fear that must have filled the hearts and minds of untold billions of the Emperor's subjects at that time as the spectre of the Planet Killer stalked the worlds of the Gothic sector.

"I am become Death, the Destroyer of Worlds!"

—Scribe Emeritus Rodrigo Konniger,

Into the Jaws of Death, Into the Mouth of Hell: Notable Actions of the Gothic Sector War, 143-149.M41

PART THREE

OPENING SALVOES

ONE

Mesmerised, the Despoiler watched as the planet below entered its final death throes.

Its oceans had boiled off into space hours ago, laying bare the broken and dried expanses of once hidden sea-beds. Everywhere bright lines of fire criss-crossed the planet's surface: rivers, lakes, entire oceans of molten magma flowing up through gaping, bleeding rents in the planetary crust as the planet itself began to break apart. The whole southern hemisphere was ablaze, covered in magma as the planet's molten heart bled out of the continent-sized open wound that the Despoiler's Planet Killer weapon had burned into it. Giant earthquakes shook the planet from pole to pole, forming and then reforming its burning topography into an ever-changing series of different, fiery visions of hell. The planet's biosphere was gone—its oxygen-rich atmosphere had ignited at the first firing of the Planet Killer's awesome weapons systems—and Abaddon assumed that all life on the world was now extinct. Perhaps a few had survived the initial firestorms that had scoured clean the surface, hiding in shelters deep below the ground, but nothing could have survived the resultant seismic catastrophe as the Planet Killer's coruscating energy beams tore apart the planetary crust and ripped deep into the underlying rock strata, finally cutting through into the planet's molten core.

Abaddon smiled, remembering other such moments of triumph, other such spectacles of destruction. He remembered standing by the side of Horus on the bridge of the Warmaster's battle barge, watching as wave after fiery wave of bioweapon missiles were unleashed at the surface of the world below them. Twelve billion people died in moments during the Scouring of Istvaan III, and the echoes of their mental death-screams had drowned out even the constant warp pulse of the astronomican, but it was only a prelude to the devastation to come.

"Let the galaxy burn," had ordered the Warmaster, and Abaddon and the other commanders of the Space Marine legions who flocked to the Warmaster's cause had done as commanded. Abaddon remembered worlds in flames, planetary systems choked with the drifting wreckage left in the wake of cataclysmic space battles, battle fronts thousands of miles long as Space Marines and the towering

war machines of the Collegia Titanica clashed with their one-time brethren on a thousand different worlds, under the light of a thousand different suns. He remembered the howl of triumph from a million Chaos-altered throats as he, Abaddon, First Chosen of the Warmaster, led the sweeping charge over the crumbled ruins of the outer walls of the impostor Emperor's refuge on Terra and into the sanctum of the Inner Palace itself.

A tremor ran through the metre-thick ceramite decking beneath Abaddon's feet, reverberating with a dull boom throughout the armoured hull of the massive vessel and interrupting the Despoiler's reverie.

"Warmaster," bleated a hunchbacked heretic tech-priest thing, shuffling forward to bow before the Despoiler. "The planet's core is beginning to break up, causing unpredictable and powerful fluctuations in its magnetic field." It paused, twin worm-tongues nervously flicking out to lick at canker-eaten lips. "Perhaps it would be wiser to order the vessel back to a point beyond the area of danger."

The Despoiler hissed in irritation, his thoughts disturbed by the intrusion of the minion-thing now cowering at his feet.

Sensing its master's mood, his sword shivered in its scabbard, eager to be unleashed and fed. Abaddon laid a reassuring hand on the skull-carved pommel of the sheathed weapon, soothing the mood of the daemon-thing bound into the warp-forged metal of the blade. Also sensitive to their master's mood, one of the hulking, armoured figures of Abaddon's Terminator bodyguard stepped forward, crackling lightning claws sliding out with a low, buzzing sound from its armoured fists as it prepared to remove the source of its master's irritation.

Another tremor ran through the deck, underlining the tech-priest's words, and through the viewing port Abaddon saw a gout of fiery magma hundreds of miles long spurting up from the burning surface and exploding high in orbit above the dying world.

At a curt gesture from Abaddon, the bodyguard stepped back to rejoin the circle of silent warriors standing round the edge of the chamber. Whimpering in terror, the tech-priest thing scampered gratefully away back into the safe anonymity of the surrounding shadows.

Turning his back on the viewing port behind him, Abaddon strode into the centre of the chamber, his bodyguard effortlessly moving to reform in a protective circle around him. Tech-priests, acolyte attendants and mewling Chaos spawn abominations scuttled out of the crushing path of the armoured giants.

At another gesture from the Despoiler, the central section of the floor of the viewing chamber began to descend down through the lower decks of the vessel. Abaddon's unspoken command was already spreading through the length of the massive Planet Killer vessel, and as the open elevator platform rumbled downwards, those upon it could see the frenzied activity as the ship's crew hastened to act on those orders. Beyond, Abaddon knew, the crews of the ships making up his Planet Killer's escort fleet would be doing likewise, their relieved captains no doubt offering up quiet prayers of thanks to the powers of the warp as they manoeuvred to move their vessels away from the violent and unpredictable death throes of the doomed planet.

It was forbidden on pain of death for any of the vessel's thousands of slave workers to look upon the face of the Despoiler, and, as the platform descended through the main crew decks, snarling overseers rushed to assure immediate obedience amongst the work-crews of prisoners under their command. Already recognising the tell-tale sound of the descending elevator, many of the slaves cowered in terror, gaze fixed at their manacled feet and their endless slave work momentarily abandoned, as the platform and the dread figure standing upon it moved past them. Others continued working, raising faces in silent question at the sound of the platform's passing, showing dark empty holes where eyes should be. Assigned to tasks where eyes were deemed unnecessary, these poor wretches had had their sight brutally taken from them by the hands of their overseers.

One chain-gang member, his still intact Imperial Navy officer's uniform showing him to have been only recently captured and enslaved into the Warmaster's service, either ignored or did not understand his overseer's barked warnings. Risking a glance towards the platform as it rumbled past, he was quickly smashed to the ground by the figure of a slavemaster wearing the dripping sigil-daubed power armour of a World Eaters Chaos Marine. Snarling in rage, the World Eater brought its chain-axe up and in one swift blow summarily decapitated the screaming slave. With solemn ceremony, it reached down to pick up the severed head, holding it up in salute to the passing figure of the Despoiler,

the slave’s dead eyes now permitted to gaze upon the sight that had been forbidden to them in life.

Thus did Abaddon the Despoiler, Warmaster of the Legions of Horus, commander of the so-called “traitor legions” as the servants of the false Emperor called them, pass through the midst of his followers. Not caring whether they lived or died, not caring whether they served him through devotion, just as long as they served him first through fear.

The platform descended through the roof of the final deck, entering a large dome-like chamber, its floor and walls hidden in darkness. With a grinding clank the platform came to rest as the centrepiece of a larger platform that hung suspended on thick chains in the centre of the darkness. Abaddon stepped off, a phalanx of waiting tech-priests greeting him with deep bows and impassioned genuflections.

“Show me,” said the Despoiler, in a voice as cold and harshly unforgiving as the vacuum of space.

One of the tech-priests ran fingers centuries ago transformed into writhing leech-mouthed tendrils over the crystal controls of a low console column. There was a dull roar of released power from somewhere within the walls of the chamber and suddenly the chamber itself was gone, the darkness around them filled with a brilliant slowly-revolving patina of stars, planets, constellations, supernova dust clouds, meteor fields and a myriad of other celestial phenomena.

After long hours spent alone in this chamber brooding on the shifting star patterns, Abaddon knew this hologram-projected scene well enough by now. It was the Gothic sector, perfect in every detail, reproduced not merely in three dimensions but also in the fourth, with the arcane logic-engine programs that sustained the projection able to take into account the unpredictable time-dilation effects of the patterns of warp space. Certainly pre-Imperium, and probably non-human—Abaddon neither knew nor cared—the entire chamber had been looted from a drifting space hulk and reinstalled into the structure of his Planet Killer command vessel.

Abaddon gazed out into the depths of the projection, noting the latest received

information on the status and positions of both his own warfleets and those of the enemy. Port Maw was a blaze of blue-marked Imperium-controlled worlds and fleet markers, although the Warmaster noted with satisfaction that the clustered ring of red markers surrounding it showed that the home base of Battlefleet Gothic was still under intense and crushing blockade.

Constellations of red and blue warfleet markers faced off against each other throughout the Gothic sector, giving little hint of the devastation each such confrontation represented as the rival warfleets laid waste to each other in bitterly-fought battles that would decide the fate of so many strategically vital planetary systems. Abaddon's gaze found and traced the emerald route patterns of enemy transport convoys making the dangerous runs between the supply worlds and the front-line battle systems. The markers of the elite Chaos hunter-killer vessels which shadowed them through the warp appeared as burning crimson points of light, while the ghostly indigo markers of the wolf pack pirate fleets allied to the Despoiler's cause lay in wait at points all along the convoys' routes.

Elsewhere, Abaddon noted with displeasure the riot of blue markers spilling out of the Orar subsector, pushing back the tide of red in that portion of the map. Bhein Morr also stood out as a bright and growing point of enemy resistance, while most of the Cyclops cluster appeared as a haze of dark shadow standing out in stark contrast against the rest of the projection's fine detail. A lone marker denoted that part of the Gothic sector to be ork-infested, and so far the unexpectedly high levels of savage resistance shown by the creatures to Imperium and Chaos forces alike had thwarted the Despoiler's attempts to even properly map the region.

And then there were the six glowing gold markers spread more or less evenly throughout the Gothic sector. Abaddon's eager gaze returned to these six points again and again, repeating their names inside his mind like a guilty secret, like a hidden mantra, the meaning of which only he could fully understand.

Fularis.

Anvil 206.

Fier.

Rebo.

Schindlegeist.

Brigia.

“We await your orders, Warmaster. What is our next target? We have prepared a list of the nearest strategically important worlds still under enemy control—”

Abaddon’s urgent hiss of displeasure instantly silenced the upstart, who quickly retreated back into the milling ranks of his fellow acolyte officers. The glowing weapon sensor beams of the Despoiler’s bodyguards tracked him as he went, marking him out for later punishment.

Fools, thought Abaddon, closing his eyes and clearing his mind of all distractions. This vessel is a powerful weapon, yes, but fear is the greatest weapon at our command. With this vessel we shall sow fear and confusion without measure amongst the enemy, for with it we shall strike at random and without seeming purpose. They shall not know where the next blow will fall, and in their fear and confusion they will not see the greater hidden purpose behind all that we have done. Let there be no lists, no predictable strategic choices. Let only the random whims of the powers of the warp guide us in our actions.

Abaddon opened his eyes, gazing out at the shifting star patterns as they slowly revolved around him. He raised his arm, pointing with one cruel metal talon into a bright mass of stars. At the gesture, the projection slowed and finally stopped, one star amongst the constellation suddenly glowing brighter than its companions. The tech-priest hurriedly made adjustments to the crystalline controls, and the projection’s focus narrowed and zoomed in on a single star. Suddenly, the image of a planetary system filled the void of the viewing chamber, the focus shifting further to find and close in on one planet in particular orbiting within the system’s primary biosphere zone. Abaddon’s lips curled back in a cruel smile of expectation as he saw blue oceans, lush greenery and the obvious signs of a breathable oxygen atmosphere. Half the world was in shadow as the planet’s rotation carried one hemisphere away from the sun’s light and into the hours of night, and Abaddon could see the tell-tale twinkle of lights—each one an entire city—scattered across the face of the darkened globe. Looking closer, he saw patterns of smaller lights—orbiting space docks and

weapon platforms—drifting in the void between the world and its one barren satellite moon.

An inhabited world. An Imperial world. And one far from both the nearest warzone and the Planet Killer's most recent choice of target. Once again, the guidance of the powers of the warp had served him well.

Tech-priests bowed in silent acquiescence, realising their master's unspoken wishes. Already the name and location of their next destination were being relayed to rest of the fleet. The inhabitants of the now-doomed world could not possibly realise or understand it yet, but the hour of their appointed execution had just been set.

Abaddon watched eagerly as the tech-priests returned the projection to its original sector-wide settings. To his Chaos-altered eyes, those six small points of gold light stood out like blazing supernovas amongst the other beacons and markers of the Gothic sector. *Fularis. Anvil 206. Fier. Rebo. Schindlegeist. Brigia.* Again he repeated their names to himself, a silent promise to a future only he could yet see.

Let the galaxy burn, the Warmaster Horus had said, and now at last, after ten thousand years, Abaddon the Despoiler would soon have the means to fulfil his master's command.

TWO

“Clear!”

The shouts echoed up the streets and alleyways, accompanied by the sounds of splintering plasti-wood as heavy booted feet kicked down doors and smashed through makeshift barricades. The wretches that inhabited these warrens cowered in fear as the intimidating, armoured figures of the Adeptus Arbites troopers forced their way into their homes. Curses and complaints were met with bone-crushing blows from shotgun butts or fists encased in heavy, armoured gauntlets, while centre points of any stronger shows of resistance were pacified with choke gas grenades hurled through doorways and windows.

Marshal Primus Jamahl Byzantane watched as another group of choking, coughing figures emerged from their gas-filled den, to be met by an impassive line of rebreather-wearing Arbites troopers armed with crackling power mauls and suppression shields. The survivors would be herded into a manacled procession for transportation back to the Arbitrators’ local precinct fortress. What happened to them there was of no immediate concern to Byzantane. Each of the fortress’s cavern-like detention levels was crowded with thousands of heretics, criminals, malcontents and troublemakers taken from the regular sweeps of the crime-infested rat warrens of this world, and a suspect could spend the rest of his life in such captivity, living and dying amongst the brutal convict gangs that invariably formed under such conditions, before his case was ever called before the court of judgement. It was of no consequence that the great wheels of Imperial justice moved so slowly, just as the lives of those crushed beneath them were also of little consequence in the grand scheme of things. All that mattered, the senior Arbitrator knew, was that in the end justice was seen to be done.

He raised a hand to his face, running his fingers over the patterns of tribal scarring that marked the dark skin of his cheeks, feeling the sheen of sweat that covered his face. He reached up with both hands, removing his visored helmet and shaking free the beaded locks of his sweat-matted hair. The members of the Adeptus Arbites must always appear to the Emperor’s subjects as the stern and faceless guardians of the Emperor’s Law, the Articles of Justice commanded, but

it was the middle of the day during this world's hot, dry season, and Byzantane had no wish for the Emperor's subjects to see their world's senior law-keeper collapse from heat exhaustion.

"Another grand victory for the rule of the Emperor's Law," grunted his deputy, Korte, beside him, handing his commander a water flask as he watched the troops under his supervision brutally and mercilessly subdue the prisoners. Byzantane said nothing—if any other man under his command had voiced such an opinion, he would not have hesitated to have had him disciplined at once. Korte was a fine Arbiter and a loyal servant of the Emperor, and should have attained the rank of marshal primus himself by now, but sometimes Byzantane was glad that the big hiveworlder's habit of speaking his mind too freely ensured that he could always count on having such an able and dependable second-in-command at his side.

"Have faith, Marshal Secundus Korte," said Byzantane, in tones of mock reassurance. "Remember that it is the duty of the mighty Adeptus Astartes Chapters and the glorious Imperial Guard to wage the Emperor's wars and the duty of the fearless Imperial Navy to guard the Emperor's spaceways, but it is to his loyal servants the Adeptus Arbites that His Divine Majesty in His infinite wisdom entrusts the most sacred duty of all—"

"Keeping in check the lawless heretic rabble that passes itself off as the Emperor's worthy subjects," smiled Korte, completing the familiar old precinct-house joke.

It was a welcome moment of levity in what had so far been a long and arduous operation. All day the Arbitrator squads had been methodically searching through the maze of beggar district hovels and workhouses that festered in the shadow of the rock of the regent's palace. The planet, Belatis, and its capital city, Madina, were far from the battle-lines, but even here the effects of the cataclysmic war raging throughout the rest of the Gothic sector were keenly felt. Like the rest of the rear echelon Imperium worlds, Belatis had been bled dry to provide manpower and materials for the war, and Byzantane knew that many of those captured in the round-up today would end up as press-gang recruits in the warships of Battlefleet Gothic or fighting in the new penal regiment detachments that the Adeptus Munitorium was forming to replace the horrific losses amongst its Imperial Guard armies. He knew also that there was no chance that any of

those arrested today would ever see their homeworld again.

From the command Rhino transport nearby came crackling bursts of vox-caster traffic as the other Arbiter squads deployed throughout the area reported in their progress so far. It was wearying, thankless work, Byzantane knew, conducting a street-by-street, building-by-building search of this worst of Old Madina's many crumbling and crime-infested hab-districts, where every kicked-in doorway or uncovered hide-hole could reveal Emperor-only knew what kind of threat or trap. They had swooped down on the area in force, columns of Arbiter vehicles rumbling out of their precinct-fortress to surround and seal off the beggar quarter in the hours before dawn. It was a show of Imperial strength of the kind that Belatis had not seen in generations: almost the world's entire Arbites force mobilised to throw a ring of steel around a whole section of the planet's capital. It was a swift and brutal reminder of the presence of the Imperium here on Belatis; not just for those caught like rats in a trap within the Arbites circle, but also for a select few outside it also.

Byzantane glanced up at the sheer face of the towering rock escarpment that hung over the rest of the city, wondering just how many pairs of eyes were now staring down at him and his men from behind the latticed windows and terraces of the palace citadel built atop it. If Byzantane had wanted to stage a show of Imperial strength, he could hardly have picked a better place than here, right under the noses of the local planetary overlords.

As if on cue, the Arbitrator manning the command Rhino's vox-caster equipment signalled to him.

"For you, commander. First Security Minister Kale."

Byzantane nodded reluctantly and took the offered vox-cast handset, sharing a look with Korte. For his part, Korte noisily cleared his throat and spat its contents onto the ground at the mention of name the governor-regent's security advisor.

"Emperor's greetings, Minister Kale," said Byzantane, barely attempting to keep the disdain out of his voice. "My men and I are busy administering the rule of the Emperor's law, so you'll understand that I have little time for interruptions."

“Emperor’s greetings to you too, marshal.” The voice on the other end of the vox-cast was smooth and unperturbed, and Byzantane could imagine the *eminence grise* figure of First Security Minister Jarra Kale sitting in his high-vaulted office in the palace, possibly watching the image of Byzantane on the vista-plate on the desk in front of him as it was beamed to him from any of the so-far undetected spy drones that Kale had undoubtedly deployed to monitor the Arbitrators’ search.

“I have just spoken with his majesty the governor-regent, and he too shares my concern regarding your decision to go ahead with this operation without informing this office of your plans.”

“I answer to the Divine Emperor, Minister Kale,” said the Arbites marshal, “not to the governor-regent of this world or his security minister. However, in this instance I did not see it as necessary to inform you of my decision. You are aware of the recent increase in the Munitorium’s demands for manpower for the valiant forces of Battlefleet Gothic. As senior Imperium official on this world, it falls to me to decide how these demands are best met. A mass press-ganging of the criminal rabble of the Rook district would seem to be in the interests of both Gothic Sector command and the Emperor’s loyal and law-abiding subjects here on Belatis.”

Yes, and if your security force of local inbreds had done its job properly, Byzantane added with his own unspoken thoughts, then criminal refuge ghettoes such as this would not have been allowed to fester unchecked right here in the heart of your capital.

A pause, and then the first minister’s voice sounded over the vox-link, its tone unchanged by the Arbitrator’s criticisms, either those spoken aloud or merely implied.

“None have a greater wish to serve the Emperor or his appointed servants more than I or the governor-regent, Marshal Byzantane. No, our only concern is that we were not informed of the press-gang operation early enough to allow our own security troops to also take part in it, should you require them.”

Emperor knows I wouldn’t want to call your planetary security force away from their normal duties of racketeering, collecting bribes and intimidating the

governor-regent's political opponents, Byzantane thought sourly to himself as he keyed open the vox-cast handset to respond.

"My thanks for your generous and loyal offer, First Minister Kale. The next time such an operation becomes necessary, I shall be sure to advise you in advance so that we may properly pool our respective forces."

Byzantane abruptly cut off the link, looking up to see the knowing half-smirk on the face of his deputy. "You think he believed you?" asked Korte.

"I don't care," growled Byzantane, "just as long as we keep him and his hired thugs out of here until we've accomplished what we came here to do."

The marshal primus turned to survey the scene around him, seeing only the low-level mudbrick dwellings and buildings that made up the vast extent of the Rook. Each building merged into the next, built without plan or purpose and interconnected by a twisting, intestinal labyrinth of passages and blind alleys. Byzantane knew that the maze system extended inside the buildings too, with holes knocked through the walls between many of the dwellings, so that it was possible to travel under cover through the entire area, entering a building at one edge of the Rook and exiting another again on the far side of the place.

The Rook was not unique—areas such as this festered on every even halfway-civilised world within the Imperium—and as one of the Emperor's appointed lawkeepers, Jamahl Byzantane knew such areas all too well. Breeding grounds for criminals and troublemakers. Refuges for outcasts and fugitives. Bolt-holes for renegades and heretics.

The operation to clear out the Rook and round up press-gang recruits for the Imperial Navy was real enough, Byzantane knew, but it was also a convenient cover for the real purpose of the Adeptus Arbites' presence here today. The Gothic sector was under attack, not just from the warfleets of Abaddon the Despoiler, but also, and more insidiously, from their allies within the many heretic cults that secretly thrived on almost every Imperium world within the sector. When the conflict was over, the cruel attentions of the Inquisition would descend in force on the Gothic sector, for it was now horribly apparent that the enemy had spent years laying their plans before launching their sector-wide

assault, and that agents of the Dark Powers had infiltrated far into the governments and planetary defence forces of many Imperium-controlled worlds.

At the outbreak of the war, as the Despoiler's warfleets burst out of the Arx Gap to fall without warning upon the forces of Battlefleet Gothic, Abaddon's allies and followers within the secret covens of Chaos worshippers had also come out of hiding at their master's bidding. Chaos-inspired uprisings and rebellions had occurred on more than two dozen worlds, drawing away vital forces and resources from the main war. More than one coven-controlled world had fallen to the enemy without a shot being fired, and, if their populations considered that they might merely be exchanging one set of oppressive masters for another, they would have realised their terrible error as soon the dark shapes of the first Chaos drop-ships fell out of the skies from the orbiting warships and they saw the faces of the things that were to be their new overlords. On other Imperium worlds, these cults remained in hiding. Waging guerrilla war against the Imperial forces of the Gothic sector. Sowing fear and dissent amongst the population. Sabotaging military and industrial instillations. Infiltrating all available Imperial forces and giving secret aid and information to the enemy.

And spreading. Always spreading. Once the Chaos contagion took root amongst a world's population, it all too often presaged the loss of that entire world to the light of the Emperor.

Yes, thought the marshal primus, the merciless judgement of the Inquisition would cut like a scythe through the ranks of the local planetary governors, Ecclesiarchy invigilators and Administratum officials of the Gothic sector once this war was over, for it was their laxity and failure that had allowed such heretic cults to first exist undetected and then thrive and spread unchecked.

But not here. Not on Belatis. Not on Jamahl Byzantane's watch.

Although it was not one of the front-line systems, Belatis was abundant with natural resources and supplies vital to the war effort. Adamantium ore for the diamond-hard armoured prows of the mighty warships of Battlefleet Gothic. Unprocessed promethium fuel for the war machines of the Imperial Guard, and plentiful grain and meat exports for the Guard's legions of hungry troops. It was not the greatest, nor the most populous or strategically important world within the Gothic sector, Byzantane knew, but, like every other of the million worlds

within the vast, galaxy-spanning Imperium, it belonged to the Master of Mankind, and for that reason alone was worth defending. Or dying over, the grim-faced Arbiter thought, remembering the oaths he had sworn thirty years ago as a cadet in the Adeptus Arbites training collegium on Anderton's World.

To serve the Emperor. To protect His domains. To judge and stand guard over His subjects. To carry the Emperor's law to all worlds under His blessed protection. To pursue and punish those who trespassed against His word.

To enforce the rule of Pax Imperialis.

Byzantane had only recently begun to suspect the presence of agents of the Dark Powers here on Belatis. There had been no reported acts of sabotage, no discoveries of secret heresies, no attempts to undermine the authority of the Imperium, but, still, he felt the presence of… *something* lurking here. Close, but unseen. Hidden, but waiting. His Truthseeker psykers too felt it, reporting strange new fluxes in the warp, disturbing patterns that hinted of some vast and calamitous event that was yet to unfold. "Like the calm before the storm," was how one troubled senior Primaris adept had attempted to describe the phenomenon to Byzantane.

Like the calm before the storm, thought the marshal primus, surveying the scene as his Arbitrator squads continued their sweep search of the area. The psyker seers of the Adeptus Arbites could provide him with no more information about this potential looming threat, but Byzantane had other sources of information available to him; sources that, as one of the stern-faced guardians of the Emperor's Law, he trusted and understood far more than the visions and prophecies of any witch-psyker. He had a network of spies and informers within the dregs of Belatis's criminal underworld, and it was not long before he heard the first whispers of secret gatherings somewhere within the confines of the Rook. If there was a coven of Chaos worshippers here, he was confident that his men would find it.

Byzantane looked to Korte, who had been monitoring the incoming vox-cast reports. Korte shook his head in response, already knowing what his commander would ask.

"Nothing yet. Just the usual rabble of lawbreakers and malcontents, most of

them hardly fit enough to make the grade as the poorest quality press-gang fodder. Vandire's teeth, we could spend a week razing this stinking sump pit to the ground, and still not find what we're looking for!"

"Perhaps not such a bad idea, Arbiter Korte," said Byzantane, sharing his deputy commander's grim humour. "But let us hope it will not come to that. At least, not yet," he added, after a considered pause.

Byzantane turned towards the open hatch of the command Rhino, directing his next comment to the figure sheltering there in the cool shadows inside the armoured vehicle.

"Truthseeker Shaulo. What help can you give us?"

The Adeptus Arbites psyker reluctantly emerged into the harsh glare of the Belatis midday sun, taking care to properly adjust the protective goggles covering his weak, pink-hued eyes. Psykers were mutants, Byzantane knew, and even those few tolerated by the Imperium and judged strong enough to withstand the lure of the powers of the warp without undergoing the agonising soul-binding ritual with the mind of the Emperor carried with them some physical mark of their difference from the rest of humanity. Shaulo was an albino, a fact that would have undoubtedly have assured him to have been killed at birth back on Byzantane's own savage and unforgiving homeworld of Skyre. Skyre was now half a lifetime and several thousand light years away, but Byzantane still felt uneasy in the presence of psykers, even if this one was a brother Arbiter.

"Nothing so far, marshal primus. It is possible that they could be using a null-shield or some other trickery to hide themselves from my senses…"

Shaulo abruptly broke off, looking up in confusion and flinching as he saw two Arbitrators just about to break down another doorway further up the street. Byzantane was already moving, the finely-honed instincts that were part of his barbarian warrior ancestry picking up on the feelings of fear and alarm now emanating from the psyker. Even before he knew why he was reacting, Byzantane was already halfway across the street, drawing his bolt pistol and calling out in a warning that he already knew would come too late.

The doorway exploded apart as the one of the Arbitrator's heavy, reinforced

boots came into contact with it. The explosion was not as large as Byzantane had feared, but the screaming Arbitrators were instantly enveloped in a spreading cloud of sickly ochre mist.

“Tox-bomb! Rebreathers on!” bellowed Byzantane, as the faint, dry season breeze carried the first trails of the deadly mist out into the street, revealing the bubbling remains of what only seconds ago had been two human beings.

Caught on the edge of the spreading cloud, one man—one of Marian’s junior troopers from Precinct Tertius, Byzantane recognised—screamed, coughing up bloody matter as he fumbled with the release catches of his rebreather mask. The men caught in the booby-trapped doorway had died almost instantly from the catastrophic effects of such close and concentrated exposure to the tox-bomb’s virulent contents, but the virus weakened as it dispersed, and at this range it would take the trooper minutes—long, agonised minutes—to die as the virus spores multiplied like wildfire within his body, causing his body to rot apart around him.

Byzantane didn’t hesitate, shooting the dying man through the heart, silently intoning a few words of the Second Litany of the Emperor’s Mercy as he pulled the trigger of his bolt pistol.

He was suddenly aware that there was gunfire all around him. His helmet’s vox-link crackled with shouts of alarm and the broadcast echoes of the same sounds of gunfire. He cursed to himself in the guttural tongue of his homeworld. An ambush, with the detonation of the tox-bomb as the signal for it to be sprang. They had come seeking the hiding place of a suspected coven of Chaos worshippers and instead they had been lured into an ambush.

He heard the drumming boom of an autocannon opening fire, saw a burst of its high-calibre shells scythe down the length of the street behind him, catching one of his Arbitrators and scattering him in bloody pieces against the mud-brick walls of the surrounding buildings.

“On the roofs! They’re firing down on us from up on the roofs!” shouted an unidentified voice in warning from over the vox-net.

Byzantane looked up, seeing a dark figure on the low rooftop above him,

perfectly silhouetted against the bright Belatis sky. Byzantane raised his bolt pistol, firing instinctively. The figure folded sharply, dropping heavily to the ground in front of the Arbites marshal. Byzantane glanced in revulsion at the dead thing that lay in the dust before him. He saw the fingers fused into curled claws, the glowing tattoo-shapes that writhed with a life of their own beneath the thing's greasy, translucent skin. Here was all the proof he needed to know that the foul taint of Chaos had indeed touched this world, and in far greater strength than any would ever have dared fear, if mutations as severe as this could have remained undiscovered and unchecked for any length of time.

The sound of gunfire continued—the stuttering chatter of crude heavy stubbers and autorifles built in local crime-den workshops, the high-pitched crack of lasgun fire—but interspersed amongst it Byzantane heard the welcome and distinctive blast roar of Arbites shotguns as his troopers rallied from the initial shock of the ambush and began to return fire.

But again came the heavy drumming of the autocannon as it blasted a deadly accurate burst of fire into the pinned-down Arbitrators sheltering in cover at the end of the street, adamantium-tipped shells cutting indiscriminately through flesh and mud-brick cover alike.

There was a fiery blast as a lucky or well-aimed shell found the engine of one of the Arbites Rhino transports, quickly followed by voices screaming in terror and pain as the vehicle's fuel cells exploded, immolating the Arbites squad sheltering inside. From the lee of the building wall where he was sheltering, Byzantane could see the autocannon firing from an open doorway beside the one where the tox-bomb booby trap had been planted. From this well-protected position it had a clear field of fire right down the street. Byzantane ripped off his rebreather mask, cursing in fury as he activated his vox-cast link.

"Korte, we're being massacred! Bring up your grenade launcher teams to deal with that autocannon."

"A difficult target, marshal. They're well dug in, and you're too close. There's as much chance we'll hit you as destroy them."

"Then cover me instead," Byzantane spat, getting to his feet and reaching for one of the heavy frag grenades held in one of the pouches of his harness belt.

“Understood, marshal. Stand by,” came his deputy’s calm-voiced reply over the vox-cast.

Byzantane launched himself forward on cue, hearing the reassuring blast-roar of Arbites’ shotguns from behind him as Korte and his squad opened fire at the rooftop snipers. Byzantane ran through the hail of sniper fire, spotting a flurry of movement at the periphery of his vision, and looked to see dark-cloaked figures moving around inside the cover of a nearby alley mouth. He ducked, just as a volley of gunfire erupted from the alley, stitching the mudbrick wall behind him with bullet holes and smoking las-blast marks. He fired back, keeping his finger on the trigger of the stuttering pistol and sending a burst of lethal bolter shells into the darkness of the alleyway. Two of the figures crouching there vanished in a sudden red spray.

He kept running towards the coven-guarded doorway, seeing one of the Chaos cultists manning the autocannon point to him in sudden alarm. The barrel of the autocannon swung round towards him as its operator started to draw a bead on him. A hidden sniper’s las-shot scored a burn line across the plasti-steel of one of his armoured shoulder pads, cutting through the layers of woven poly-silicate, impact-resistant material of his uniform to sear the flesh underneath.

Ignoring the pain, aware only of the deadly threat of the autocannon barrel now gaping straight at him, Byzantane hurled the grenade through the mouth of the doorway, where it detonated scant seconds later, killing the Chaos cultists clustered inside.

Byzantane jumped past the wreckage of the autocannon and its crew, unsure whether the twisted limbs and gruesome, bloody redesigns of human flesh that he glimpsed there were a result of Chaos mutation or merely the work of heat blast and razor-sharp shrapnel burst. Warily, the Arbites commander stepped into the darkened room beyond the doorway, bolt pistol in one hand and power maul in the other. His fingers touched the sequence of activation runes on the haft of the maul, and the energy weapon crackled into life as he brought it up to near full strength setting, its energy aura bathing the abattoir scene inside the room with a flickering blue light and revealing vile-looking sigils and runes daubed on the walls of the place. The painted marks seemed to actually writhe and retreat along the rough surface of the walls as the light touched them, and with a lurch

of revulsion Byzantane understood them to be blasphemous symbols in praise of the dark gods of Chaos.

A number of doorways opened off from the room, one of them leading to a crude, downwards-sloping passage. A faint current, shockingly cold compared to the heat outside, drifted up from the darkness there, carrying with it the scent of something rotten and foul. Byzantane instinctively notched the crackling power maul up to a higher energy setting, just as a crowd of black-cloaked figures exploded out at him from the other doorways, screaming sounds of animal hatred at the Arbiter as they attacked.

The bolt pistol in his right hand sounded loud in the confined space of the room. Bolter shells shredded open the chest of one cultist, tore off another one's legs at a point just above the knees. They fell to the ground, still screaming as they died. The bolt pistol clicked empty and, with a feral curse, he threw it into the snarling face of the next Chaos cultist.

At the same time he swung the power maul in his left hand, its energy-haloed mace head cutting a fiery arc through the air. At its lower, normal settings, the weapon's energy field could knock out an opponent with one blow; at the higher settings, it pulverized flesh and bone into bloody jelly. Byzantane's first blow struck one of the Chaos cultists across the head, shattering it in a spray of bone and brain matter. His second blow came down on the next opponent's shoulder, cleaving down through his ribcage and destroying his chest cavity. Byzantane hauled on the weapon, pulling it free of the dead cultist's body just as another screaming maniac threw himself at the Arbiter. This one's mouth gaped horribly open, his mutant jaws distending wide to reveal a mouthful of needle-fanged teeth even more deadly than the serrated knife blade in his hand.

Byzantane smashed the fist of his now empty right hand into the cultist's mouth, feeling the mutant thing's fangs break under the impact. Unable to bring his power maul to bear, he swung out clumsily with his other arm, partially blocking his enemy's knife thrust, deflecting the lighting-quick attack away from his exposed throat and into the armoured gorget collar round his neck. The creature bucked wildly on top of him, its strength inhuman. It gnashed its broken-toothed, blood-foamed jaws, trying to chew through the tough material of the gauntlet and into the meat of Byzantane's hand. At the same time its other hand locked round Byzantane's throat and it pressed forward, using its body weight to pin

him down as it began to saw its knife blade through the armoured collar and into the flesh of his neck.

A heavy booted foot crashed into the creature's face, sending it sprawling. A shotgun blast lifted the thing up from where it fell, two more dumping it in the corner in a ragged, bleeding heap.

"Help the marshal primus," commanded Korte, his combat shotgun spitting scatter shell shots with deadly accuracy into the remainder of the Chaos things as they retreated back into the darkness and away from the Arbitrator squad now crowding through the doorway from the street outside.

Byzantane shrugged off the gauntleted hands that helped him to his feet, and bent to retrieve and reload his bolt pistol. He looked questioningly at his deputy.

"Twelve dead so far. The worst of it was in the street outside," said Korte, looking round the chamber and glancing with distaste at the sigils daubed on the walls. "They caught us by surprise at first, but after that we soon got the measure of them. Nothing but heretic rabble and scum. Mahan, Scheer, Bartolemeo and their squads are chasing down what's left of them now."

Korte kicked with disgust at one of the dead mutant things lying at his feet. "It would seem that the marshal primus has found what he was looking for."

"A whole nest of them," Byzantane nodded grimly, indicating the entrance to the subterranean passage. "Bring up lux-lamps, flamers and power shields. Grenades too, as many as each man can carry. And find Truthseeker Shaulo. We'll need his help if we are going to flush out the rest of these abominations."

THREE

Cornered and with nowhere to ran, the servants of Chaos made the Arbitrator squad fight for every step of their long and bloody descent into the dark. Heedless of their own survival, they threw themselves forward into the face of the Arbites' guns. Flechette scatter rounds and solid shot shells from the Arbites' shotguns ripped them apart as they charged forward, but those that followed on behind clambered over the bodies of the dead and dying to get at their enemies. At other times, they held back, firing incessantly up the passageway at Byzantane and his squad as the Arbites troops crept forward behind hand-held power shields, the Imperium troops depending on the shields' humming energy fields to protect them from the withering hail of fire coming at them from out of the darkness.

Five times they came to junctions or sudden turnings in the passage. Forewarned by Truthseeker Shaulo's psychic senses, they were able to avoid the ambushes waiting for them at these dangerous juncture points. Flamer bursts and hurled handfuls of frag and choke grenades cleared out side passages, flushing burning and asphyxiating figures out of hiding and into the gun-sights of the waiting Arbiters. Shotgun-launched salvoes of the special heat-seeking shells—called "executioners" amongst the Adeptus Arbites—were fired whenever they came to a corner, the tiny Adeptus Mechanicus devices buzzing off into the darkness in search of their targets, followed split seconds later by screams of pain and the sound of multiple detonations into human tissue. Quickly advancing round the corner, Byzantane and his men soon finished off any who had survived the executioner shells' deadly bite.

The Arbites' own progress down into the depths was not without loss. Arbitrator of the Second Rank Corna, who had served by Byzantane's side since the marshal's quelling of the inmates' rebellion aboard the prison-hulk Charon, had his throat torn out by an autogun bullet that had pierced an overloaded and failing power shield. Minutes later, during the clearing of a side passage, a mutated female cultist, ablaze with flamer-ignited promethium, had ran straight into their midst through a hail of bullets, her burning and bullet-riddled body propelled onwards by hatred and insane devotion to her daemon-lord masters. She threw herself at Proctor-Sergeant Tylen, enfolding herself around him in a

deadly embrace and wrapping him in the blanket of flames that covered her own body. Nothing could break her furious hold on the screaming, burning Arbiter, and so the two of them had died together in another hail of shotgun fire as Tylen's comrades sought to spare him a slow, agonising death amongst the flames.

It was another fifteen brutal and bloody minutes—minutes filled with the roar of Arbites shotguns and the shrieking screams of the Chaos cultists—before the Imperium law-keepers fought their way down to the passageway's terminus. Byzantane kicked aside the corpse of the last Chaos cultist—some kind of priest-leader, judging by his robes and the horribly intricate tattoo markings on the diseased and rotting skin of his face—who only seconds ago had tried to eviscerate him with a wild chainsword swing, and stepped forward to enter the chamber beyond.

"Beware, marshal," warned Shaulo, the albino truthseeker's face looking haggard and eerily ghost-like in the flickering light of the lux-lamps. "I sense the presence of the powers of the warp in this place."

Byzantane motioned to the Arbitrators flanking him, indicating for them to spread out and cover the entire chamber with shotguns and flamers. He repressed a shiver of superstitious dread that rose up from the depths of his barbarian soul. He feared no enemy of the Emperor, but the warp-born horrors of Chaos made him feel like one of his primitive feral world ancestors, crouching together for mutual protection round their cave-mouth fires and listening in fear to the cries and screams of unknown beasts prowling the darkness beyond.

Powerful lux-beams scanned the walls of the chamber, revealing more of the blasphemous daubings on the rough stone walls; walls that had been carved out of the living rock long ago. The place was perhaps some kind of ancient smugglers' hideaway or outlaw bolt-hole, thought Byzantane, not wanting to dwell on the alternative possibility that Chaos cults may have been thriving here on Belatis since the time when this place was secretly excavated centuries ago.

"Throne of Earth!" exclaimed Arbitrator of the Third Rank Mainz as the beam from his lux-lamp revealed the thing hanging in chains on the far wall.

It was human, Byzantane realized, although it was only through his

understanding of the savage and terrible new shapes that combat in all its forms could reduce the human body to, that he was able to recognise it as such. Byzantane had taken part in his share of interrogations, but torture at the hands of the Adeptus Arbites was a simple and brutal affair, designed to break the body and will of the prisoner as quickly and efficiently as possible. In contrast, Byzantane knew that the Inquisition employed specialists who had been versed from childhood in the countless methods of inflicting pain and suffering, and who considered torture to be almost an art form. Perhaps these madmen, in their wildest fantasies, could have imagined the thing that now hung before the Arbites squad.

It was the human form re-sculpted: a body turned inside out but still somehow following a semblance of its original shape. Reformed flesh flowed over reshaped bones; sinews, veins and musculature twisted in complex new patterns over the skin that had once covered them. It was an abomination in flesh, no doubt left hanging here by the cult either as a sacrificial leftover or as some kind of gruesome altarpiece before which they performed the obscene rites and ceremonies demanded by their daemonic masters.

Shaulo suddenly staggered back. Byzantane caught the truthseeker just as he started to collapse, seeing the blood—shockingly red against his chalk-white skin—pouring from the albino's nose, sensing the sudden oppressive change in the atmosphere within the chamber, feeling the first droplets of blood drip down his own face and onto his lips.

"Marshal…" choked the psyker, his face contorted in pain.

"*Marshal, beware,*" echoed a voice from nearby, its tone thick with mocking irony.

Byzantane heard a clink of chains, and when he looked up the thing on the wall raised its twisted head to grin back at him with malicious pleasure.

"Yes, beware," it said, from a mouth that should form no words, from a body that could hold no life. *"Beware, little lackey. Faithful little servant of the false weakling emperor. The gaze of the Despoiler has fallen upon this world and all it contains. Pray to your weakling emperor for salvation. Seek protection behind your fleets of warships. It will do you no good. Better to kill yourselves now,*

better to kill each other, than face the fate that descends on you from out of the warp!”

The Chaos oracle-thing’s voice was rising to a gleeful shriek, ectoplasmic slime spraying from its malformed lips. Byzantane found he could not move, could only stand and stare at it in horrified fascination as it thrashed wildly against the confines of the chains pinning it to the wall.

“Kill yourselves! Kill your comrades! Kill your children! Better to die now than wait for the shadow of the executioner to fall upon you all!”

Korte was the first to act, raising and firing his combat shotgun. The weapon’s harsh roar was a catalyst to the others, breaking the spell the daemon-thing’s presence had cast over everyone within the chamber, and they too raised and fired their weapons. The thing hanging from the wall shrieked in perverse pleasure as its body was torn apart by the volley of shotgun blasts, thrashing madly and cackling in daemonic joy even as Byzantane took hold of one of the flamers and enveloped it in an all-consuming wave of fire. He continued to play the jet of flame over the oracle-thing’s body long after its flesh had melted from its bones and the last echoes of its insane laughter had faded away.

The remains of the thing lay smouldering on the ground, fused and unrecognisable. Despite its destruction, none of the Arbitrators dared go near it. Korte looked to his commander.

“Marshal, what orders?”

Byzantane handed the flamer to one of the Arbitrator troopers, seeing another one reach down to attend to the unconscious figure of Shaulo. “Burn it,” he ordered. “Burn it all. Use melta-charges. We’ll collapse the passageway behind us when we leave. Nothing must remain of this place when we are gone.”

“And after that?” asked Korte, the big hiveworlder trying to subdue the note of uncertainty in his voice. Byzantane laid a reassuring hand on his second-in-command’s shoulder.

“After that, old friend, we prepare to face whatever it was that thing was speaking of.”

FOUR

Adept Veneratus Parcelus Sobek awoke from his meditative trance, greatly troubled by the changes he sensed in the shifting currents of the great empyrean. It was dark within the small, windowless chamber he occupied in the southern wing of Madina's main Ecclesiarchy citadel-cathedral, but he had been blind for almost eighty years, ever since he had willingly sacrificed his sight during the ritual of binding his soul with that of the Divine Emperor, and, as an astropath psyker, he now had little need of anything as crude as mere visual sight.

He had served the Emperor well, linking his mind in the warp with those of his brother astropaths as they communicated with each other over the vast interstellar distances, but in recent years he had started to realise that his abilities were now slowly changing. All astropaths were occasionally gifted and cursed with fleeting images of the future, but the elusive talent of true precognition lay not only in understanding the meaning of such shadowy images as they flickered across the face of the warp, but also in being able to distinguish those that were real from those that were the misleading work of the deceitful daemon-things that inhabited the furthest reaches of the immaterium.

Sobek reached out, unerringly finding and picking up the small box that he already knew to be there. In his mind's eye, his psychic senses saw him performing each action just before he did it, enabling him to move and operate in the physical world with far greater care and precision that any normal sighted human. He ran his index finger down the seal on top of the box, the container recognising the genetic signature of its owner and opening itself to allow him to remove its precious contents. A series of thinly-cut cards made from a substance that felt like, but was not, delicate bone, slid out into his hand.

The Imperial tarot.

Sobek laid the first of the blank-faced cards out before him on the prayer mat he was kneeling on. His lips silently intoned the words of the Invocation of Blessed Prophecy. He concentrated, focussing his inner sight, as he reached out with his mind into the warp again, searching through its dark depths for the bright, pure radiance that was the overpowering psychic presence of the Master of Mankind.

It would be through this mystic commune with the Emperor that Sobek would know the meaning of the troubling thoughts that had disturbed his meditations.

He reached out, his hand hovering inches above the face of the card, as the priceless psychoactive material from which the ancient cards were constructed reacted to the warp-born power he was channelling through himself. Slowly, an image formed on the surface of the card. A single, baleful, staring eye. The Eye of Horus.

The Traitor, thought Sobek, gasping in shock. The card occurred frequently for all those consulting the Imperial tarot here within the Gothic sector, where the Imperium was at full-scale war with the followers of the Heretic Warmaster, but never before had he seen it come up as the first card drawn. It was a cursed card, auguring nothing but failure and disaster. Quickly, he drew the rest of the cards, the face of each newly-revealed card coming like a stab wound to the heart.

The Falling Star, reversed. Ill-fortune, descending from the heavens.

The Warp, ascendant. Change and flux, beneficial if preceded by any of the blessed Emperor arcana cards; malign and daemonic if preceded by any of the cursed arcana.

The Angel Primarch. Sorrow and sacrifice. Great loss foretold.

A sob of fear escaped from the astropath's lips, and he allowed the rest of the cards to fall unread from his hands, reaching for the bell-rope that would bring running the young novice initiate granted to him as his personal servant. He would send the boy to alert the Master of the Chapel, who in turn would send urgent word to both the governor-regent's palace and the office of the Cardinal Astral here on Belatis.

Sobek did not know it, but the terrible secret that had been revealed to him was already known to a small number of Adeptus Arbites. Soon, however, the dreadful burden of knowledge that they all shared would be known to millions.

FIVE

“Open missile tubes.”

The five Imperial warships cruised through the void in a wide spearhead formation, aimed dead centre at the heart of the enemy fleet. On cue, metres-thick blast hatches ground open along the beaks of their heavily-armoured prows, revealing the mouths of a series of ominous silo openings, burning gases flaring from each one as the missiles within powered up their launch thrusters.

“Launch torpedoes!”

Simultaneous flame bursts erupted from each opening as powerful engines, assisted by the launch tubes’ own gravitic motors, roared into life, firing the hundred metre-long missiles out of their silo tubes and into the vacuum of space. The torpedo missiles sped away at incredible velocity, their fast-burn plasma engines leaving a trail of burning, blinding-white plasma energy in their wake.

The aftershock of the torpedo launch rang through the hulls of the Imperial ships: a deep, rumbling shudder that ran through the length of the massive vessels, causing the sweating work crews of ratings to pause for a second in their tasks, many of them whispering oaths in both praise and fear to the awesome destructive power of the ship’s machine-spirit.

“Torpedoes launched and running,” confirmed the calm, authoritative voice of Master of Ordnance Remus Nyder as the same rumbling tremor ran through the command deck of His Divine Majesty’s Ship the *Lord Solar Macharius.*

Leoten Semper stood in his captain’s pulpit, watching the torpedoes’ progress on the data-slate screen of his command lectern, imagining the missiles roaring through space towards their targets. On the other four capital ships within the formation—*Drachenfels, Torment, Scipion* and *Graf Orlok*—he knew that his fellow captains would all be doing the same, watching as their vessels’ deadly payload sped towards the enemy. Five ships, launching six missiles apiece. Thirty torpedoes, closing on the enemy pack at a speed of tens of kilometres a second. Semper smiled, imagining the panic amongst his counterparts aboard the enemy ships as they watched the wave of torpedo icons sweep across their

surveyor screens towards them. Glancing at his command deck's own surveyor screens, he could already see the tell-tale energy spike readings that signified vessels powering up their main drives and engaging emergency manoeuvring thrusters as they attempted to get out of the path of the torpedo wave. So far the Imperial fleet's battle plan had gone as hoped, but now its ultimate success or failure depended on the next few moments.

"Missiles running true," spoke an ordnance servitor, communing with the simple machine-minds of the torpedoes' logic engines and reading and interpreting the data relayed back from the missiles' guidance and surveyor systems. "Enemy vessels are commencing evasive manoeuvres. Enemy carrier vessel *Lord Seth* launching attack craft."

"A defence screen of fighters to intercept the torpedo wave," commented Semper's second-in-command, Flag-lieutenant Hito Ulanti.

"Standard anti-ordnance tactics, Mister Ulanti," Semper agreed. "Nothing out of the ordinary. But let us see if they're expecting our next move also." He nodded to Nyder, who stood expectantly waiting on his captain's next orders.

"Mister Nyder, what is our launch status?"

"Reloading torpedoes now," answered Nyder, with typical dry efficiency.

"Our attack craft squadrons?"

"*Nemesis, Firedrake, Harbinger* and *Mantis* are at full launch readiness," replied the craggy-faced Nyder, not needing to consult the data-slate presented to him by one of his junior ordnance officers. "*Storm* and *Hornet* are in standby positions awaiting orders, and the remainder of our bomber and fighter squadrons are being prepped for second wave launch as we speak. I can give you forty Starhawks with fighter escort launched and burning hard vacuum within thirty seconds, and another three patchwork squadrons ready to go twenty minutes after that."

Semper nodded in approval, unsurprised by his ordnance commander's efficiency. In the long and hard-fought months since the start of the Gothic War, the crew of the *Macharius* had undergone their bloody baptism of fire and were,

their captain truly believed, a match for any other Imperial Navy crew throughout the whole of Battlefleet Gothic. Still, he thought, up until now their experience with the enemy had come as convoy escort battles against the so-called “wolf pack” pirate marauders or long-range patrol encounters with single vessels or small squadron groups. This was the first time the *Macharius* had taken part in a fleet-sized action of this magnitude.

Semper looked at his lectern, watching in fascination as the ship recognition codex symbols of the approaching enemy fleet crowded across the screen there. Thirty-four enemy vessels, the surveyor scanners confirmed. Sixteen Capital class vessels and escorts protecting an invasion armada of eighteen troop carrier transports. A formidable force, and one that even the most experienced warship commander might hesitate to engage head on.

“Helm—continue on course,” he ordered. “Mister Nyder, launch bomber squadrons and signal *Storm* and *Hornet* to stand by to engage the enemy’s fighter strength. They must ensure that the torpedo wave reaches the enemy fleet.” He paused, looking at the expectant faces of his assembled command deck officers, seeing in them the same keen intensity and rising sense of excitement that he himself felt.

“Make ready, gentlemen. Now we go to war.”

A heavy tremor ran through the fuselage of the Starhawk bomber as the first magno-clamps began to disengage, separating it from its launch cradle. Milos Caparan cast a cautious glance at the status runes on his console. The reassuring rows of green symbols told him that his craft had so far survived the often rigorous traumas of the pre-launch delivery system. Over the bomber’s internal comm-net, he could hear his crew go through the usual pre-launch system checks as well as their own personal rituals. There was the murmuring, machine-tone voices of Tech-Adept Shanyin Ko and the four onboard servitors under his command as they communed with each other in ways only the servants of the Machine God could explain or understand. From the top gun turret came the barbaric-sounding chanting of Gunner First Class Daksha as he prayed to his ancestral gods in the incomprehensible native tongue of his homeworld.

Caparan neither knew nor cared whether Daksha’s ancestor worship was in

accordance with the strict orthodox edicts of the Imperial Faith; he was the best turret gunner that Caparan had ever had, with sixteen enemy fighter kills to his credit, and if the spirits of Daksha's ancestors were indeed watching over him and guiding his aim as he believed, then Caparan was glad to have them aboard. Meanwhile, a stream of loud and impressive cursing sounded over the comm-link, signalling that Bombardier Georgi Kustrin was also going through his customary pre-mission preparations. A native of the *Macharius*'s original home-port world of Stranivar, Kustrin was a particularly skilled exponent of the well-known Stranivarite ability to be able to curse in a long and increasingly virulent string of imaginative and highly-detailed expletives without ever once repeating himself.

Warning icons flashed red as the Starhawk suddenly dropped, released from the crane cradle that had lifted it up into the launch bay. For a few brief but truly sickening moments, the three hundred tonne bomber was in freefall and then its fall was abruptly halted, powerful suspensor fields catching it and holding it in place mid-air within the launch bay.

"Suspensor fields operating. Preparing to disengage from launch cradle," confirmed Madik Torr from the cockpit seat beside Caparan, his warning, as usual, coming seconds too late.

Despite himself, no matter how many times he had done it before, Caparan had still never fully resigned himself to that one moment when he had to put his faith in the launch bay's powerful but ancient suspensor field generators—Caparan still managed a weak smile at his co-pilot's customary joke, which was as much a part of their pre-launch preparations as any of the systems checks and tech rites.

Together, Caparan and Torr carefully powered up the bomber's four wing-mounted engines, knowing that the slightest drop in the suspensor field's integrity at this most crucial and dangerous part of the launch process would mean the bomber's complete destruction. The engines were soon operating at near full power, but the bomber was stationary within the launch bay, held immobile in the invisible but inexorable grip of the suspensor fields as the laws of physics fought against the launch bay's equally powerful inertial dampener fields.

The bomber's entire fuselage shook under the strain, the bomber threatening to tear itself apart any second under the effects of the contradictory forces pulling and pushing at it. Brief seconds stretched out into an eternity as Caparan heard the countdown chimes broadcast over the cockpit's comm-net link. And then finally the last chime sounded and suddenly—shockingly—the bomber was released from its suspensor field and was surging forward with incredible speed, its engines screaming in relief at being set free from the invisible forces that had held them in check.

Caparan fought with the controls, aware of the wall of the launch bay streaming past only a few narrow metres from his starboard wingtip; aware of the second craft following at an identical velocity close behind his own; aware of the launch exit opening ahead; aware of the fact that eighteen other Starhawks would be fired out of surrounding launch bays at the same time; aware that the same thing was happening with twenty more Starhawks from the launch bays on the other side of the ship; aware that all of them were exiting at high speed from a carrier ship that was itself travelling at high velocity through space.

Aware of all this, and the fact that the smallest mistake or miscalculation on the part of any one of the pilots would mean disaster.

And then there was only the blackness of space around them, followed by the tell-tale pulling sensation and—a split second later—a rumbling shudder as the Imperial bomber passed through in sequence its carrier ship's gravity field and protective void shields. Glancing at an auspex screen, Caparan saw the view from the rear tail-mounted turret of the vast shape of the *Macharius* already falling away into the distance behind them, and he felt the customary dual emotions familiar to any attack craft pilot. Relief at the completion of a successful launch, but also apprehension and awareness of the fact that he was now alone in the void and separated from the protection and safety of the giant carrier ship.

A row of green icons lit up one by one on his command console. Eight… Nine… Ten. All bombers under his command had safely cleared the *Macharius* and were reporting all systems clear. Caparan activated a rune, opening up a comm-net channel.

"*Nemesis* Leader to *Nemesis* Squadron. Form up into attack formation."

The threatening, sickle-winged shape of the Swiftdeath fighter cruised through the void, starlight glinting off its black, diamond-hard, armoured hull. The sole occupant of its cockpit scanned the surrounding void, wire cables plugging into the empty sockets where his eyes had once been, feeding him tactical information direct from his fighter's onboard surveyor systems.

Around him, he sensed the rest of his squadron flying in a loose, crescent-shaped intercept pattern. Ahead of them was their mission objective, the bright target shapes of the oncoming enemy torpedo wave and, beyond that, the far more tempting series of secondary target shapes: the distinctive flying pattern and energy signals of an enemy bomber wave approaching in attack formation and with fighter escorts. Encased in ancient flight suit armour that had fused itself to his skin, and enmeshed in cables and wiring that made his body just another component of his fighter craft, Pilot-Champion Vohten Kroll cursed in barely restrained anger. Intercepting the torpedo wave was, he knew, vital in protecting the Chaos fleet from the enemy's initial attack, but there was little honour and challenge in the all-too-simple destruction of such lumbering and—crucially, for Kroll—crewless targets. There would be greater challenge amongst the bomber formation, Kroll knew: pitting his skill against those of the Starhawks' pilots and gunners, dog-fighting with their deadly Fury Interceptor escorts. And, after that, when the torpedo and bomber attacks had been annihilated and the Imperium and Chaos fleets met in direct battle, there would even finer sport after the Chaos fleet's inevitable victory.

He could see it now: his Swiftdeath fighter swooping through the tangle of drifting wreckage and burning hulks that was all that remained of the Imperium fleet, his finely-honed surveyor senses extended to their maximum limit, seeking and finding life-pod vessels floating amongst the debris. Inside would be survivors from the destroyed enemy warships, and Kroll relished the thought of their helpless terror as his fighter bore down on their doomed and unarmed escape craft. A target was only worth the taking, the Chaos pilot champion believed, if you could imagine the terrified death screams of the human cargo inside it.

Through his surveyor-enhanced senses, he could see the strong signal patterns of the torpedoes as they sped towards him through the void. He smiled, noticing the

surprisingly high energy fluctuations thrown off by the torpedoes' imperfectly balanced power systems, a fact which would make the missiles all the more easy to lock on to and target with his fighter's weapons systems. Intercepting and destroying the torpedo wave would now even simpler than ever now, and, after that, his squadron would be free to seek out far more rewarding targets.

"Enemy escort vessels are moving to protect their flanks. Capital ships are powering up void shields and weapons systems."

"Secondary bomber wave being loaded into launch bays. Countdown to launch in ten minutes."

"Enemy troop transports are commencing drop-pod planetary assault. Estimate two hundred plus drop-pods deployed in the last five minutes."

Semper listened in silence to the ongoing litany of reports from his junior officers as he studied the pattern of icon markers on the main surveyor screen, the screen's luminescence casting an eerie glow over his hawk-like features under the dim lighting on the *Macharius*'s command deck. It took years to be able to decipher the ever-changing patterns and symbols as the command deck's servitor drones received and interpreted the streams of data from the ship's surveyor systems, but to an officer of Leoten Semper's experience the complex array of machine-code markings flashing across the surveyor screen was as clear and understandable as simple Low Gothic script.

Here he saw the icons representing the torpedo and enemy fighter waves move close towards each other, changing colour to an angry crimson in warning of their imminent and conflicting convergence. There he saw the threatening shapes of the enemy warships manoeuvre round to face the Imperial capital ship formation as it sped towards them. And, beyond the line of enemy warship icons, lay the Imperial fleet's true objective: the bright cluster of troop transports, blinking alert symbols beside them indicating that they had already commenced their drop-ship invasion of the Imperial world which the *Macharius* and its sister ships had been sent to protect.

Again Semper watched the twin converging icons of the torpedo and fighter waves, diminishing rows of tiny rune symbols counting down the rapidly

shrinking distance between them.

Soon, he thought to himself. Soon they would know whether their opening gambit would succeed.

SIX

Elsewhere, another captain stood studying the tactical display on his command deck's surveyor screen, his attention fixed on one enemy vessel marker in particular. For half a day now, his vessel's gun batteries had been ceaselessly bombarding the surface of the world below. Now the providence of the warp had provided a target far greater than underground missile silos and cities full of cowering, terrified civilians.

"At last, the *Macharius*…" breathed Bulus Sirl, plague-champion captain of the *Virulent*, shuffling the tumour-swollen bulk of his body through the rich, foetid stew of the atmosphere of his vessel's command deck to closer inspect the image on the long-range augur screen.

"Yes. The vessel that destroyed our sister ship *Contagion*, if the propaganda lies of the enemy are to be believed," confirmed his second-in-command, taking care not to tread on any of the litter of pet Nurgle-spawn that swarmed in his captain's wake.

Sirl studied the magnified image of the loyalist craft, seeing its launch bays open to disgorge a swarm of gull-winged bomber craft; seeing the cruiser move forward in battle formation along with the rest of the loyalist fleet. For four days the Chaos fleet had advanced through the Helia system, finding little evidence of the presence of the forces of the hated false Emperor other than a few brief but bloody skirmishes with lone scout vessels and marauding attack craft squadrons. In those four days, most of the system had been ruthlessly subdued.

The defence monitor station at the system's outer edge had been the first to fall, overwhelmed and destroyed as the first of the Chaos warships emerged out of the warp jump point that the station was supposed to be guarding. Mining and industrial colonies on the system's two gas giant planets were next to succumb, bombarded into submission as the Chaos fleet swept onwards past them, heading into the system's core. Their target was Helia IV, an Imperium resource world with a population of more than three billion. Perhaps those three billion supposed that their world merely was to be plundered, mused Sirl, the survivors emerging from hiding afterwards and praying to their weakling emperor in

thanks as they watched the Chaos reaver fleet leave orbit and head out of system towards its next target destination. If that is what they thought, he smiled to himself, then how much anguished despair must they have felt as their astropath psykers and long range surveyors detected the warp burst signatures of many more Chaos vessels—troop transports and their protecting escorts—emerging out of the warp and following in the wake of the main warfleet? It was only then that the Despoiler's intentions for Helia became clear to its terrified inhabitants.

Invasion. The ruthless subjugation of their world by the powers of Chaos.

Inside the transports were the Legions of Chaos: Chaos Marines and daemon-things, confined for centuries within the Eye of Terror and now impatient to be unleashed upon the servants of the false Emperor. There were savage beastmen and degenerate human followers of the Dark Gods, eager only for the slaughter of their masters' enemies; slave-troops and monstrous mutant spawn creatures, fit only to be used as cannon-fodder in the armies of Chaos. Any who resisted would be mercilessly put to the sword, while the remainder of the world's population would be enslaved, put to work constructing fleets of more warships and troop transports for the Despoiler's battlefleets. The strongest amongst them —those who could actually survive the brutal realities of life on what would soon be one of the Despoiler's prison-factory worlds—would be formed into slave-troop regiments and herded aboard the newly-constructed transports, ready to be taken on to the next doomed world to lie in the path of the Chaos reaver fleets, leaving behind them the bone-scattered ruins of their dead world.

Fear, thought Sirl. Fear was the Despoiler's main weapon in this war, and its tendrils spread deep into the minds of the inhabitants of very Imperium world within the Gothic sector; fear that their world would be next to fall under the gaze of the Despoiler, and fear of what fate the Chaos Warmaster had already decreed for them when he sent his fleets to darken the skies above their world.

Helia IV was the third such world to fall before this warfleet—the holds of many of the transports were crammed with the slave-troop remnants of the populations of the two preceding conquests—but this was the first time that the Imperial Navy had appeared in any force to oppose them. Sirl and his fellow captains had resigned themselves to another simple but unsatisfying slaughter of the local in-system defence forces—its orbital defence platforms and slow, poorly-armed system vessel gunship squadrons—and so it was with a thrill of anticipation that

they greeted the sight of the Imperial Navy battlegroup that emerged from the warp to challenge the Chaos fleet as it made its final approach on the otherwise defenceless world.

Despite his four centuries of service to the God of Decay, there was enough of the Imperium fleet officer still remaining in Sirl to recognise the feeling now growing within him. It was an old, familiar feeling, one that the bosun-instructors of the fleet naval academies tried hard to instil in the officer cadets in their charge. It was the thrill of anticipation, the relish of the challenge to come that every navy officer feels before battle.

And also, sometimes, the satisfying knowledge that old scores and debts of honour were about to be settled, he thought, still studying the image of the *Macharius.*

“Morrau was a fine captain, and a loyal servant of Grandfather Nurgle,” slurred Sirl, mucus-bile bubbling in his pustule-swollen throat.

“His death and the destruction of one of the Grandfather’s vessels shall not go unavenged.”

“Anomaly detected within the enemy torpedo wave,” came the urgent warning from one of the tech-priest surveyor seers, calling Sirl’s attention back to the immediate realities of battle. “There are additional ordnance-class targets masked within the torpedo wave energy reading!”

Amic Kaether powered his Fury Interceptor forward, residue plasma energy splashing against his forward shields as he piloted the fighter craft through the kilometre-long backwash of the torpedo missile. Around him, the rest of *Storm*squadron followed him into the attack, emerging out of the energy wake of the torpedo wave that had so successfully concealed their approach from the enemy. Kaether’s command flight—Zane, Vale, Altomare and Cipolla—took up position around their leader, the squadron’s other two flights completing the three-pronged attack formation.

Fifteen fighter craft—a full strength squadron—and, nearby, another fifteen belonging to *Hornet* squadron. Thirty Imperial interceptors, attacking in

overwhelming force against an unprepared enemy.

Kaether locked onto the first enemy target, his fingers closing on the firing triggers of his Fury's formidable armament array. A stream of super-charged energy instantly spat out from the nose-mounted lascannons. The battle of Helia IV had begun in earnest.

Kroll's wingman exploded, transformed in the blink of an eye into an incandescent fireball that flickered briefly in the void and then was gone forever.

Too late, Kroll's craft-joined senses saw the swarm of enemy fighters emerging out of cover from amongst the torpedo wave; too late, he tried to evade the sharp daggers of las-energy stabbing at him from out of the darkness. They struck against his fighter's armour, smashing it into broken shards and ripping through his starboard engine, one stray shot blinding him as it burnt through his forward surveyor systems.

Unseeing and out of control, Kroll's crippled Swiftdeath tumbled through space and into the path of the oncoming torpedo wave. His soundless scream of rage was lost as, seconds later, both he and his fighter were obliterated, smashed apart against the thick armoured nosecone of one of the juggernaut missiles.

"Semper watched as the enemy fighter formation icon faded off the surface of the surveyor screen. The Imperial attack wave closed on the Chaos fleet, and now nothing lay between it and its target. Semper's attention was caught by the urgent flashing of the torpedo wave marker. He looked to his Master of Ordnance.

"Targets acquired on all missiles," confirmed Nyder. "Impact imminent."

Tens of thousands of kilometres ahead of the *Macharius,* the wave of torpedo missiles entered their final lifecycle stage, logic engines reaching out to find their targets. Crude but effective guidance systems engaged, short-life manoeuvring jets firing as the missiles' machine-minds made any necessary course changes towards their selected targets. The main drives flared into fiery life for the last time, expending all remaining energy as they boosted the missile

warheads towards their targets at increased velocity.

Fear and panic spread like wildfire through the Chaos fleet as they witnessed their fighter screen's failure to intercept and destroy the torpedo wave. Parked in closely-ranked and stationary orbit above Helia, the invasion fleet was the very model of the Imperial Navy tacticians' definition of a target-rich environment. For every target a torpedo's logic engines failed to lock onto, there were another half-dozen to choose from. On the Chaos warships, gunnery officers who had already been zeroing their weapons batteries in on the approaching Imperial fleet frantically redialled new target co-ordinates into their gunnery cogitators, knowing that it was already too late to retrain their lumbering gunsights on targets as small and fast-moving as torpedo missiles, especially at such close range.

Turret gun crews fared better; already alerted and manning weapons systems designed to fend off ordnance attacks, they stood ready to project a curtain of defensive fire into space around their vessels. Of the thirty torpedoes launched by the Imperium ships, twelve were to be destroyed by the Chaos vessels' anti-ordnance defences before they could strike their targets. Most fortunate of all was the Murder class cruiser *Violator,* whose turret crews destroyed all three of the torpedoes that had targeted their vessel.

There was particular panic aboard the Chaos fleet's carrier vessels. Bomber and fighter squadrons already committed to supporting the drop-ship assault on Helia were being hurriedly recalled back to the defence of the orbiting fleet, while the few squadrons still aboard the carrier ships were being rushed into action, many of them launching without being fully prepared for combat. There was a special note of urgency aboard the Styx class heavy cruiser *Lord Seth* which had been targeted by five torpedoes, the missiles' surveyor systems homing in on the strong energy and comm-net signals emanating from the Chaos fleet flagship. Scramble-launched into action and given only a hurried pre-launch maintenance check, two of its Doomfire bombers collided in the launch tubes, the explosion from their full payloads roaring back into the flight decks and sweeping over the attack craft still lined up there and awaiting rearming and refuelling. Promethium fuel reserves and ammunition stacks lying on the flight deck detonated in a growing chain reaction, destroying the ship's entire wing of starboard launch bays and dealing the Chaos flagship a crippling blow even before battle proper had been joined. Seeing their flagship stricken, many aboard the surrounding

Chaos vessels mistakenly assumed that it had been the target of a close-range torpedo attack from an undetected Imperium ship, and panic spread further into the Chaos ranks at the thought that small but deadly torpedo ships such as the Cobra class destroyer might already have infiltrated the fleet defences and be hunting, undetected, amongst them.

The first actual torpedo strike occurred on the outer fringes of the fleet perimeter, two of the *Macharius*'s torpedoes streaking towards a Chaos ship that had foolishly or bravely moved forward away from the main body of the fleet group, instantly singling itself out as a target for the missiles' questing surveyor senses. Whether it was trying to escape or sacrificing itself to protect the troop transports behind it was something those intently watching from aboard the*Macharius*'s command deck would never know.

"Target is an enemy escort vessel, probably one of their Iconoclast class of destroyers," Nyder told his captain, reading the information from the complex array of machine-code icons flashing across the surveyor screens. "They're opening fire with their defence turrets. A hit! One torpedo gone. The other torpedo still closing. Its warhead has just achieved critical mass…" A bright energy flare blossomed on Semper's lectern screen, temporarily overwhelming and dispelling the other data scrolling across the vid-display. Semper looked up, looking through the command deck's viewing bays to see a matching explosion burst light up the vacuum of space ahead of them as the torpedo warhead smashed through the Chaos ship's hull and detonated amongst its engine systems, breaching the walls of the generarium plasma reactors and setting off a chain reaction explosion that completely vaporised the enemy vessel. The explosion and expanding cloud of super-heated burning plasma energy briefly flared like a second sun against the blackness of space, but all around Semper saw glittering constellations of other explosions and energy bursts, evidence of the fleet-sized space battle now taking place all around them. In rapid succession, the rest of the torpedoes lashed into the ranks of the Chaos fleet, with devastating results.

The anti-ordnance gunners aboard the *Lord Seth* succeeded in destroying the warhead of one of the torpedoes targeted at it. However, their success was to be short-lived. Driven onwards by its powerful thrust engines, the intact main body of the torpedo still struck the ship, shearing away one of the massive lance turrets that studded the heavy cruiser's spine. The power conduits to the turret's

weapons systems failed to close, and a fountain of burning plasma pumped up direct from the ship's generarium core erupted geyser-like from the ship's upper hull, diverting vital energy away from other weapons systems. The anti-ordnance turrets suddenly fell silent, and their gunnery crews were helpless to stop two more torpedoes slamming into the *Lord Seth* seconds later. On the remaining port side launch decks, frantic pilots and ground crews raced against time to ready their Swiftdeaths and Doomfires for launch as a series of explosions ripped through the stricken ship's interior.

Three of the troop transports, crudely constructed by unskilled slave labour and little more than glorified cattle trucks fitted with warp engines, took a torpedo hit apiece and were vaporised, killing the thousands of Chaos troops still aboard them. Down on the surface of Helia, the odds shifted that much slightly back in favour of the hard-pressed Helia defence forces as they grimly fought against the seemingly never-ending tide of Chaos troops now dropping out of the skies to attack their world.

The Iconoclast escort destroyer *Foresworn* was struck aft by a torpedo, the explosion destroying its air recycling plant and igniting an oxygen fire that swept through the ship's interior compartments. Those that survived the fire were doomed to a slow death by asphyxiation, sealed inside airtight compartments and praying for a rescue that would never come.

The Murder class cruiser *Pagan Voyager* suffered a direct hit to its command tower, the blast ripping upwards through deck after deck within the armoured blockhouse and killing everyone present on the bridge, including the captain and flag-lieutenant. Suddenly robbed of almost its entire senior officer cadre and with its internal comm-net also disabled by the loss of the command deck, the *Pagan Voyager* would take little further part in the Battle of Helia IV as its junior officers strove to bring order to the various out-of-contact sections of the ship, eventually choosing discretion over valour and retreating from the conflict altogether.

Throughout the Chaos armada, wounded ships burned and bled their atmosphere and energy lifeblood out into the cold vacuum, but, despite the damage caused by the Imperial torpedo attack, the battle's final outcome was by no means assured. Chaos warships manoeuvred for position, swinging round to bring lance turrets and weapons batteries to bear on the oncoming Imperium fleet. The

Imperial ships were closing rapidly, but the enemy fleet was still out of range of their own forward-firing batteries. Knowing that the enemy's firepower had a longer reach than their own guns, the Imperial line braced itself for the Chaos fleet's reply.

The void between the two fleets was filled with bright rainbow displays of las-fire, roaring plasma comet trails and the thick, iridescent streams of lance-beam energy. An Imperial Cobra destroyer escort, caught too far out of position ahead of the main body of the fleet, exploded apart as an arcing beam of lance fire passed over it, cutting through it in one lethal sweep. Las-beams, energy blasts and missile volleys impacted against overloading void shields, penetrating through to strike at the pitted and dented skins of ancient and battle-scarred armoured hulls. The prow of the *Torment* burst apart as probing las-beams found a weak spot in its adamantium shell, drilling through it to find and detonate a newly-loaded torpedo missile sitting in its launch silo. The back-blast blew the sealed, seventeen tonne silo door off its mountings, a wave of fire sweeping out into the eight-deck-high loading chamber and back further along the wide rail-tracked tunnel from where the torpedo missiles were brought up from the ship's magazine.

Stricken, the Lunar class cruiser fell out of line, its sister ships leaving it behind to fend for itself as its officers and crew desperately fought to contain the conflagration burning through the ship and prevent a catastrophic magazine explosion.

On the bridge of the *Macharius*, Semper stood his ground, feeling the ship sway under him as it was buffeted by the blasts impacting against its void shields and armour. The *Macharius* was equipped as standard with heavy blast shields which closed over its viewing bays during combat, but Semper had ordered his vessel into battle with blast shields open, reasoning that a few extra feet of titanium steel armour would make little difference to their chances of survival if the command deck took a direct hit, preferring instead to see something of the enemy and the current disposition of the battle with his own eyes rather than merely as an array of icons and symbols on a surveyor screen. Looking out, he saw a vision of hellish beauty: explosions and fire-bursts blooming against the black void; warships, vast and powerful, moving forward with ponderous majesty. Over the open, fleet-wide comm-net came the voices from those ships, sounding weak and insignificant in comparison to the grand scale of events

happening around them.

“The *Lord Seth.*.. Its defence turrets are dead. Vandire’s oath, if you’ve got any torpedoes loaded, use them now!”

“*Nemesis Leader* to *Macharius.* We’re through the enemy’s forward picket line, or what’s left of it. Commencing attack run on the troop transports. Enemy fighter activity disorganised but still fairly intense… Be good to see some friendly Furies up here with us, *Macharius*.”

“Vanguard destroyer squadron to main group. That Murder class protecting their far flank is drifting out of position, looks like it’s taken a hit to the command tower. There’s a path opened up for us clear through to those damned transports. Requesting supporting fire from any available capital ships.”

“*Graf Orlok* to battlegroup… *Torment*’s gone. We’re out here alone on the port flank and taking heavy fire. Requesting permission to withdraw and recharge void shield generators.”

“Von Blucher, you yellow bastard! I don’t care how high your blueblood family connections in Battlefleet Command go,” replied an angry voice over the comm-net channel, momentarily drowning out all the other radio traffic. “You withdraw from action now and I’ll personally take great pleasure in hunting down and destroying both you and that junker heap you call a warship!”

Semper recognised the voice of Erwin Ramas, captain of the Gothic class cruiser *Drachenfels.* Even over the comm-net static, the mechanical rasp in Ramas’s voice was still clearly detectable. Ramas was a Battlefleet Gothic legend, the sole survivor of an eldar pirate torpedo attack that wiped out his entire command deck crew. His crippled body maintained by Adeptus Mechanicus cyber-devices, what was left of Ramas was confined within an armoured strategium shell somewhere deep within his ship. However, despite the damage to his body, the wily old veteran’s command abilities and taste for the thrill of battle clearly remained undiminished.

Semper suppressed an inappropriate smile, not wishing to be seen to laugh openly at a brother captain in front of the*Macharius*’s bridge crew. That said, Titus von Blucher was a notoriously vainglorious fool who owed his captaincy

of the*Graf Orlok* solely to the fact that he belonged to one of the lesser branches of the Ravensburg family line and was hence a distant but acknowledged relative of Lord Admiral Cornelius Ravensburg, commander of Battlefleet Gothic. Only Ramas, a battlefleet legend with forty years experience in the captain's chair, could speak like that to one of the Lord Admiral's relatives and hope to escape free from any kind of censure afterwards.

"*Drachenfels* to *Macharius*," called Ramas. "What do you say, Semper? Shall we show this faint-hearted blueblood how a true captain in His Divine Majesty's Imperial Navy behaves?"

"Lead the way, *Drachenfels. Macharius* will join you," replied Semper, looking expectantly towards his helm crew, catching the nervous and apprehensive glances that passed between many of his junior officers. Hito Ulanti stepped forward, adding his voice to that of his captain's, and daring any of the doubters on the command deck to challenge their dual authority. After all, if a vessel's rightful, Emperor-chosen captain gave an order, and his second-in-command concurred with that order, then what reason would any loyal servant of the Emperor have to argue otherwise, no matter how near-suicidal that order might seem? Ulanti's hand rested on the hilt of his sheathed sabre, and, nearby, the giant, thuggish-looking petty officer that Ulanti seemed to have adopted as his personal bodyguard stiffened to attention, alert to any potential threat against his patron officer.

"Helm—continue full ahead. Match and meet the current speed and course of the *Drachenfels,"* ordered Ulanti in his characteristic clipped hiveworld aristocracy accent. "Generarium-channel all available power to the forward void shields. Gunnery control—prepare to fire twin broadsides as soon as we are in range of any available enemy target. Ordnance—the captain wants a full torpedo spread loaded and ready to launch, and he wants them now."

The young flag-lieutenant stepped back, watching alertly as he ensured that his captain's orders were being correctly carried out. Semper studied the sharp-minded and keenly ambitious Necromundan noble, becoming increasingly aware of just how able an officer Ulanti was. He knew that Ulanti would go far, and was willing to stake the Order of the Gothic Star cluster pinned to the breast of his own tunic front that Ulanti would finish this war with a captaincy of his own.

Assuming he or any of us survive that long, he reminded himself, thinking of the grim news of the latest tallies of losses, defeats and hard-fought and narrowly-won holding actions that arrived almost daily from all points throughout the sector.

Assuming any of us even live through the next hour or so, he thought further, looking out the viewing bay at the scene beyond, as the awkward but impressive bulk of the *Drachenfels* thundered ahead towards the enemy battle line. A second later, Semper felt the increased vibration of his own vessel's engines as they pushed the *Macharius* forward to join its sister ship.

Together, the two cruisers rumbled forwards into the face of the enemy's guns, renewing the impetus of the faltering Imperial attack and leading the formation straight towards the centre of the Chaos fleet.

Kaether cut the power flow to his Interceptor's engines, depending on instinct and manoeuvring thrusters as he cruised through the midst of the Chaos fleet, making the small and nimble fighter craft an even more difficult target for the enemy weapon targeters to lock on to. Something flickered on the edge of his vision and he hit his starboard thrusters, rolling the fighter to port and triggering his lascannons as he did so. The Swiftdeath that had passed momentarily across his cockpit's vision field was instantly transfixed in a stream of azure energy lines, las-bolts hammering into it, ripping through black glass armour plating. One wing-mounted engine thruster exploded, and Kaether saw fused melt-holes punctured along the length of its fuselage. The Swiftdeath tumbled out of control, seconds later exploding apart as a second, deadly accurate stream of lascannon fire found and vaporised it, Kaether's port wingman Altomare finishing the task begun by his squadron commander.

"Fine shooting, Storm Three," Kaether signalled over the squadron comm-net. "We'll dice for who claims the kill back aboard the *Macharius.*"

"That's if we make it back aboard," sounded the quiet voice of Vale, flying on Kaether's starboard wing. "And that's if the*Macharius* itself is still there, even if we do make it out of here in one piece." It was only a few minutes since Cippola's Fury had been destroyed—ripped apart by a flechette burst of millions of monofilament micro-shards—by a random, unexpected strike from a nearby

enemy vessel's anti-ordnance defences, but none of the other pilots would have considered Vale's joking words inappropriate. For the Fury pilots, death, shocking and violent, was a constant and ever-present possibility. "My wingman on my port side, the Emperor on my starboard and Death on my tail, breathing in my engine wash," as the old navy pilot phrase put it. Death could come for them at any time in space combat, and always it would be sudden and instantaneous. They joked about it now, here in the heat of battle even as friends and comrades died around them, but later, back aboard the safety of the *Macharius*, they would grieve together in their own solemn and private ways.

Four craft left in his wing; nine more in the two other wings, which he had assigned to escorting the first bomber wave following on close behind. Their firepower, combined with that of the Starhawks' own turret guns, proving more than enough to fight off any marauding enemy fighters. Kaether's wing flew pathfinder through the Chaos fleet, dodging in and out amongst the strange, warp-altered shapes of the enemy vessels. Deadly to other attack craft, the Fury's banks of lascannon and wing-mounted missiles would be less than pinpricks against the thick, armoured hulls of the massive Chaos warships, but the Furies could still bring harm to them in other ways. From the cramped cockpit space behind him came a low-voiced litany of telemetry data and gunnery target co-ordinates as Manetho, Kaether's Adeptus Mechanicus navigator and rear gunner, relayed detailed and close-range observation intelligence on the enemy fleet back to his tech-priest brethren aboard the *Macharius*. Much to Kaether's satisfaction, Manetho had directed the Imperial gunners in on the enemy ship that had destroyed the *Cippola*, and moments later the gunsights of the mighty *Drachenfels* had zeroed in on the enemy destroyer, cutting it in half with one sweep of its port-side lance batteries.

Kaether's wing had swept a path through for the bomber wave, encountering and destroying six more Swiftdeaths along the way. With the *Lord Seth* no longer a threat—Kaether had seen it take three more torpedo hits in the last few minutes—the only enemy carrier ship still in operation was the *Pluton*, and most of its attack craft strength seemed to be bomber squadrons. What few enemy fighters they had encountered were lone stragglers recalled from the invasion beachhead, their power reserves depleted by extended operation in a planetary atmosphere and the long, hard climb up from Helia's gravity well to rejoin the new orbital battle. Those not returning to the *Pluton* for rearming and refuelling fell easy

victim to the veteran pilots of *Storm* squadron's elite command wing.

Ahead, Kaether could see the squat, ugly shapes of the troop transports, their launch bay doors open to reveal the cavernous interiors of their holds. Inside, row upon row of drop-pods were stacked in tiered launch cradles, swarms of them dropping in sequence from the underbellies of each transport. Kaether scanned his surveyor screen, satisfying himself one last time that there were no enemy fighters protecting the transports. He keyed a series of rune signs into his comm-net panel, sending a pre-arranged code signal back to the *Macharius* and the bomber wave close behind his pathfinder flight. Seconds later, the answering series of code-marks appeared across his data-screen.

"*Storm Leader* to squadron. Bombers have their targets. Break off and stand by."

"What targets now, commander?"

Throne of Earth, I've known servitors that sounded more human than that, thought Kaether, recognising the familiar, blank-toned voice that sounded over the comm-net.

It was Zane—Zealot Zane, as the other members of the squadron called him, even though none of them would ever question the misfit pilot's reputation as the best fighter ace aboard the *Macharius,* with the highest kill tally to prove it.

"Commander?" asked Zane again, his tone patient but expectant.

Kaether paused, considering. His orders were to circle in search of any remaining fighter targets and then escort the Starhawk wave back to the *Macharius* after the completion of their bombing mission. On his long-range scope, he could see the *Pluton* launching bomber craft, and there were reports of more Swiftdeaths on their way back up from the planet's surface to rejoin the fray.

Kaether glanced again at the spread formation of troop transports, seeing the continuing rain of invasion force drop-pods falling from their open underbellies. Fifty to a hundred enemy troops packed like so much cattle into each drop-pod; several hundred drop-pods to each transport, dozens more of them being released from orbit with every passing every minute. Even with several transports already

destroyed, the Chaos armada was still in the process of deploying a considerable invasion force on Helia. Kaether knew that every drop-pod destroyed increased the odds in favour of the Imperial forces now fighting on the planet's surface, and the point of the entire battle was to defy the enemy's attack on Helia, wasn't it? Swiftly, he came to a decision, knowing he might have to answer for it later.

That's if any of us survive that long, he reminded himself, thinking of Vale's traditional pessimistic fighter pilot riposte to any mention of the future.

"*Storm Leader* to squadron. We'll leave the nursemaid duties to those greenhorns in *Hornet* squadron. New target priority—form up into wingman teams and target those drop-pods. They won't add anything to your kill tallies, but you'll be giving those ground-pounders on Helia a better fighting chance. And Emperor knows they need it, especially since they're unfortunate enough not be part of His Divine Majesty's Imperial Navy!"

A loyal chorus of laughs at the traditional and well-worn naval joke sounded over the comm-net as, one by one, the pilots of *Storm* squadron sent their fighters rolling off into deep attack dives targeted at the lines of falling drop-pods.

The Starhawks launched their payload from near point-blank range, sending a wave of high-explosive warhead missiles streaming into the open, vulnerable underbelly bays of their troop transport targets. Fire from the transports' anti-ordnance defences was sporadic and desultory—the vessels were under-armed and their turret crews under-trained—damaging only one Starhawk and destroying virtually none of the incoming missile wave. Multiple explosions tore through the bellies of each of the three target transports, destroying row upon row of drop-pods as they sat stacked in their launch cradles. Others, ripped from their moorings by the force of the blasts, fell free, tumbling down towards the planet below, their crude flight systems unable to bring them under control and dooming those inside them to a terrible, fiery death as the pods burned up in the upper atmosphere of Helia.

One of the transports blew up entirely, the explosions that had gutted its belly hold spreading into its reactor system, enveloping the vessel in a sudden and spectacular fireball, throwing out wreckage to smash into other surrounding

transports and their closely-packed launch lines of falling drop-pods. Peeling away at the end of its attack run, one of the Starhawks—Goschen's craft, Caparan saw, the same one that had been damaged by turret fire—was caught and consumed by the fringes of the blast. One bomber was a small price to pay for the destruction of three enemy transports and the thousands of troops and vehicles aboard them, Caparan knew, but, such cold strategic equations did not make the loss of any of those under his command any easier to bear.

"*Nemesis* to *Macharius,*" he signalled. "Payload expended, targets well struck. Awaiting further orders."

"Fine hunting, Milos," came the reply, the familiar voice of Remus Nyder crackling over the long-range comm-net frequency. "Rendezvous with fighter escorts and return home, *Nemesis. Macharius* looks forward to welcoming you back aboard her once more."

"Emperor's oath, Zane. Pull up! Your outer hull is starting to burn!"

Reth Zane flicked a switch on his comm-net panel, cutting off the warning voice of his wingman. Altomare was a good pilot, he knew, but his brother Fury pilot had little in the way of faith. And, faith, Zane knew, was the greatest weapon of all. Alarm chimes sounded from his instrumentation panel, warning him of the mounting temperature of his craft's outer skin. Zane ignored them, reciting the words of the 58th Incantation of Inner Peace to himself, looping his own voice through his helmet speakers, so that all he heard were the calming words of the holy text.

The Emperor is my Guardian, my Shield and my Protector.

While he watches over me, I shall fear no enemy.

The Heretic, the Daemon, the Abomination have no hold over me.

He recited the words to himself as his fighter fell headlong down the gravity well, ghostly flames dancing around its wing tips as it cut a fiery trail through the upper strata of the planet's atmosphere. His fingers connected with the control stick's firing triggers, releasing short, stabbing bursts of las-energy from his nose cannons.

Once. Twice. Three times.

His lascannon power cells were almost depleted, but he had already realized just how vulnerable and poorly-armoured the drop-pod targets were. The first lascannon volley caught the nearest drop-pod on its underside, blowing off pieces of its glowing heat shield and destroying its retro-thrusters. Even if the drop-pod somehow survived atmospheric entry with a damaged heat shield, it would still be unable to slow down its speed of descent, and would plough into the ground of its intended landing site with meteoric force.

Zane's next volley ripped away the side of the second drop-pod, causing catastrophic decompression and sucking the pod's screaming occupants out into the void.

His third burst missed the last pod in the chain. Zane paused and recited the lines of the incantation to himself again, his face glowing in the reflected light from his instrumentation panel as series after series of crimson flashing runes lit up in urgent warning. The sound of alert chimes filled the cockpit, and from somewhere came the faint but distinct smell of burning wiring and plastics. Even the ever-silent servitor drone manning the fighter's cockpit rear turret gun seemed agitated.

Zane opened his eyes, fixed on his target and fired. The last drop-pod exploded apart as the line of las-blasts tore through it.

Zane took tight hold of the control stick, pulling back hard and feeding power through to the thrusters. The Fury shook violently, its engines whining in protest as they struggled against the seemingly irresistible pull of Helia's gravity. And then the Fury was rising again, pulling out of the high orbital dive, its scorched underbelly riding a cushion of fire as it skimmed across the top of the upper atmospheric envelope. Most of the status runes on his instrumentation panel returned to a reassuring green or at least a non-urgent amber again, but several remained crimson. Zane ignored them, already seeking out the next line of targets as he rose to rejoin his wingman. He and Altomare had followed that last line of drop-pods down together, jointly destroying the first six of them before Altomare gave up the chase, turning back to avoid burning up in Helia's atmosphere. Zane had gone on to destroy the remaining five drop-pods in the

chain, pushing his Fury Interceptor to levels beyond its supposed tolerance limits, although Zane knew that he would come to no harm. Not with the Emperor watching over him and guiding him in his holy work.

“I am his Sword of Retribution, I am his Vessel of Wrath. Though I am but weak and mortal flesh, the spirit of his Divine Will fills and strengthens me,” Zane murmured to himself, reciting the 13th Canticle of Divine Retribution, remembering the first time he had seen those words, carved, along with thousands of other sacred text lines, into the floor of the great Ecclesiarch cathedral on the shrine-world of Sacra Evangelista. Remembering kneeling as a young novice just recently taken Holy Orders and running his fingers in wonder over the ancient, time-worn letters painstakingly etched into the stonework of the floor.

Remembering how, that very night, the visions of the blessed Sororitas warrior angel had come to him as he knelt praying in his cell, telling him that his destiny in the service of the Master of Mankind lay elsewhere: that he was to become an Avenging Fury, the scourge of the Emperor’s enemies.

Remembering how he had gone to the father-confessor with the news of his visions, and remembering too the subsequent agonies and ordeals as the truth of his visions was examined by an Ecclesiarchy court of inquiry and he himself was rigorously tested physically and mentally for evidence of heretical falsehood. His visions finally verified by the court, he was released from his vows as a Ministorum adept and allowed to pursue his service to the Emperor elsewhere within the mighty Imperium of Mankind.

Zane levelled out of the power climb, searching for and finding the next string of falling drop-pods, and guiding his prophetically-named Fury Interceptor towards them. More of the Emperor’s enemies still lived, and his holy work was not yet done.

Bulus Sirl watched as another of the troop transports exploded. Even with his cataract-clouded vision, he could see the firefly specks of enemy bombers dancing round the wreck of the burning ship. They were losing this battle, he realized, and losing it badly. The invasion of Helia was over. Forget the transports and the slave-stock scum inside them, he told himself. All that matters

was that warships such as the *Virulent* survived to fight another day. With warships, another world could be subjugated, another army of slave troops could be raised, another fleet of transports could be constructed.

Yes, the invasion of Helia was over, he told himself. At least for the time being.

“Break off,” he ordered. “Bring us about and take us out of orbit.”

“Our orders are to stand in orbit and offer close support to the drop-pod assault on the planetary surface,” warned his second-in-command, a mere stripling with less than half a century’s service to the pestilent glories of the Creator of Corruption.

Sirl hissed in irritation, the gill-like slits on the sides of his neck opening in reaction and releasing a stinking spray of mist redolent with drifting viral spores. He lashed out with his tumour-tentacles, picking up the upstart and smashing him against a nearby bulkhead wall. A swarm of chittering Nurgle-spawn fell on the corpse, eagerly lapping up the mess leaking from its smashed skull. Sirl reached out again, appointing another officer as his new second-in-command, and with one touch of his tentacles he bestowed the blessings of the plague-kiss upon the chosen recipient.

“Our first loyalty is to the Plague Lord. Our first duty is to avenge the death of his servant. Set a course and prepare for battle. Our target is the *Macharius*.”

The *Macharius* shuddered under the impact of another blast against its void shields. A dull boom reverberated through the command deck, indicating an internal explosion somewhere below decks. Semper cast an anxious glance at his vessel’s Technis Majoris.

“Magos Castaboras, damage report!”

The gold-masked figure of the *Macharius*’s most senior tech-priest paused for several seconds, mind-impulse implants allowing him to commune with other Adeptus Mechanicus servants of the Machine God aboard the ship, and with the arcane workings of the machine-spirit mind of the *Macharius* itself. In seconds, he was able to receive and interpret detailed information from all over the ship.

“There has been an explosive hull breach on the starboard underside, penetrating several lower decks. The affected sections have been sealed off and the oxygen fires in those sections allowed to burn themselves out. There has been some interruption to the atmosphere systems of lower decks four through eight.”

Interruption, thought Semper, knowing that conditions on the lower decks could confidently be described as approaching hellish at the best of times: an endless warren of cramped and ill-lit passageways and compartments, the air thick with toxic fumes and burning vapours spilling out from the ship’s churning, mechanical guts. What must it be like down there now, he wondered, with whole sections in flames or exposed to the vacuum, and what little circulating air supply there was now cut off.

“How will this atmospheric ‘interruption’ affect the crew on those levels?”

The magos hesitated, seemingly caught by surprise by his captain’s question. Semper often had the impression that, to the haughty servants of the Machine God, the presence of a human crew aboard the vessels under their charge was viewed as merely a necessary inconvenience.

“Casualties will be medium to heavy, captain, but almost all of them from amongst the lowest class of crew ratings, and hence easily replaced by non-skilled conscripts from other decks.”

Semper nodded in acknowledgement. Battle raged all around the *Macharius,* and his ship, together with the *Drachenfels,*had been first to feel the full fury of the enemy guns, and had now taken several damaging hits. Two of its portside launch bays and one on the starboard side were out of action; one of its forward portside gun decks had been gutted by a direct hit from a deadly vortex missile; its long-range surveyors had been disrupted by a series of damaging radiation bursts against the void shields, and the Generarium tech-priests were now reporting damage to the coolant systems of two of the ship’s five massive plasma-core reactors. None of this damage was critical yet, Semper knew, and every hit the *Macharius*took was instantly sent back to the enemy by the Imperial ship’s own gun batteries. Surging forward into the midst of the disordered enemy fleet, surrounded by enemy targets, the *Macharius*’s guns spoke without interruption, carefully combining their fire patterns with those of the *Drachenfels;* the *Macharius*’s massed salvoes stripping bare an enemy

vessel's void shields and leaving it vulnerable to follow-on blasts from the Gothic class cruiser's fearsome batteries of lance turrets. Two enemy destroyers had been obliterated in this way, and the infamous renegade vessel *Heathen Promise* had been driven off after a pounding from the two Imperial cruisers, retiring from the battle with one entire flank of its hull laid open and trailing a cloud of debris and energy vapour.

Elsewhere, the battle was slowly turning in the Imperial fleet's favour. The *Torment* was a burning wreck, but so too was the enemy flagship *Lord Seth,* succumbing at last after receiving a total of eleven torpedo hits. Bombers from the *Pluton* had mercilessly pounced upon Vanguard squadron, but not before the Imperial Cobra destroyers ships had claimed two more troop transports with a close-range torpedo strike. The second wave of *Macharius*-launched Starhawks was even now attacking and destroying more of the transports, but reports were coming in that the first attack wave of Starhawks en route back to the *Macharius* had ran into trouble, coming under heavy attack from enemy fighters returning to orbit from the surface of Helia. The fighters were from the *Lord Seth*, and, with their home vessel destroyed and no space for them aboard the *Pluton*, they threw themselves at the Imperial bombers with suicidal frenzy, displaying an unmatched savagery remarkable even for the insane followers of the malignant powers of the warp.

Still, the current tally stood at nine of the enemy troop transports crippled or destroyed, with the second Imperial bomber wave likely to further add to that score. Of the enemy warships, the cruisers *Pagan Voyager* and *Heathen Promise* had already withdrawn from battle, and there were signs that others—including, significantly, *Pluton*—were also preparing to withdraw. Without their warship protectors, the remaining troop ships were doomed, and the invasion of Helia would be almost totally defeated.

Suddenly, the command deck was rocked by a heavy blast, knocking Semper to the ground. Alarms sounded, and an object—the body of a servitor drone—fell from one of the bridge's high upper galleries, smashing into main deck and lying on the ground, its broken, mechanical limb-attachments still twitching with mindless cybernetic life.

"Slaughter class cruiser! It came in on us fast, using those wrecks for cover!" said Ulanti, helping the captain to his feet and pointing in warning towards the

main viewing bay port. The blast shutters were sliding down in automatic response to the surprise attack, but Semper could still clearly see the distinctive viper-head prow shape of a renegade cruiser bearing down hard on his ship.

“Brace for impact!” bellowed Ulanti. “They’re coming in close to give us a full broadside!”

“No,” said Semper, countermanding his lieutenant’s order. The enemy Slaughter class ships were notoriously fast for capital vessels and, at first, Semper thought that the enemy cruiser meant to ram them. Then he saw it turn away a few degrees, rolling over to port to present its armoured underbelly to the *Macharius*. The surface of the warp-altered vessel’s underside was sickeningly organic-looking, and was pitted with blisterlike pustules. Even as Semper watched, he saw these pustules swell and open, revealing the metal prows of the craft inside them.

“Boarding action! Armsmen to their stations,” ordered Semper. “Prepare to repel boarding assault.”

Spat out of the underbelly of the *Virulent*, the wave of boarding craft spanned the narrow distance between the two ships in less than a minute. Many were picked off by the *Macharius*’s anti-ordnance defences before they could attach themselves to the Imperial ship’s hull, exploding apart amongst the hail of las-cannon bursts and shellfire. Others misjudged their course trajectory or failed to fire braking motors in time, dashing themselves against the metal cliffs of the cruiser’s armoured flanks. Those that survived attached themselves limpet-like to the surface of the *Macharius*’s hull, using melta-charges to blow open airlock seals; powerful metal jaws to chew through thick armour plating; even ancient phase field generators to open up entryways through otherwise impenetrable bulkheads.

All over the starboard side of the *Macharius*, on deck after deck, strange, warp-altered figures emerged through raw-edged holes in bulkhead walls, howling in triumph at being here amongst their enemies and instantly falling upon the first of the Imperial vessel’s human defenders.

Maxim Borusa cursed, swinging his chainsword and shearing away the face of the beast-headed warp spawn that blocked his way. Another Chaos thing charged towards him, trying to impale him on the point of its pike weapon. Maxim cut it off at the knees with his return swing, pressing the barrel of his shotgun into its neck and pulling the trigger as it fell squealing to the ground.

He continued moving forward, cutting and blasting a path through the scram of bodies, following in the wake of the figure in the navy blue uniform with the gold epaulettes. Maxim enjoyed life on the command deck of the *Macharius,* away from the filth and squalor of the ship's lower decks, where he had begun his erstwhile career aboard the carrier ship, slaving away on a gunnery deck work crew as just another piece of convict-conscript hivetrash. He enjoyed the feel of his crisp clean new uniform, and his private berth in the petty officers' quarters, and the many luxuries and indulgences that often came his way now. He enjoyed all this, and he realized that his continued enjoyment of all these pleasures depended totally on the continued well-being of Flag-lieutenant Hito Ulanti.

Something that smelled of open charnel pits and spat out a stream of acidic bile rose up in front of him, barking incoherently. Maxim fed it the pommel of his chainsword, feeling the studded ridges of the hand-guard smash through gangrenous flesh, rotted teeth and bone. The thing staggered back, mewling loudly, and Maxim shot it three times in the face and throat with an autopistol that he did not remember picking up from one of the many corpses lying at his feet on the floor of the passageway.

He pushed on, stomping his heavy boots down on the face of something on the ground that tried to stab up at him with the bone-skewers that grew out of its hands. Disembowelling a renegade who still wore the remnants of the uniform of the Imperial Guard regiment he had deserted from to join the cause of Chaos. Tearing the rebreather mask from the face of a carapace-armoured warrior and watching the disease-bloated features of the once-human thing underneath as it asphyxiated on the relatively clean and unpolluted air of the *Macharius.*

This was the third such battle that he had followed his patron officer into since Ulanti had volunteered to personally lead the defence against the enemy boarding assault, and Maxim soundly cursed all ambitious and over-keen young flag officers. Ulanti would go far, Maxim suspected, and hopefully his faithful

petty officer companion and protector Maxim Borusa would go far along with him, but only if he managed to keep his meal-ticket alive in the meantime.

Maxim saw the aristocratic officer artfully gut an enemy boarder with his sabre, but another renegade crewman nearby raised his boltgun towards Ulanti. The big hiveworld ganger lunged ahead, savagely kicking an Imperial armsman forward into the renegade's line of fire. The armsman was torn apart in the burst of bolt shells intended for Ulanti and Maxim emptied the rest of the autopistol clip into the renegade before he could fire again.

Ulanti turned, nodding in silent thanks to his bodyguard protector. Gunshots rang out along the passageway as a second wave of enemy boarders advanced towards them. Maxim pulled Ulanti back into the cover of a recessed maintenance conduit, snatching up the dead renegade's bolter as he did so. Ulanti drew a master-crafted laspistol from his side holster and began firing off a series of carefully-aimed las-shots. Maxim, born and raised in the tunnels of the Stranivar underhive, knew that what counted in situations like this was heavy firepower, and plenty of it. He hefted the bolter, its feel and weight familiar to him from a thousand bloody ganger battles in those same tunnels, and checked its ammo load, pleased to see that he still had almost a full clip of shells. He raised the weapon and began firing, methodically panning it back and forth and pumping shell after shell across the full width of the passageway, whining ricochets zigzagging off metal bulkhead walls and further increasing the chances of any one shot finding a target.

The boltgun's heavy chatter was soon joined by the dull roar of shotguns, a squad of naval armsmen advancing down the passageway to support Maxim and Ulanti. The bodies of enemy boarders began to pile up on the decking but any possibility of retreat was cut off by a second group of *Macharius* defenders seizing and holding the passageway junction to the enemy's rear. The renegade troops were quickly cut down in a withering crossfire, their dying screams of devotion to their Plague Lord master lost in the roaring chorus of shotgun blasts.

The midshipman commander of the armsman squad stood to attention before Ulanti, saluting smartly at the sight of his flag officer rank insignia. "More of them, sir. Perhaps another three dozen or so, down on the next level. Commissar Kyogen's got them pretty well boxed in, but there's a chance they could try and storm through towards the central magazine."

“Show me,” said Ulanti, drawing his sabre again and moving off at the head of the squad. Behind him, Maxim spat in disgust, scrabbling about in search of fresh bolter clips amongst the already putrefying bodies of the enemy dead before hurrying off in pursuit of his patron.

The master of the *Virulent* turned away from the auspex screen, pleased to see the distant shapes of the Imperial fleet falling away to the rear of his vessel. Accompanying the *Virulent* were the *Pluton*, the *Pagan Voyager* and a handful of surviving escort vessels. The *Heathen Promise* limped off on a different course heading, offering itself—Sirl was delighted to see—as an obvious, alternative target for the wrath of any pursuing enemy ships. Ahead of the fleeing Chaos ships was open space, and the promise of escape into the warp.

It had been Sirl’s intention to launch a second wave of boarding craft at the *Macharius*, but, before he could do so, he was beaten off by the marauding beams of the *Drachenfels*’s deadly accurate lance turrets. Sirl was a loyal servant of the true powers of the warp, but he was no rage-possessed Khornate madman. He had served Grandfather Nurgle for centuries, and fully intended to serve him for centuries more yet. The ways of the Grandfather were slow and methodical, differing from those of the other Chaos powers, but in the end, all things fell to decay and corruption. The *Macharius* and the*Virulent* would cross paths again, he knew, and, when they did so, he would have his revenge.

After all, he mused to himself, had he not already taken steps to ensure that it would be so?

The Chaos thing shuffled through the darkness, leaving the lights and shouts of the enemy search parties behind it. There had been others like it amongst the boarding assault, it knew, others bearing the captain-champion’s plague gifts, but somehow it sensed that it was the only one to survive this far.

The cold, metal vaults and passageways of the enemy ship were unfamiliar to it, not at all like those of its own vessel, where the rich, humid atmosphere was thick with the stench of rot and decay, and the decks and walls marked with bright patterns of rust corrosion and weirdly beautiful sprays of poisonous algae and fungi. Still, it knew enough to head downwards into the bowels of the enemy

vessel in search of what it needed. Or, rather, in search of what the thing stirring to life inside it needed.

Heat and darkness. Solitude and security. To grow. To thrive.

To fester.

SEVEN

Tiredness and exhaustion filled every particle of Leoten Semper's being. He had been on his feet for over thirty hours now, the last ten of those overseeing the aftermath of victory. The Battle of Helia IV was won. The boarding assault on his own vessel had been repulsed, and the honour of the final shots to be fired in anger had gone to *Scipion* as it put four torpedoes into the engine reactors of the retreating *Violator,* bringing the Chaos ship's ran of luck throughout the battle to a sudden and spectacularly explosive end.

Yes, the battle was over, but there was still much to be done. Without their warship protectors, the Chaos troop transports fell easy prey to the Imperial gun batteries and torpedoes, but there was a considerable enemy invasion force already on the planet's surface and digging in hard. The ground war would continue for months yet, and Imperial Guard reinforcements would have to be brought in from elsewhere within the Gothic sector to finally dislodge the enemy presence on Helia IV.

Amongst the surviving Imperial ships, both the *Macharius* and the *Drachenfels* had taken damaging—but not debilitating-hits, while *Scipion* had taken a crippling hit to its warp drive and would remain in orbit above Helia for weeks to come while it underwent vital repairs, in the meantime putting its firepower to use against the Chaos positions on the planet's surface. Of all the Imperium capital ships, only von Blucher's *Graf Orlok* had survived more or less undamaged, and Semper would well imagine what Erwin Ramas's scathing opinion on that particular subject would be.

Rescue shuttles were still bringing in life-pod survivors from the *Torment* and the other destroyed Imperium ships, although the diligent search for these survivors was less a mission of mercy and more an act of necessity: *Macharius* and its sister ships all needed fresh blood to replace their own crew casualties suffered during the battle. Meanwhile, repairs to all vessels were already underway, while the Firestorm class frigate *Vengeful* had been despatched in high-speed pursuit of the retreating Chaos fleet, tracking them to the edge of the Helia system where it was hoped that its on-board psyker navigators and astropaths would be able to pick up prophetic hints of the Chaos fleet's eventual

destination as it made the jump into warp space.

“We’ve won a fine victory today, captain, but it’s plain to see that you’re almost dead on your feet. You should retire to your quarters. Emperor knows you have earned your rest.”

Semper turned, unaware until now that Koba Kyogen was even present on the bridge; he had thought that the ship’s commissar was still touring the ship, checking that crew morale was at sufficiently high levels after the recent victory, gathering information and making notes for the inevitable commissar’s report that he would later secretly transmit via astropath to Battlefleet Command. Along with Ulanti, Kyogen had led the battle against the enemy boarding assault, and Semper was fairly sure that the stem-faced giant had been on duty for even longer than he had. Sometimes Semper wondered if his vessel’s enigmatic chief commissar wasn’t some kind of ingeniously-crafted automaton creation of the servants of the Machine God rather than an ordinary flesh-and-blood human.

“You are of course right, comrade commissar,” said Semper agreeably, only too aware that Kyogen’s casually-expressed words were probably less of a suggestion and more of a direct command. In all matters relating to security and order aboard an Imperial Navy vessel—including even the well-being of its captain, it seemed—the word of a ship’s commissar was law. Semper looked around the bridge, searching for and finding the next most senior present officer in the chain of command.

“Mister Maeler, the bridge is yours. Gentlemen…”

Senior Gunnery Officer Werner Maeler clicked his heels together in understanding in the approved Battlefleet Gothic manner, the other command deck officers saluting in response to their captain’s farewell. Semper walked towards the bridge elevator, the waiting trio of veteran armsmen bodyguards falling into step beside him. The elevator doors opened ahead of them, and Semper saw the familiar dark grey robes of the group of figures who stepped out onto the command deck. They were the acolyte servants of the members of the Adeptus Astra Telepathica, and amongst them was the tall and hooded figure of their master. His sightless gaze swept the command deck, settling on Semper.

“Adeptus Rapavna,” murmured Semper, nodding his head in deference to the adept. “What brings my exalted senior astropath here to the command deck?” If Rapavna detected any hint of disapproving censure in his captain’s words, he gave no indication. Amongst the notoriously superstitious crews of the Imperial Navy, it was often considered bad luck to allow psykers onto a vessel’s command deck.

“An urgent communication from Battlefleet Command,” came the reply, intoned in an astropath’s customary eerie, empty-toned whisper. “We have new orders, captain. The *Macharius* is to make haste at once to Belatis, where we are ordered to safeguard the evacuation of the Divine Emperor’s most loyal and valued servants from that world before the moment of its appointed destruction at the hands of the enemy.”

INTERLUDE

The Planet Killer moved through the warp with ponderous majesty, like a triumphant Imperial potentate marching at the head of his all-conquering army. Escort vessels swept ahead of it like heralds bearing the news of their master's approach. A phalanx of cruisers and battlecruisers travelled alongside it, flanking it in protective formation. Two battleships and an awesomely ancient and venerable Adeptus Astartes battle barge followed in its wake.

Once known as the *Magna Tyrannis*, the battle barge was older than the Imperium of Mankind and had served throughout the Horus Heresy as the flagship of the Despoiler. Fully five companies of Black Legion Chaos Marines were carried within it, serving as Abaddon's personal praetorian guard. Now re-christened *Harbinger of Doom* by Imperial historians since its fall to Chaos, the battle barge—twin to the one aboard which the final confrontation between the Emperor and Horus had taken place as Abaddon and the Chaos Warmaster's other lieutenants led the assault on the Imperial Place—was a symbol of the Despoiler's personal power and continuation of the dread legacy of the Warmaster, and the mercifully rare sightings of it beyond the boundaries of the Eye of Terror almost without fail heralded the advent of another major Chaos incursion into Imperium space.

Larger than any vessel ever constructed by human hands, the Planet Killer moved implacably forward towards its still distant target. Its crew went about their duties, ever aware that the eye of the Despoiler was upon them, even though it was by no means certain if he was aboard the vessel. Ever cunning and mindful of the danger of a surprise enemy attack or even the possibility of an assassination plot amongst his many ambitious and ruthless underlings, the heir of Horus randomly transferred his command flag between vessels, and at any one time could be aboard the Planet Killer, the *Harbinger of Doom* or either of the two formidably-armed battleships. Only his most trusted inner cadre of servants and acolytes knew his exact location, and there were whispered rumours amongst his fleet admirals and legion commanders that the Despoiler had secretly created a series of homunculus duplicates of himself to further confuse his enemies. The truth of this last legend was so far unknown, but Imperium and

Chaos forces alike had been confused on more than one occasion by apparently confirmed reports on the Warmaster's whereabouts, only to then receive conflicting reports of simultaneous sightings of him aboard a different flagship vessel in other warzones many days' warp travel from his previous reported position.

Cunning and resourceful, it was not for nothing that Abaddon the Despoiler had endured for these last ten millennia within the Eye of Terror as the commander of the Traitor Legions and the chosen champion supreme of Chaos Undivided.

Inside the observation blister atop the spike-crowned spire of the Planet Killer's central command tower, its triumvirate of Chaos sorcerer navigators cast their otherworldly gaze out into the warp, mystically divining a path through the shifting currents of the immaterium. The mysteries of the warp held no terrors for them as they did for the human navigators guiding the vessels of the Imperium. They could sense other presences out there in the warp: other navigator-minds belonging to other vessels, and, moving unseen and predatory amongst them, the disembodied daemon-things of the warp. The mindless, bloody thoughts of these entities burned bright in the empyrean as they hungrily and impatiently scratched at the protective warp shields that separated them from the frail and mortal creatures that dared trespass within their realm.

Nearby, the sorcerer-navigators detected the lurking presence of an enemy scout vessel shadowing the Planet Killer fleet on its journey through the warp. It would be a simple thing to issue orders and despatch escort vessels to hunt down and destroy the enemy spy, but the Despoiler had already forbidden such action. It suited him at present to allow the enemy to be aware of the Planet Killer's position. He knew that, hard-pressed on so many different fronts, they could not currently hope to rally a sufficiently large force to try and attack it, and so the knowledge of their own powerlessness must seem all the more terrible to them as they watched the awesomely destructive power of the massive weapon device moving slowly, implacably towards its target.

And, from somewhere out there in the distant reaches of the immaterium, the Planet Killer's sorcerer-navigators could dimly sense the warp of that target. It flickered there on the edges of their mystic warp-sight perception, but growing brighter and more distinct as they closed towards it. The navigators of the Imperium used the guiding call of their weakling Emperor's astronomican to

find their way within the warp, but the pilots of the Despoiler's Planet Killer vessel used a different kind of beacon to guide then to their destination.

Fear.

The terror of billions of human minds. The blind panic of an entire world's population, imprinting itself on the psychically-sensitive stuff of the immaterium and manifesting itself as a bright, dense dwarf star of bitter fear shining in the void.

The minds of the people of Belatis called out into the warp in uncomprehending fear against the injustice of their imminent destruction, and it was that same fear which guided the instrument of their destruction to them.

PART FOUR

EYE OF DESTRUCTION

EIGHT

The mortar shells fell out of the grey, cloud-shrouded Belatis skies, impacting into the muddy earth of the Arbites' precinct-house courtyard and exploding amongst a crew of labourers.

"Blessed Helena's holy teats!" cursed Vannan Korte, taking the name of one of the Adepta Sororitas's greatest heroine-saints in vain and ducking for cover behind the tracks of a Rhino transport as the shower of mud, filth, shrapnel and body parts rained down around him.

He ran from cover, knowing from the experience of the last few frantic, chaos-filled days that he had about twenty seconds' grace to reach other cover before the next round of mortar shells blasted into the precinct compound.

"Mahan," he called into his helmet vox-caster as he ran, "what are your men doing up in those wall turrets? Comparing their favourite passages from the Books of Judgement? Take your boot to your spotters' arses and get a targeting fix on the location of those mortar units!"

"We're trying, Marshal Secundus, but they're hiding out in the hab-zones to the east, amongst those bombed-out ruins, and they're moving their mortars every few rounds, before our spotters can zero in on them," came back the crackling reply on the helmet's vox-unit, strain and tiredness sounding clear in the voice of the Arbites squad commander. Mahan was the youngest and least experienced of the marshal's lieutenants, and Korte had originally opposed his promotion, arguing privately with Byzantane that, promising as he was, the young agri-worlder Arbitrator wasn't yet ready for squad command. Grudgingly, he had to admit that, as in so many things, the marshal's judgement had been right. In the last few weeks, Mahan's performance had been outstanding, often surpassing that of other, more senior squad commanders. He had taken command of the precinct house wall defences, repulsing several full-scale mob attacks on the fortress battlements and offering an umbrella of effective covering fire to the evacuation airlifts that arrived daily from the other Imperium outposts across the planet.

Not, of course, that he was about to tell any of this to Mahan himself. As second-in-command, it was his duty to be the holy terror of the marshal's junior commanders. And besides, he smiled to himself, recognising the familiar biases of a born hiveworlder, he'd be Emperor-damned if he was going to be putting any compliments the way of some dumb hick of an agri-worlder cattle-worrier.

"Then keep at them. Duty to the Emperor demands results, not excuses," growled Korte into the vox-unit microphone.

A warning shout from a nearby trooper alerted him to the whistling whine of the next round of approaching mortar shells. Korte threw himself forward, joining a group of Arbitrators crouching behind a sandbagged lee-wall just as the mortar shells struck, exploding against the solid, reinforced rockcrete walls of the precinct fortress's inner blockhouse or churning up the mud of the outer courtyard. Almost instantly, the macro-cannon turrets of the wall defences spoke in reply, hurling adamantium-tipped high-explosive shells back at the mortar battery's estimated position. A few seconds later, and there came the roaring blast of their impact somewhere amongst the ruins to the east, followed by a series of smaller explosions.

Korte and one of the other Arbitrators—Dolan, who had been with the marshal since the pacification of the genestealer infestation of Tannen's World—exchanged glances, nodding in unspoken agreement.

Secondary explosions, thought Korte. We hit something, alright. Definitely at least some of those mortars. Maybe even an ammo dump into the bargain. Not bad, Arbitrator Mahan. At least for a dumb agri-worlder cattle-worrier.

"Fine work, Mahan," he spoke into the vox-unit, "but keep looking. Find and destroy whatever's left of those mortars. There's a flight of grav-hoppers on their way to us from the evacuation of Precinct Tertius, and I don't want to spend the rest of an afternoon clearing the landing zones of wreckage and body parts again."

"Understood, marshal secundus," came the gunnery commander's calm-voiced reply.

With the mortars at least temporarily silenced, Korte stood up, taking in the

scene around the precinct house's outer courtyard. Baton-wielding proctor-sergeants bawled in unison, directing convict work labourers to clear the courtyard of bodies and wreckage. The chaingang work-crews crept nervously out of whatever cover they had been able to find, terrified that at any second the skies would again drop another deadly hail of razor-edged shrapnel down upon them. One of the crews fought the blaze from a burning, open-topped Rhino transport variant that had taken a direct hit from a stray incendiary round, and the smouldering wreckage of one of the local planetary defence force grav-hoppers still lay where it had crashed nose-first into the western quadrant of the courtyard, shot down by ground fire after almost completing its third strafing run of the Arbites' compound. From somewhere above the low ceiling of rain clouds came the thin, threatening drone of high altitude flyer engines. Korte and Dolan exchanged glances, both of them vainly searching the grey, formless skies above Madina for clues to the flyers' location and identity. "One of ours, or one of theirs?" asked Dolan.

"These days, does it make any difference?" shrugged Korte, with dismissive contempt. Three hours ago, they had watched a flyer formation make a textbook and apparently devastating low-altitude air-strike on ground targets amongst the industrial suburbs to the north of the capital. Who the flyers were, and what their targets had been, was still a mystery to the defenders of the Arbites fortress.

Korte looked out past the walls of the fortress, seeing the dark shape of the rock of the regent's palace visible through the curtain of rainfall, the rain lighting up the enormous, looming edifice as it sparked off the crackling defence shield that surrounded the seat of power of the planetary governor of Belatis. Even from this distance, and even through the sound-blanketing barrier of rain, he could hear the sounds of artillery fire. He raised his binoculars, wiping the lenses free of dripping rainwater. The range-finder device zoomed in on the regent's palace, allowing Korte to see the spattering of artillery fire impacting harmlessly against the barrier of the defence shield.

As long as they keep firing at their beloved governor-regent then at least that means they won't be firing at us, Korte consoled himself as he thought again of just how sickeningly quickly events here on Belatis had overtaken them all. It was scarcely two months since the unexpectedly premature end of the dry season and the beginnings of this, the harsh and unforgiving monsoon months; scarcely two months since the fearful discovery in that now thankfully-obliterated

underground chamber beneath the Rook, but in that time the whole of Belatis had slid into anarchy and civil war with a speed and viciousness that had been truly terrible to behold.

Korte watched another round of artillery fire strike against the palace defence shield. Several shells overshot their target—Emperor alone knows how the gunners could miss a target that massive, thought Korte—and landed with disastrous effect amongst the thousands of refugees sheltering in futile hope amongst the surrounding ruins, under the falsely protective shadow of the palace rock.

The whole place is going to the warp and the warp's welcome to it, thought Korte sourly, with a bitterness that he knew came from helplessness and his own angry reaction against what was now the inevitability of total defeat. The sooner the marshal gets us out of here, the better. Emperor knows we've done everything here we could for these poor wretches.

NINE

Muffled by the defence shield and the invisible nullfields that screened off the otherwise open balconies from the outside world, the sounds of the civil war tearing Belatis apart hardly penetrated the throne room of the regent's palace. Indeed, thought Byzantane, you wouldn't know that their world was only days away from extinction, the way these fools prattled on, still vying for petty privileges and personal advantage as their world died around them.

"What you must understand, honoured marshal, is that his majesty the governor-regent is not yet ready to take leave of his beloved homeworld. A world which, I hasten to add, the Emperor in his divine wisdom has entrusted to the stewardship of the governor-regent and his family for these last four hundred years."

What you really mean, thought Byzantane, staring impassively at the tall and patrician figure of First Security Minister Judda Kale, is that you've persuaded the fat fool that it's his noble duty to remain here until the very end, because you and your kind still haven't finished plundering your beloved homeworld for every piece of booty that you need to set yourselves up for the rest of your parasitic and well-pampered lives on another world. Preferably one far from any warzones and any troubling memories of Belatis and the ghosts of its inhabitants.

So far, the first security minister had almost filled the holds of one orbiting transport with property of the household of the governor-regent; property which included not only the contents of the now-emptied vaults of the regent's treasury, but whatever other loot and valuables that Kale's security thugs could plunder from elsewhere amongst Belatis's museums, shrines and treasure houses. The question of how many of their fellow doomed Belatisites could have been carried to safety inside those cargo holds was apparently not one that occurred to either the security minister or his accomplices.

"I understand the governor-regent's desire to remain here with his people for as long as possible," said Byzantane, pointedly addressing the occupant of the governor-regent's throne rather than figure of Judda Kale standing before the throne dais. "Still, as a servant of the Emperor it is also his duty to survive, since

the Emperor in his mercy has commanded all his most valued servants here on Belatis be spared from the power of this new enemy weapon. As the most senior agent of the Emperor's law here on Belatis, it falls to me to ensure that the evacuation of the Emperor's faithful subjects proceeds without delay. I am here today to warn the governor-regent that he cannot delay his departure any longer. The Imperial Guard forces of the 48th Valetta and the 123rd Tyre-Minos regiments are already embarking aboard their transports. My Adeptus Arbites garrison is the only Imperium force remaining on Belatis, and I have just received word that we too have been ordered to pull out."

Byzantane paused, looking directly at the portly figure of the governor-regent sitting on his throne. "If the governor-regent wishes to remain here along with the rest of his subjects to face the arrival of the Despoiler's terror weapon, or to hold out to the last against the renegades currently laying waste to his capital, then I commend his majesty's loyalty to his planet and people, but I tell him now that he shall do so alone and without the protection of the Adeptus Arbites and the Imperial Navy."

Almost on cue, a heavy salvo impacted against the palace defence shield, sending tremors running through the stonework of the ancient building and causing many of those present—courtiers and the anonymous faces of Belatis minor-ranking nobility, clustering to the presence of the governor-regent in the knowledge that he was their sole chance of escape—to cast nervous glances around them. Clearly, few amongst this aristocratic elite shared their governor's apparent desire to see their world's death agonies out to the bitter end, and most if not all of them already wished they were aboard one of those orbiting transports. The dank and confined holds and compartments of an Imperial transport were a poor substitute for the grand and spacious fineries of the governor-regent's palace, but at least they were safely out of reach of the cultist artillery barrage.

"We thank the marshal for his warning, but we remind him that we too hold adeptus rank equal to his own, and that as His Divine Majesty's governor of this world, the final order to leave it and abandon it to the enemy must come from this palace and not from the Arbites' courthouse." The governor-regent's strangely thin and reedy voice rang through the high-ceiling throne room, and he glanced nervously around him as he spoke, seeking encouragement from those around him.

Byzantane fought down an outburst of angry frustration. Even now, with his world just days away from destruction, this fat fool wanted to play politics, to put on a show for the assembled nobles that he would not be so easily dictated to by the Imperium. Before Byzantane could react, however, a dark blue-habited figure stepped forward from the ranks of courtiers near the throne. In instinctive recognition of the simple yet distinctive robes of a member of the Adepta Sororitas, the nobles and guards stepped aside to let her pass.

“The governor-regent is of course correct, but his adept rank is that of the order of Adeptus Civitas. As a member of the Adeptus Arbites, the marshal is of the order of the Adeptus Militaris. In all situations pertaining to war against the enemies of the Imperium of Mankind, it is the Emperor’s holy will and the command of the High Council of Terra that the word of the members of the Adeptus Militaris take precedence over that of all others.”

The silver-haired member of the Sisterhood of the Adepta Sororitas bowed to the planetary governor and stepped back, casting a brief glance over at Byzantane. The Arbites marshal nodded to her in silent thanks, glad of the presence here of at least one other agent of the Imperium. Sister Apponia belonged to the Order Famulous of the Adepta Sororitas, assigned by the Ministorum to organise and maintain the governor-regent’s household, serving as an advisor to the lord of Belatis and, should he require it, a constant reminder of his subservience to the higher authority of the Imperium.

Vittas Sarro was not a bad man, Byzantane thought: he was in his own way a loyal enough servant of the Emperor, but he was a weak and foolish one, subject to petty vanities and too dependent on the opinions and manipulations of others. Others such as First Minister Judda Kale. Or the stolid, glowering figure of General Brod, commander of what was left of Belatis’s planetary defence forces, who glared in open hostility at Byzantane from across the floor of the throne room. Or, if the word of agents that Byzantane had amongst the palace staff was to be believed, the figure sitting on the lesser throne beside that of the governor-regent’s. Even as Byzantane watched, Sarro leaned over, accepting both a goblet of wine and a few whispered words from his beloved sister, the alluring Lady Malissa.

Installed in the place of the ruthlessly expunged clan of the rebel Lord Tarsus,

the Sarros had been the rulers of Belatis for the past four hundred years, each Sarro planetary governor carefully adding the word “regent” to his title in acknowledgement to the Emperor, the true lord of Belatis and in whose name they continued to rule with the approval and protection of the Imperium. The House of Sarro had served the Emperor well in those four hundred years, their loyalty recorded in the frescoes of the dubiously over-heroic battle deeds of previous governor-regents which decorated the walls of the throne room. All around were epic battle scenes of the Sarros’ ancestors routing the Tarsus rebels or defending Belatis from foul alien attackers, but the bloodline had clearly degenerated over the four centuries, and statues and noble portraits of Sarro’s honoured ancestors gazed down on the governor’s throne in what might have been stern disapproval of its present incumbent.

Sarro gulped nervously at the wine goblet proffered by his sister, and Byzantane added likely intemperance to the governor-regent’s many failings. Studying the Lady Malissa—her graceful patrician features, her obvious shrewd intelligence necessarily masked by the dictates of court protocol—as she stroked her brother’s face comfortingly, Byzantane again cursed the local hereditary customs, wondering again if Belatis’s slide into anarchy and civil war would have been so steeply rapid had it been the Lady Malissa and not her younger, weaker brother who had ascended to the governor-regent’s throne after the death of their father eight years ago.

“Can the situation really be so bad?” stammered Sarro, draining the last of the wine. “We can still call in more troops to maintain order and defend the palace. As governor-regent, the people will look to me for leadership in this dark hour. It is my duty to remain here with them for as long as possible. They will want to know that, though our world may soon be gone, its memory and spirit will live on, for as long as the House of Sarro itself endures.”

No, not a bad man, thought Byzantane. Just weak and foolish. And completely deluded.

“More troops?” asked Byzantane, struggling to temper the scathing tone of his voice. “From where, my lord? Your barracks are empty. Your entire troop reserves are either deployed in the field or have abandoned their posts. Many of them, whole regiments, even, have gone over to the side of the enemy.”

Byzantane broke off here, sparing a withering glance to General Brod and his adjutants; it was now apparent that the ranks of the planetary defence force had been successfully infiltrated months or even years ago by Chaos cultists and sympathisers. As word of the impending disaster leaked out amongst the people of Belatis, more and more Chaos cults had emerged from hiding in almost every major population centre across the planet's surface, spreading fear and dissent amongst a populace already terrified by the first whispered, horrified rumours of their world's imminent destruction. Many of the first local defence force units despatched to quell the cult-inspired uprisings had in fact sided with the enemies that they had been sent to destroy, their officers and NCOs now known to have been the corrupted followers of the powers of the warp. In other units it had been the rank and file troops who rebelled, executing their officers and opening their armouries to the ever-swelling ranks of the followers of Chaos. The cult leaders preached that only those that swore themselves to the Dark Powers would be spared when the Planet Killer hung in orbit over their heads and the wrath of the Despoiler descended upon their doomed world. The terrified inhabitants of Belatis had flocked to the cause of Chaos in their millions, desperate to grasp at any chance of survival, when faith in the Emperor apparently now offered none. The wave of defections and conversions to the side of Chaos spread at a terrifying rate amongst the population, starting primarily amongst the planetary defence force.

At Byzantane's order, Korte had carried out an investigation amongst the higher echelon ranks of the governor-regent's armies, identifying sixteen officers on Brod's command staff, including the general's own second-in-command, whose incompetence and laxity had contributed to the army's failure to contain the situation. Justice for those sixteen had been swift and summary, but the investigation had been necessarily hurried, and Byzantane was troubled by a worrying suspicion that there might still be Chaos agents hiding amongst the planetary defence force command staff.

And perhaps higher than that, whispered a voice inside him, giving rise to a second even greater and more worrying suspicion as he looked round the throne room and studied the faces of the assembled ranks of the great and the good of Belatis's aristocracy and government. Here was not the time and place to act on those suspicions, he knew. Later, when they were underway in the warp and he had them all isolated aboard an Adeptus Arbites strike cruiser, would be the time

to start asking questions about how Belatis had descended into anarchy so easily and so quickly; how much was due to laxity and incompetence, which, as those sixteen executed PDF command officers could testify were themselves considered crimes against the Emperor in the eyes of the stern guardians of his Law, and how much was due to a crime far more heinous.

Treason. Betrayal. Heresy and connivance with the powers of the warp. Crimes for which there could never be a great enough punishment.

But first Byzantane knew he had to get everyone here off this world. First must come the evacuation, and, only after that, possible judgement and punishment. Stifling his natural anger and frustration, he adopted a more conciliatory tone, remembering an expression used by the hunters of his homeworld as they patiently lay in wait, sometimes for days on end, watching over the traps and snares they laid by the game-trails and watering holes of the dense forests that covered the face of Skyre.

First the bait, then the blade.

Byzantane looked at the figure occupying the throne chair. “All here know you to be a true and faithful servant of the Emperor, honoured Governor-Regent Sarro. Be assured that that you will be accorded all the honours and tribute due to you as this world’s Emperor-appointed guardian. Tell me what you wish, honoured governor-regent, and I will make it so.”

TEN

“I tell you, I swear it sounded like Kerner.”

The other two planetary defence force troopers peered cautiously through the bunker’s forward observation slit, scanning the shifting mists that covered the rain-soaked mud in front of their position and listening to the eerie silence that enveloped the scene. Bodies, dressed in the now familiar black-cloaked garb of the Chaos cultists and splattered with mud and blood, lay scattered around everywhere outside. The three PDF troopers had held out for four days so far. They still had food and water, and ammunition supplies for the bunker’s heavy bolter turrets were still plentiful, but after days of probing enemy attacks, their nerves were shredded, and resolve and determination were at a premium. The bunker was part of the ring of fortifications guarding the powerful defence laser batteries and missile silos based here in the hills above Madina, protecting the capital from orbital attack, but their communications had been cut two days ago, and they had no other means of communicating with their central command point or even the nearest neighbouring bunker that was probably no more than two hundred metres away. Occasionally, they heard chattering bursts of heavy bolter fire sounding through the mists—proof that they were not the only defenders still left—but they had not heard even that in the last few hours.

Maron, the eldest and most experienced of them, scanned the mists one more time before drawing back into cover again, looking at the young look-out in clear irritation. “I don’t hear anything. Whatever you heard—if you even heard anything, mind—it wasn’t Kerner. Forget about Kerner. Kerner’s dead. Or deserted. Either way, he’s not coming back to help us.”

“Kerner wouldn’t abandon us!” protested his younger comrade. “He promised us he would come back with reinforcements!”

“Aye, and perhaps he even meant it at the time,” said Maron, “But maybe it was a different story if he actually did make it past those black-cloaked bastards. Kerner’s got a wife and two kids down in Madina, and he probably figured he’d rather face the end with them than with me or either of you two fools. Hell, I don’t even blame him. I’ve got family too, back home in the outskirts of Rabas.

That’s another continent away from here, but if I thought that I even had half a chance of getting back there in time, you think I’d still be sitting here with you?”

Maron shook his head in disgust, and then checked himself. The young trooper had fought well over the last few days, but he was barely older than Maron’s own lad back home. He was frightened, and tired. All three of them in this bunker were going to die, if not now at the hands of the Chaos cultists hiding somewhere out there in the mists, then in a few days’ time when the enemy fleet and its terrible world-destroying weapon arrived in the Belatis system. Perhaps, thought Maron, he should be easier on the lad. Perhaps—

“Out there! There’s someone in the mists! It’s Kerner! Emperor’s oath, it’s really him!”

Alerted by the other young recruit’s excited shout, Maron snatched up his lasgun, using its infra-red sighting scope to pierce the veil of mist. He saw a figure emerging out of the distant tree-line, staggering towards the bunker. It was wearing the bloodstained blue serge uniform of the Belatis planetary defence force, and seemed to be limping from a leg-wound. Maron retrained the scope settings, zooming in on the blood-smeared features of the figure’s face. It was Corporal Kerner, alright—through the scope, Maron could see Kerner’s mouth moving, and from inside the bunker he could hear his comrade’s cries for help, pleading with them not to fire upon him—but still, something about the scene made the veteran trooper hesitate. Something, a sense of disquieting doubt, called out in warning to him.

Then, suddenly, there was the sound of crackling bursts of gunfire, bullets and las-bursts throwing up small gouts of muddy earth in the area around Kerner. Maron saw dark figures moving amongst the cover of the tree-line, and the soldier in him reacted instantly and instinctively.

“Covering fire! Give him covering fire!”

One of the other troopers manned the bolters, sending a stream of heavy calibre death into the cultists’ hiding place, expertly panning the twin-mounted weapons back and forth along the tree-line for maximum effect. Maron watched, nodding in approval. At the start of the dry season this one had been a raw recruit, but the last two months of fighting, as Belatis tore itself apart around them, had turned

the young trooper into something close to a seasoned veteran.

Maron took aim with his lasgun, sending precise and carefully judged shots into any black-robed shape foolish enough to show itself to his gunsights. An urgent hammering sounded from the thick, armoured door at the end of the cramped bunker space. Kerner, pleading to be let in. One of the youngsters moved to disarm the booby-trapped door systems and let him in. Maron readied his lasgun, expecting the cultists to make a suicidal charge across the open ground and towards the bunker door as it opened, but instead he saw them falling back into the sheltering shadows of the surrounding forest.

Again, that mental voice of disquieting doubt called out to him in warning. Too late, he turned seeing the youngster already opening the door.

Seeing Kerner in the doorway.

Seeing the bloody marks of the eight-pointed Chaos sigil that had been carved into the flesh of his face.

Seeing the laspistol in his hand; seeing as he raised and fired it at point-blank range into the chest of the youngster who had opened the door for him.

Seeing the rows of explosive charges strapped to Kerner’s chest; seeing the trigger device gripped in Kerner’s other hand.

Maron reached for his lasgun, knowing that he would never be able to aim and fire in time; praying that, when the end came in a few days’ time for his wife and children, it would be just as sudden and painless as this.

Khoisan the Faceless, champion of Chaos Undivided, watched in grim satisfaction as the aftermath of the explosion swept across the clearing, mud and debris raining down in its wake. Around him, the line of black-cloaked cultists crept out of cover. Khoisan barely spared them a glance. They were mere rabble, barely fit to serve amongst the lowest dregs of the Despoiler’s armies, but here on this world they were adequate for the purpose, just as the captured prisoner had in the end adequately carried out his purpose.

The fool had willingly carried out his task, believing in doing so that his death

would ensure that his family would be spared in the coming catastrophe. Khoisan almost laughed at the thinking behind such folly, knowing that all around him were other fools who believed the same: who believed that in serving the cause of Chaos they would be saved when the Planet Killer arrived. It was the will of the Despoiler that all on this world be annihilated, and that was the purpose of the mission Khoisan was now on.

He raised a hand, signalling to a cultist nearby armed with a grenade launcher. Seconds later, a bright starburst shell exploded high overhead, summoning the main body of cultist troops gathered on the lower slopes of the hillside.

The last bunker in this section of the defence chain was gone. The way ahead to the laser batteries and silos was clear.

ELEVEN

For the third time in as many hours, the wave of black-cloaked cultists charged across the square. And, for the third time in as many hours, they were met with a withering hail of fire from the defenders behind the makeshift barricades.

From his position atop the shattered stump of what had once been a tall statue of the blessed Sebastian Thor, Confessor Johann Devane directed his flock's volleys of gunfire, heedless of enemy snipers. "Holy Terrors" the commanders of the Imperial Guard disparagingly called the Frateris Militia, believing the religious-inspired armed laity of the Imperial Faith to be as much a danger to themselves and any other Imperial forces they were serving alongside as they were to the enemy. Still, right now, Devane would be glad to match and compare his flock's resolve and fighting spirit with that of any regiment in the entire Imperial Guard.

"Keep at them!" he exhorted. "Let them draw close and fire only when you're sure of your target! If you run out of ammunition, take up the nearest weapon at hand and join your brethren amongst the second line of defence!"

A stub gun round whined off the arm of the overturned statue behind Devane. The Imperial confessor looked around, seeing a planetary defence force trooper in a uniform dyed black with smeared mud and engine oil kneeling on a pile of shattered masonry and readjusting his aim for the follow-up shot. Devane raised his own autogun and fired. The deserter screamed and fell off the pile, clutching at his face. With no shortage of targets to choose from, Devane kept firing, sending short, precise bursts of bullets into the body of heretic after heretic.

Devane saw a hail of Molotov cocktails sail up from the cultist attack wave, the missiles breaking in fiery explosions amongst the ranks of the defenders. Fearful screams and the smell of burning flesh rose up from behind the barricades. Devane sighted on one of the firebomb-throwing cultists, a burst of devastatingly accurate autogun fire exploding the missile just a moment after it left the thrower's hand. A blanket of burning promethium drenched the cultist and those around him, setting alight their robes and transforming them in seconds into living, screaming fire manikins. In their terror and pain, they ran blindly

amongst their own ranks, setting others alight and spreading the fear and confusion even further into the cultists' attack.

"See? The fires of the Emperor's wrath consume them!" called Devane, knowing all too well how positively the zealots of the Frateris Militia responded to such fire-and-brimstone rhetoric. "Shine the burning radiance of the Emperor's glory upon them! Cast them back into the darkness of the warp!"

Slight of figure and clean-shaven, Devane knew he little resembled the fiery, wild-eyed and bearded figures of the confessor of the Imperial Faith familiar from so many stirring Ecclesiarchy myths and histories. Yet in the eyes of his flock, he stood taller and more awesome than the fifty-metre tall statue that still guarded the main archway entrance to the cathedral square. A month ago, when he was still a lowly and anonymous preacher in one of thee rural parishes far to the south of the capital, he had gathered his flock together and told them that if they were doomed to die, then it would be better to wait for the end in the sanctuary of the great Ecclesiarchy cathedral in Madina, where they could spend their final days in prayer and contemplation before finally commending their souls to the Emperor. This pilgrimage to the capital had been long and danger-fraught. Many had fallen along the way, killed in the violent chaos that had enveloped all of Belatis, but many more had joined them, drawn by this unknown country preacher's quiet intensity and the promise of a safe and holy refuge in which to wait out their final days, and when Devane finally arrived in Madina five days ago, it was at the head of something by then resembling a small army of pilgrim followers.

If they had expected to find the planetary capital, the very seat of Imperial authority here on Belatis, exempt from the disorder that ruled elsewhere, they were soon disappointed.

Armed gangs of looters and bandits roamed the city, preying on anyone who crossed their path. Much of the city was in flames, with loyalist and renegade PDF forces conducting artillery duels over the ruins. The governor-regent's palace was still intact, protected by an impenetrable defence shield and guarded by the elite troops of the palace guard, but the rule of the Emperor's law on Belatis now extended no further than the main Arbites citadel-courthouse and the Administratum buildings and dormitories clustered close within its protective shadow. When he and his followers reached the cathedral, they found it under

the fragile protection of a makeshift, defence force mainly composed of aged, non-combatant Ministorum priests, keen but disorganized Frateris Militia laity and nervous young acolyte adepts who barely knew which way up to hold a lasgun. There had also been a small force of Adeptus Arbites, but they had orders to pull out and rejoin the main courthouse garrison on the far side of the city prior to final evacuation. There were reports that heretic cultists were descending on the capital from all directions, and the necessary decision had been made to concentrate all remaining Imperial forces on the defence of the Arbites courthouse and the governor-regent's palace.

The Ecclesiarch cathedral, isolated from the other two remaining pillars of Imperial authority on the far side of the river that divided Madina, would have to fend for itself in these final few days of the planet's life. As would the tens of thousands of pilgrim refugees who had flocked to the cathedral in search of sanctuary.

Devane, who had answered the calling of the Ministorum priesthood after almost twenty years service as an officer in the Divine Emperor's armies, the 415th Mordian Iron Guard, no less—the famous "Old Indefatigables" who had forged themselves a legendary reputation during the months of the bloody climax of the Karnak Crusade—now found himself, thirteen years after being released from service in the Imperial Guard, once again called upon to take up arms against the enemies of the Emperor.

Immediately, he had begun putting his military experience to use. The huge cathedral square, with so many entrances and approaches leading into it was, he quickly realised, indefensible given the quality and quantity of troops and weapons that he had. He had ordered a barricade circle to be built round the towering cathedral edifice, giving the defenders sheltering behind it a clear field of fire across the open expanse of the surrounding square. Statues and monolithic plinths honouring some of the Imperial Faith's greatest heroes and martyrs were ruthlessly pulled down and dragged into position; vehicles were overturned and employed as barricade building blocks, the contents of their fuel tanks carefully drained and stored away as part of an arsenal of hundreds of guerrilla warfare firebombs. Even the pews, pulpits and choir transepts inside the cathedral great hall had been ripped out and used to build the barricade.

The Arbitrators had left what weapons and ammunition they could, and the

cathedral had its own hidden weapons stores, but neither were enough to completely arm his rag-tag army of defenders or fend off their attackers. And so Devane had had to improvise.

Every third defender was armed with some kind of gun, typically a lasgun or autogun, although the Arbitrators had blessedly left them with a few precious autocannons and heavy bolters to supplement the Frateris Militia cache of flamers and heavy stubbers. When one of the gun-armed defenders fell in battle, one of his unarmed brethren took up his weapon and assumed the dead man's place on the barricades. So far, this strategy was working, and Devane knew that there were men on the barricades whose weapons had been in the hands of four or five previous owners in just the last two days. Meanwhile, those defenders without guns were armed with any kind of close-combat weapon that came to hand, and it was their duty to form the secondary line of defence, engaging in bloody bouts of hand-to-hand combat with any cultist attackers who made it through the hail of fire and attempted to break through the barricades.

And, behind them, was a third and final line of defenders. Women and children, the wounded and the elderly, armed with firebombs or even cobblestones torn up from the surface of the paved square, hurled a rain of missiles over the barricades and onto the heads of their attackers.

These people—his new-found flock—would fight to the death, Devane realised. When they were overwhelmed on the barricades, as they surely soon must be, they would fall back and try to hold the gateway entrances to the cathedral building itself, and when the heretics broke through those, then they would defend the cathedral corridor by corridor, chapel by chapel, crypt by crypt, laying down their lives in defence of the House of the Emperor Divine and in defiance of his heretic enemies. They understood their lives were forfeit, Devane knew; now they wished only for their deaths to have meaning, for by sacrificing their lives in the service of the Emperor they would be assured an honoured place in the afterlife, seated by the Emperor's right hand.

Devane saw the remains of the heretic attack wave break against the barricades, the second rank of defenders sheltering behind the barricades rushing forward to meet them. The battle descended into a series of vicious hand-to-hand struggles along the tops of the barricades. Devane saw a cultist with a brace of frag and krak grenades strapped to his body climb the barricade and throw himself down

upon the defenders on the other side, detonating in their midst in an explosion that killed or injured more than a dozen and blew a clear breach in that section of the barricade ring.

A human bomb, he grimly realised. They had been seeing more and more of these devastating living weapons in the last few days as the planet's end approached and the suicidal mania grew in the minds of all those still trapped upon it. There were those amongst his own laity who would gladly accept such a death in the name of the Emperor, Devane knew, but as a former Imperial Guard officer his every instinct was repelled at the thought. In the Emperor's armies, only the worst kind of penal regiment scum—criminals, deserters, cowards and heretics—were used in this way, and Devane could not countenance employing such a tactic using the Emperor's faithful and devout servants.

Elsewhere, he saw a young boy wearing the robes of a novice acolyte of the Ministorum—the lad was barely old enough to have started shaving, Devane judged—expertly bayoneting a tattoo-faced cultist, spearing the heretic madman through the heart with one well-judged thrust. The cultist's lifeless body tumbled away down the barricade slope to join the growing mound of black-garbed copses heaped there.

Another cultist, roaring in defiance, his giant body streaming with blood from half a dozen near-mortal wounds, scaled the barricade, swinging a razor-edged, machine-tooled hand-axe and decapitating the Frateris Militia defender that rose up to meet him. Then, at the top of the barricade, a hurled cobblestone smashed into his head. His skull crashed, he fell amongst the waiting defenders on the other side of the barricade. Bellowing in pain, he was immediately set upon by a pack of women and children who savagely beat him to death with clubs and bloodied rocks.

Devane drew his old Imperial Guard chainsword and threw himself into the fray, hacking and slashing into the press of black-cloaked bodies and shouting whatever stirring exhortations that he could remember from the more bloodthirsty passages of the Approved Litanies of Devotion.

"Father confessor, beware!" shouted one of the frateris in warning, suddenly throwing himself in front of Devane and taking a heretic sword thrust intended for the Imperial preacher. Devane swung his chainsword in fury, severing the

heretic’s sword arm with his first blow and laying open their chest with the return sweep. The heretic—a woman, Devane saw, with a shock—fell away with a gurgling death-scream.

Devane knelt down over the dying frateris brother, recognising the man as one of the group of sharecropper farmers who had joined the pilgrimage at the end of the first week of their journey. Devane realised with regret that he had never learned the man’s name.

“Father… My wife and children, my sister’s family too,” choked the dying man, reaching with a wavering hand to grasp the burnished silver medallion image of the Emperor Ascendant that Devane wore round his neck. “They are sheltering inside the cathedral, father…”

“The Emperor will watch over them,” Devane assured him, recognising the helpless fear in the dying man’s eyes, pressing his hands to the medallion image. “As will I,” he added, seeing the man’s features relax in contentment just seconds before the moment of death.

“Walk in the light of the Emperor Divine, brother,” he intoned quietly, touching the medallion image to the dead man’s lips and forehead in the traditional Blessing of the Fallen.

The Imperial preacher took up his chainsword again, keen to take out his rising rage on the Emperor’s enemies, but all around him he saw that this latest phase of the siege of the Ecclesiarchy cathedral was coming to an end. What was left of the cultist attack wave was fleeing back in retreat across the cathedral square. Gunfire from the barricade defenders chased them on their way. Devane understood the gunners’ sense of bloody-handed triumph and desire to punish their enemies further, but there were other more tactically vital considerations to be made.

“Cease fire!” he bellowed. “Conserve ammunition! Don’t waste your shots. Save them for the next time they come at us!”

Other voices took up the cry all along the barricade lines, and the ragged volleys of gunfire quickly died away; silence suddenly and shockingly descending on the open expanse of the corpse-strewn square.

Quickly, while the surrounding cultists were still reeling from the failure of the latest attack, packs of small, nimble figures scurried up over the tops of the barricades and began foraging amongst the carpet of dead and dying heretics. They began collecting weapons and ammunition from amongst the enemy dead, despatching any wounded and still-living heretics they came across with quick thrusts of the sharp-bladed knives they carried.

They moved fast, trying to keep one step ahead of the enemy snipers who were now beginning to open fire at them from the far side of the square. They were women, children, the walking wounded and any other non-combatants who had volunteered for this perilous but very necessary task; better to risk their lives to a sniper's bullet, ran the cold-blooded tactical doctrine, than that of an able-bodied fighting man. Devane knew the tactic was a good one, but still it sickened him to have to put it into practice.

Children, he thought to himself, wondering how much further the planet-wide madness would go as Belatis's final extinction loomed ever closer. Now we are using children to wage our wars.

Suddenly a chattering stream of heavy stubber fire ripped across the square, shattering cobblestones, making corpses jump and dance under the impact of high-speed bullets into flesh and cutting across the path of one of the small running figures. The child screamed and fell, and kept screaming as it writhed in agony amongst the corpses, in clear view of the enemy snipers. A second burst from the same weapon would have mercifully finished the victim off, but Devane knew that mercy was not something the enemy was capable of.

It was a trap, he knew. The injured child was bait designed to lure others out into the snipers' sights, and, even as Devane watched, two frateris brethren scrambled over the barricades and ran to the child's aid. Devane cursed aloud their foolishness and at the same time offered a silent prayer for their protection. Neither man was truly a fool, Devane saw. They ran in crazy zigzag patterns, defying the snipers an easy shot at a linear-moving target, and made sure to keep their distance from each other, forcing the snipers to choose between them. It was a brave and bold action, well thought-out and properly executed.

It almost worked.

The first man went down five metres short of the child's position. A las-bolt caught him high in the left shoulder and spun him. He staggered, fell to the ground and attempted to rise again, but by that time the other snipers too had found him. Seen from the barricades, he looked like a puppet being jerked on its strings as the volleys of bullets and las-blasts plucked and pulled at his flesh.

The second man took advantage of the gruesome display his comrade was performing for the enemy's entertainment. He ran to the child, scooping him up into his arms and turned to ran back towards the barricades, taking only a few steps before the snipers tired of their sport with their other victim and turned on him instead.

Bullets and las-blasts ricocheted off the cobbles around him. He tried zigzagging again to evade the snipers' aim, but this time he was moving more slowly, weighed down by the body of the child, and now the snipers had only one target to concentrate on.

The first shot caught him in the small of the back. He staggered, but did not fall. Still carrying the now still form of the child, he abandoned the zigzagging run and instead made straight for the safety of the barricades, sniper fire snapping at his heels. From the barricades, men shouted praise and encouragement, every defender there willing their brother on. Seeing the man's plight, the Ecclesiarch protector in Devane won out over the military tactician.

"Open fire!" he ordered, telling himself that the expenditure of their precious ammunition reserves would be worth it in terms of the morale boost if by some Emperor-ordained miracle the man actually made it back with the child to the cover of the barricades. "Cover him. Lay down suppressing fire on those sniper positions!"

A wave of gunfire crashed across the square, peppering the ancient stonework facades of the public buildings and rich mercantile townhouses that lined the fringes of the square where the main body of the heretic forces was sheltering. Devane doubted that this noisy and profligate expenditure of their limited ammunition supply would result in many enemy casualties—the range was too great for accurate shooting, and the accuracy of the frateris gunners was variable, at best—but it would hopefully force some of the snipers to keep their heads down, giving the man all that more chance to make it to safety.

Devane could not hear the snipers' fire over the sounds of the defenders' volleys, but he knew that at least some of them were still shooting. He saw the man stumble twice more on his journey back to the barricade, assuming with a sinking heart that each stumble came from another bullet hit. When, at last, he somehow made it to the foot of the barricades, half a dozen defenders scrambled down to help him, a sea of hands reached out to lift him and the child up over the top of the barricade.

Frateris defenders crowded round the man, then parted to let Devane through. The man was dying, the preacher saw instantly, the quilted flak jacket that he wore and which had partially protected him from the snipers' fury was soaked dark with blood. Devane knelt over him, bestowing the Blessing of the Fallen upon him as gentle hands took hold of the body of the child cradled in the dying man's arms. The boy moaned in pain as he was lifted away.

"He lives," breathed one of the frateris in wonder, sending a thrilled ripple of surprise out into the ranks of the brethren crowded close around.

"Take him to the infirmary," ordered Devane. "See to it that the blessed sisters tend to him as best they can."

"It is a sign," called one of the frateris elders, his red-and-gold fringed robes and mortified skin-markings identifying him as a follower of the zealot-minded Redemptionist sub-cult of the Imperial Faith. "First the Emperor sends the father confessor to lead us in the defence of this holy place, and now he sends us this sign that he is watching over us still!"

Others took up the cry, and soon the barricades rang with the joyous shouts and devotional chants of the faithful. Devane moved amongst his flock, outwardly sharing in their excitement. He offered words of encouragement and pious fortitude. He politely but firmly refused the small but precious gifts of food and drink that many tried to press upon him, knowing that food supplies were already at a premium, and that many of these people had not eaten properly in days. He bestowed blessings on men and weapons, and sat praying with an injured frateris brother who had remained on duty on the barricades for the last two days, refusing to give up firing control of the heavy stubber he had manned since the beginning of the siege. The man was obviously dying—Devane could smell the tell-tale sickly odour of gangrene-rotted flesh from beneath the man's

bandaged wounds—but he was amongst the best gunners they had, and Devane quietly acceded to the man's clear but unspoken wish to die fighting the Emperor's enemies rather than amongst the sick and injured that already crowded the cathedral's infirmary.

Devane did all this devoutly and faithfully as an Imperial preacher and servant of the God-Emperor, but all the while from inside him the voice of the military commander he had once been told him that it was ultimately all in vain.

A sign or miracle, he thought to himself, momentarily allowing that doubting, questioning voice free rein. Two brave and able-bodied fighting men dead, and for what? The life of an injured child who, if he does not die from his wounds in the next few hours, will die along with the rest of us in a few days time anyway? Tell me, preacher, where is the Emperor-ordained miracle in any of this? Where is the sign that these good and faithful people have not been betrayed and abandoned by the mighty Imperium which they were always told was there to protect them?

Devane shook his head in a physical effort to dispel such blasphemous doubts from his mind. If he truly believed that, he told himself in reply, then why did he not climb over the barricades now and run across the square to join those other heretics massed there? This was the poisoned reasoning that had caused so many of this world's population to turn away from the Emperor's divine light and instead go towards the darkness of the malignant and false powers of the warp, he realised.

"Father confessor?"

In gratitude, the preacher drew his mind away from such thoughts and turned towards the speaker now addressing him. It was a young Ecclesiarch scribe-acolyte, clearly nervous and overawed in the presence of the great and mighty warrior-priest confessor. Devane was still unable to come to terms with this new image of himself as some towering and inspirational presence in the minds of the cathedral defenders. Father confessor, they called him, yet Devane was not even certain that he was properly entitled to his newly-ordained rank. It had been bestowed upon him by the impressive and imposing figure of the Arbites commander—Byzantane, he had been called—when he had arrived to supervise the Arbitrators' final withdrawal from the Ecclesiarch cathedral. It had been

Byzantane who had authorized for the frateris to be given whatever weapons and supplies the Arbites had to spare, and it had been Byzantane who had shrewdly realised the Imperial preacher's worth.

"A Guard officer turned holy man," the Arbitrator had said, looking speculatively at Devane. "We could use a man of your abilities defending the Imperium compound across the river. You'll be doing your duty to the Emperor just as you are here, but there'll be a place on an evacuation shuttle in it for you as well."

"My place is here, with my flock," Devane had answered. "I have led them this far. I cannot abandon them now. If they must remain here, then I must remain with them."

Byzantane had nodded in silent understanding, approving of the preacher's devotion but regretting the loss of such a clearly capable and courageous servant of the Emperor, and had turned to go. Suddenly he had hesitated, turning back towards Devane. "A mere preacher is an unworthy leader for the Frateris Militia. The Articles Faith of the Church Militant tell us that only an Ministorum adept of the rank of confessor or higher may command the armies of the faithful. Your cardinal is already aboard one of the orbiting transports, which leaves me as the ranking Imperial servant left on this world."

The big Arbitrator had paused, reaching forward and solemnly laying a heavy armour-gauntleted hand on the shoulder of the diminutive preacher.

"Walk with the Emperor, Father Confessor Devane. My thoughts and prayers go with you."

Devane had stood stunned as the Arbites commander saluted him, and strode off towards the waiting grav-lifter shut-tie. At the bottom of the landing ramp he had again turned to back to Devane, his final words to him still somehow audible over the rising scream of the shuttle's engines as it prepared to take off.

"You have your duty, and I have mine, and those duties take us to our separate destinies, but I swear to you that one day my duty will be to avenge the loss of this world and the sacrifice of these children of the Emperor."

“Father confessor?” asked the scribe again, his voice cowed in tones of nervous reverence and again calling Devane’s attention back to the situation at hand.

“Tell the brother arch-deacon that the enemy assault is over, at least for the present. It is safe for him and the other brethren to continue with the evacuation.”

The young acolyte bowed and gratefully retreated, eager to be away from the dangerous barricades area and keen to rejoin the rest of his brethren in the safety of the cathedral’s inner courtyard, where they had gathered to await the arrival of the final series of evacuation shuttles scheduled to depart from the cathedral. Over a hundred Ministorum adepts yet remained within the cathedral, overseeing the final inventory and packaging of the precious Ecclesiarchy relics and records housed in the miles of crypts beneath the ancient building. There were countless documents and scroll-records stored down there, maintained and guarded by an army of scribe-adepts. Taken together, they formed a comprehensive record of the presence and power of the Imperial Faith here on Belatis, and thus were also a history of the thousands of years of Imperium rule of the world, the oldest and most precious of them dating back more than ten millennia to the time when the world was first reclaimed in the name of the Emperor. The planet and its people would soon vanish, but through the Ministorum’s painstakingly-maintained histories, some vestigial memory of it would continue to live on as part of the everlasting Imperium of Mankind, if only in the form of meticulously catalogued scrolls and data-slate recordings stored deep in the bowels of a Ministorum librarium on some far-distant Ecclesiarchy shrine-world.

Accompanying the records and relics on the flight from the doomed world would be hundreds of Ecclesiarchy adepts, ranging from the Cardinal Astral himself to the lowliest scribe-adepts and relinquindus keepers. Many of the cathedral adepts had opted to remain here to defend the Emperor’s house against the heretic horde, but many more had not. If Johann Devane the man was tempted to feel any bitterness towards those who sought to escape the destruction of this world and its people, then preacher—now confessor—Devane the adept did not, remembering again the final words of the Arbites commander.

They have their duty and I have mine. In the end, it is our destiny to serve the Emperor in the ways He has commanded for each of us.

TWELVE

“Master, you must come! The last of the shuttles is about to leave. The arch-deacon himself has commanded you to board it!”

The frightened voice of the novice initiate roused Sobek from the light trance that he had placed himself in, although his astropath’s senses had warned him of the boy’s scurrying approach through the now eerily empty and abandoned corridors and chambers of this section of the Ecclesiarchy cathedral. From outside the cathedral walls, the astropath’s finely attuned ears picked out the now familiar sounds of combat, while his psychic senses dimly told him of the even greater chaos in the city beyond; dimly, only because he had deliberately closed off those levels of his inner vision with powerful mental blocks, fearing that the psychic Shockwaves generated by the confusion and terror of the doomed planet’s population would overwhelm his own mind.

“I have already spoken with the arch-deacon, Lito. I have told him that it is my wish to remain here on Belatis.” Sobek turned his blind face towards the frightened boy, favouring him with a rare smile. “I have been on this world for sixty-eight years. Before that, I saw the faces of many other of the Emperor’s worlds with these blind eyes, but after so long I can scarcely recall which of them was the face of my own birth-world. This world is really all I have ever known. I have served the Emperor well, but I am old and tired, and I know that soon the Emperor will call me to him. Leave me be, Lito. I do not wish to see the faces of any new worlds.”

The boy lingered in the doorway, afraid to return without him; clearly, thought Sobek, the arch-deacon’s proclamation that any adept-brothers who wished to remain to defend the Emperor’s sacred house was not meant to extend to brethren as unique and valuable as an astropath of Veneratus rank.

From far below in the cathedral square came the sounds of renewed gunfire, and, from closer in the inner courtyard, the roar of powerful thruster engines firing up.

“You should go now, Lito,” warned Sobek. “They will not wait for you, whether

I am with you or not. Go now. We both have our separate destinies to follow," he added, wondering from where those last words had sprung unbidden.

The boy hesitated, took one last despairing look at his master, and then vanished, running pell-mell along the high-vaulted corridor and towards the sound of the shuttle engines. He had been genuinely fond of the boy, Sobek thought, even if he had been clumsy and inattentive, with all the signs of becoming yet another dull-witted catechism-mumbler, a breed of which the Ministorum had more than enough of already in Sobek's despairing opinion. But, all the same, he had been fond of the boy, and thought it a pity that he had even less time to live than Sobek himself.

The astropath again consulted the mystically-charged cards of the Imperial tarot, using them as a tool to unlock the prescient images that his psychic senses had plucked from the face of the warp.

He drew two cards, laying them out in concordance and seeing dual images forming simultaneously upon their faces. On one, the image of a fortress with its towers struck by a falling star tumbling from the heavens. *The Fallen Citadel.* On the other, the highly-stylised representation of a space vessel, the occupants within it kneeling in prayer as they sought protection against the daemons of the warp that hovered in the air above them. *The Starship,* here appearing in its rarer sub-form, *The Pilgrim Vessel.* Sobek focussed his inner sight, again seeing the same warp-dream images of the future.

Fire-death tendrils spreading through the rusting passageways and compartments of a space vessel, reaching deep into the vessel's innards and closing around its beating plasma heart. The screaming faces of Lito, the arch-deacon, the cardinal himself even, and those of many other adept-brothers, all of them obliterated in an instant in a white-hot gush of blinding light.

Sobek heard the roar of the shuttles taking off, all too aware that he had just seen the deaths of all those now aboard. His own death was only days away, he knew, but theirs would come even sooner than that. How or why, he could not divine, but their deaths had already been ordained and somehow he sensed it was not in his power to try to warn them or interfere in their destiny. As his own end approached—as the shadow of the Planet Killer loomed ever closer through the warp—he found that his powers of prophecy, always at best vague and indistinct,

were becoming more accurate and finely-detailed. How this should be, he did not know, but he felt certain that it was the Emperor’s will that he be kept the fate that would befall the rest of the cathedral brethren. He had a growing feeling that he had been spared or forewarned because the Emperor still required one more task of him.

He turned back to the tarot cards again, looking to find in their shifting patterns and faces some clue of what that task might be.

THIRTEEN

Like mourners attending a deathbed vigil, the vessels of the many branches of the Imperium hovered in waiting above the doomed world. Like greedy heirs apparent gathering in anticipation of its imminent death, they plundered the world of its choicest riches while it yet lived.

Bulky troop transports took aboard the fighting men of two full Imperial Guard regiments, together with their vehicles and equipment. Garrisoned on Belatis, these troops would be spared the same fate as the rest of the planet's population, although their evacuation had probably only postponed their destruction rather than averted it. The sector-wide war against the forces of the Despoiler was consuming Guard regiments at a truly ferocious rate, and even now some Imperial Guard war-marshal or Departmento Munitorium official was assigning these two regiments to one of the dozens of planetary war-zones spread throughout the Gothic sector.

A seemingly unending series of freighter transports had arrived and departed in the last few weeks, each of them carrying off whatever part they could of Belatis's abundant industrial or mineral resources. Tanker vessels had taken aboard hundreds of thousands of tonnes of processed promethium from the planet's many fuel refineries, all of it laboriously hauled up into orbit by a fleet of grimy haulage shuttles. Cargo transports filled their cavernous holds with similar quantities of mined adamantium, ferro-titanium, trikali crystal and other materials vital for the Imperium war effort.

A week ago, a massive and ancient transporter vessel belonging to the Adeptus Mechanicus had arrived in Belatis orbit, despatched by the tech-priests of Mars to rescue not only their brethren from the condemned world, but also the technology and arcane devices held sacred by the servants of the Machine God. For days now, their agile lifter shuttles had been flitting back and forth between the vessel and the planet's surface, carrying back not merely the products of Belatis's tech-priest-maintained industrial factories but also the some of those very factories themselves, disassembled by armies of servitor work-drones. These factories and assembly lines, churning out weapons and war machines for the Imperium armies, incorporated precious and irreplaceable technological

knowledge held sacred by the members of the Adeptus Mechanicus. The rescued knowledge inherent in these automated factories, once reassembled and transplanted to the soil of a Mechanicus forgeworld, would once again be used in the service of the Machine God.

Not all the branches of the Imperium operated on such a massive scale as the Adeptus Mechanicus, nor were their motivations for participating in the evacuation of Belatis so easy to speculate on.

Three days ago, a sleek, black-hulled corvette vessel had arrived to join the Imperium flotilla. Although obviously a vessel of the Imperium, identifying itself as the *Bernardo Gui* and broadcasting approved Imperial ship recognition codes,*the* craft was of a design unfamiliar to most navy eyes, and officers crowded the *Macharius*'s command deck viewing bays to watch as it glided into Belatis orbit.

"Inquisition," they whispered in fearful tones amongst themselves, afraid even to say aloud the name of the most secret and powerful arm of Imperium authority.

The *Bernardo Gui* had remained in orbit, blanketed in radio silence and unresponsive to hails from other vessels, save for the three occasions when it had sent a single shuttle down to the planet's surface, each time demanding and receiving an escort of fighters from the *Macharius*'s attack craft squadrons to accompany the shuttle on its journey to the surface and back. Each time the shuttle had returned to the parent ship after only a few hours. What it had done in that time—who or what it had picked up or even delivered to the surface to the doomed world—was a matter of much private, whispered conjecture amongst the crew of the *Macharius.* On two occasions after such planetary expeditions, the Inquisition craft had sent terse, firmly-worded commands to several of the navy vessels protecting the evacuation flotilla that they were to carry out an immediate and intense orbital bombardment of two precise points on the planet's surface, one of which was a small but densely populated city in the southern part of Belatis's largest continent.

Whatever the Inquisition had been doing on Belatis, it clearly wanted no trace of itself left behind for the enemy to find.

Two days ago, another, different Imperial vessel had arrived to join the growing

armada. Looking through the command deck's port viewing bay, Hito Ulanti could see it now, circling in watchful high orbit above Belatis. It was the *Inviolable Retribution*, a Punisher class Arbites strike cruiser, constructed in much the same way as the Adeptus Astartes variant and intended for much the same purpose: rapid response planetary assault force deployment and orbital offensive support. Ulanti studied its lean, brutal lines and fearsome armaments with an admiring eye, while the naval officer in him couldn't help assessing the lawkeeper ship's likely capabilities and comparing them to those of his own vessel. The Arbites cruiser was smaller and faster than the navy warship, more heavily armoured and packed more of an offensive punch, but the*Macharius* was a long-range patrol vessel, designed for extended, independent operation and had a wider variety of offensive and defensive capabilities.

"Your opinion, Mister Ulanti?"

Ulanti did not turn at the sound of his captain's voice, but continued to study the Arbites cruiser as it drifted past the*Macharius*'s port side.

"A fine vessel, captain. Its main bombardment cannon armament makes it dangerous to ships and planetary targets alike, while its unorthodox main engine array suggests it that it will always have the advantage of speed and manoeuvrability. I almost pity those amongst the enemies of the Emperor who must face such a vessel in battle."

"But?" There was a tone to his captain's voice which a stranger might mistake for angry sharpness. Ulanti, however, knew better. He turned, smiling, knowing what was expected of him next.

"But I believe that the *Macharius* would still be the victor in any one-to-one confrontation with it." Catching Semper's expectant look, he continued: "Although a fine vessel, it's still primarily a blockade runner and rock-pounder, designed for dealing with orbital defence platforms and putting the fear of the Emperor into planet-based ground forces, not going up against a cruiser-class warship. I doubt that we could manoeuvre it into a position for a close-range torpedo strike, but its comparative lack of anti-ordnance defences for a vessel of its size would leave it highly vulnerable to attack from our bomber squadrons. Also, our greater reactor output, ability to absorb high crew casualties and superior weapon accuracy at longer ranges would be the telling factors in any

extended battle."

Semper nodded in approval, pleased with his second-in-command's shrewd assessment of the theoretical outcome of a battle between the two vessels. As always, Leoten Semper liked to keep his officers on their toes, if sometimes he made even veteran officers feel as if they were Schola Progenium cadets standing before a particularly demanding and exacting Preacher Tutorius taskmaster.

And, as always, Ulanti noted, the captain had ended his private rest period and reported for duty on the bridge long before he had been scheduled to, this time by some three hours. Frequently restless, the captain had been even more so since the conclusion of the battle of Helia IV and their subsequent reassignment to the evacuation of Belatis. Ulanti knew that something had clearly been troubling the master of the *Macharius*. He was glad, then, to see his captain apparently in a lighter mood now.

Semper stepped up to his customary informal command position, midway on the bridge's central nave, from where he could oversee the operations of the command deck crew. A junior watch officer handed him a data-slate, saluting smartly as he did so, but Semper merely cleared his throat and looked to his second-in-command. "Your report, flag-lieutenant?"

"The situation is much as it was, captain. The final stage of the evacuation is proceeding, and transport vessels *Albemarle*, *Barham*, *Brennus*, *Haruna*, *Mikasa*, *Orlando* and *Tsarevitch* have all signalled that they have completed cargo uploading and are ready to be underway. We expect the other transports to be at a similar state of readiness before the end of the current day-cycle."

"In-system enemy activity?"

"*Drachenfels* and our own attack craft patrols have reported two long-range contacts with enemy Raider class vessels' answered Ulanti. "Both contacts were in the vicinity of the gas giant belt. Both retreated from any further challenge, although elements of our *Firedrake* squadron are currently chasing down a third possible enemy contact."

Semper grunted in a lack of surprise. They knew this game of old—

the *Macharius* had spent an earlier part of the war protecting transport convoys from the wolf pack pirate fleets that preyed on the main Imperium shipping lanes. Like these enemy vessels, the pirate raider ships specialised in hit-and-run attacks, probing the convoy defences for signs of weakness but retreating at the first sign of challenge from the vastly larger and more heavily armed Imperium warships. At present, it was reckoned that two—possibly even three—Chaos scout vessels had infiltrated the Belatis system, advance heralds for the approaching Planet Killer fleet. Mindful of this, the Imperial Navy ships had spread their strength out accordingly.

The *Graf Orlok* and a sister Lunar class cruiser, the *Borodino,* were parked in close orbit above Belatis, the transport fleet sheltering in the cover of their formidable combined firepower. The *Drachenfels* and a squadron of Sword class frigates restlessly prowled the system's outer reaches searching for those elusive enemy scout ships while the *Macharius* circulated in a wide concentric orbit between the two Imperial detachments, launching bomber patrols in support of the *Drachenfels*'s vigil and then looping back in-system to offer fighter escort cover for the fleet of shuttles and cargo lifters travelling endlessly back and forth between the planet's surface and the Imperial transports. So far the operation was proceeding as planned, although the strain of offering near-constant attack craft support was starting to tell on the crews of the*Macharius*'s Starhawk and Fury Interceptor squadrons.

"Our current on-board status?" asked Semper.

"Satisfactory," replied his second-in-command. "Magos Castaboras reports that the temporary battle damage repairs have been completed and tested to his satisfaction, pending full repair next time we make space dock." Ulanti paused, Semper instantly picking up on his lieutenant's hesitation.

"But there is a potential problem elsewhere, is there not, Mister Ulanti? Tell me what it is."

"Ship's Surgeon Littorio reports an outbreak of disease amongst several crew detachments. So far the outbreak has been exclusively confined to three of the lower decks."

Semper frowned in displeasure. Outbreaks of disease and plague were far from

uncommon aboard the vessels of the Imperial Navy, especially amongst the squalor and filth of a ship's lower decks, but he prided himself on running a clean and adequately disease-free ship. "Does the ship's surgeon know the cause of the outbreak? Was it brought aboard by any of the replacement crew we picked up from the *Torment*?"

"That's possible, sir. Most of the survivors from the *Torment* were assigned to replace our crew casualties suffered on those decks now affected by the outbreak," answered Ulanti. "What action do you wish to be taken?"

"Quarantine the decks in question and send in armsmen squads to find and destroy any identified carriers of the disease," ordered Semper. "Tell Littorio I expect a full report on the causes and symptoms of this outbreak as soon as possible."

Ulanti nodded in acknowledgement, just as a communications officer called out, signalling for the two flag officers' attention.

"Captain, the *Graf Orlok* has just put out a shuttle carrying Adept Hyuga of the Departmento Munitorium. They're requesting permission to dock with us, and Adept Hyuga instructs that he requires an immediate meeting with you. What orders?"

Ulanti glanced at Semper, seeing no trace now of the captain's earlier, lighter mood, and imagining the orders that Semper would probably dearly wish to issue, if he could. Something along the lines of *"Arm defence turrets and open fire at will"*would probably be close to the mark, mused Ulanti, knowing his captain's strong dislike of rear echelon bureaucracy in general and Adept Primus Ferdinand Hyuga, the Departmento Munitorium official responsible for overseeing the evacuation, in particular.

"Permission to dock granted," sighed Semper. "Send out a fighter escort to bring our distinguished visitor safely to us. Mister Ulanti, form up an honour guard to meet him at the shuttle bay and see to it that he is greeted with all the pomp and ceremony he expects. Find Commissar Kyogen and tell him to join us for a meeting in my private quarters. We look forward to hearing what the honourable adept has to tell us."

The lead Starhawk in the bomber formation probed ahead with its surveyor senses, searching for traces of the target pattern of the retreating Chaos raider craft. When last reported, it had been moving at speed, turning away to escape the threat of the marauding lance batteries of the *Drachenfels* and running for the cover of a nearby gas giant. Since that last contact, the enemy ship had vanished off their target screens, probably cutting its power emissions down to a minimum and drifting into the obscuring shelter of the planet's massive surveyor sensor shadow or the cover offered amongst the debris of its orbital rings. The seven-strong *Firedrake* squadron—there had not yet been time to replace their losses suffered during the recent battle of Helia IV—were coming in on a widespread search-and-acquire formation, forward surveyors boosted to maximum intensity, but they were now dangerously close to their full operational limit away from the*Macharius.* They must either find their target soon, the squadron leader knew, or turn back now if they hoped to make it back to the *Macharius* on their remaining fuel and oxygen reserves.

Inside six other bomber cockpits, the pilots of *Firedrake* squadron patiently maintained their current course and speed, one eye on their surveyor screens, the other on their fuel and oxygen supply indicators. And then, finally, the order came over the comm-net channel.

"*Firedrake Leader* to squadron. Mission is null and void. Break off and return to carrier."

In sequence, each Starhawk fired in turn first its braking jets and then its manoeuvring thrusters, following the lead of the squadron commander's craft and bringing them all on a tight, sweeping turn away from the deep space edge of the Belatis system and back towards their far-distant mother vessel.

On board the *Starhawks,* navigator crewmen swiftly switched off or powered down their search surveyors, decreasing their crafts' tell-tale energy signal outputs and increasing their chances of survival for the long and often danger-fraught journey back to the safety of the *Macharius.*

Behind them, his vessel drifting inert amongst the rock and frozen ice flotsam of the orbital rings, the commander of the Chaos Infidel class raider watched in only partial relief as the enemy bomber squadron turned away from its search

and headed back in-system towards their carrier vessel. He had been reasonably certain that his vessel's gun batteries and defence turret gunners could have destroyed the bombers had they come any closer. However, it was likely that the bombers would have been able to send back a warning to their mother ship before they were destroyed, and the Chaos commander was under strict orders to avoid detection by the enemy for as long as possible.

For there were not just Chaos scout vessels at large in the Belatis system. Hanging on the fringes of the upper atmosphere of the looming gas giant behind the escort ship, masked by the thick, drifting clouds of methane and hydrogen and the massive electromagnetic storms that pulsed through them was not just a full squadron of five more raiders, but also a capital vessel warship: the Murder class cruiser *Charybdis.*

All of them had arrived in the Belatis system weeks ago. All of them emerging from the warp at a point far beyond the usual system's edge warp jump beacons and drifting slowly into the system on low power to evading detection by Imperium patrols. All of them awaiting the arrival of the Planet Killer. All of them watching patiently as the followers of the false, weakling Emperor tried to defy the will of the Despoiler by rescuing what pitiful numbers of their own kind that they could from the doomed world.

All upon Belatis would die. None would escape. The Despoiler had so commanded, and soon the lurking Chaos flotilla would see to it that the Warmaster's wishes were fulfilled.

FOURTEEN

Heat. Darkness. Safety. Food.

These things the entity craved; these things it found in abundance in this, its new home. Its previous home—the living vessel in which it had been transported into these metal bowels of its fine new home—lay discarded somewhere in the darkness behind it. Now barely recognisable as anything once living, the rotting, desiccated remains of its host body had provided it with much needed nourishment in the first few days after its birth.

It remembered those days only indistinctly now. The host had found a good birthing place, a dark and seldom-visited blind alley amongst the maze of pipes and low-ceilinged metal maintenance passageways. Hiding itself behind a cluster of hissing steam pipes, the host had entered the final stages of its glorious gestation-transformation, deliberately chewing through its own tongue early in the process to stifle its cries of pain. Afterwards, when it had finally died, the heat and moisture from the steam pipes had quickly brought its body to bloated fruition, making it all the easier for the entity which had grown inside it to rip its way out through malleable and rot-ripened flesh.

The entity had begun absorbing the remains of its host into itself, clothing itself in the suitably reformed flesh of its parent. It was then, as it delicately picked its way through the memory morsels contained within its host's decaying brain matter, seeking out useful knowledge of its new home, that it discovered its own name.

Plaguebearer.

The entity liked the name. It gave it an identity. And it told it what the purpose of its existence was. Thus enlightened, it set about enacting that purpose.

Although it had lived all of its short life to date alone in the darkness, it knew that it was surrounded by other fleshy vessels similar to the one that had birthed it. As well as its name, it had inherited from the mind of its dead host an overwhelming awareness of the need to hide itself, and so it went about its work cautiously and carefully, taking pains never to be discovered or reveal itself. It

laid its spoor in the cramped spaces of air ducts, knowing that the currents would circulate the stuff to areas far distant from where it had been planted. It left traces of itself at passage junctions and other places where many of its prey often passed by. It knew the places where the prey kept their food and water supplies, and it knew that if it could get into these places, then it could spread its plague-seed at a far greater rate. However, it knew also that such places were guarded, and that to reveal itself to its prey at this early stage would mean disaster.

Still, the time would come for such a move, but it would first have to multiply. And, to do that, it would need more nourishment.

More food.

Light and noise from along the passageway alerted it to the presence of danger. It moved fast, jumping upwards and oozing between two power conduit pipes that ran along the ceiling of the passage. It watched, trembling with a fear inherited from its weakling parent-host, as two of the prey creatures came along the passage towards it. They were armed with weapons; the bright lights in their hands were lux-lamps and the strange coverings on their faces were rebreather masks, the memory-morsels absorbed from its host's brain told it. They scanned their light beams ahead of them along the passageway and into every nook and recess as they came to them. A thrill of fear ran through the entity. It had been cautious in everything it did, but it knew that some of the prey had already been successfully infected by its plague-seed. Had its existence been discovered? Were they now actively hunting it?

They passed beneath it, one of them by chance swinging its light beam up to peer into the maze of overhead pipes. The entity hiding there reacted with an instinct inherited not from its host-parent but from something far greater and more terrible.

It lashed down with one dripping claw-hand, catching the prey under the jaw and sinking bony talons deep into the flesh of its throat. One jerk of its arm, and the prey's jaw and much of its face came away in the entity's hand. The prey fell backwards, its death-throe spasms discharging the weapon still gripped in its hand. It was the first gunshot that the entity had ever heard, shocking its delicate and still nascent senses.

Taking fright, it oozed quickly down out of its hiding place, dropping the body of its first kill. The other prey was making muffled screaming noises from within the mask it wore over its face, but still took the entity by surprise by bringing its own weapon up to bear and firing it at point-blank range into the entity's body.

The entity felt a scattering of hot metal rip through the flesh of its body, and then felt that same flesh reform and reknit over the bloodless wounds. There was none of the sensation that its host's dead mind would have identified as pain. The entity surged forward, choking off the prey's screams with a tentacle-transformed hand that wormed its way down the creature's throat. With its other hand, it punched through the prey's chest and pulled out its heart. The entity seemed with anger at the false instincts that it had inherited from its host: if it had known that the prey creatures were so easy to kill, it would never have been so afraid of them in the first place.

Working quickly, it gathered up the remains of its prey and dragged them off into the darkness. Now it had the fresh nourishment it needed.

To grow.

To thrive.

To multiply.

Reth Zane, awoke suddenly from a troubled sleep. For a few seconds, he did not know where he was, mistaking the night-cycle-dimmed gloom of the quarters he shared with four Fury Interceptor pilots and navigators for his old novice cell back on Sacra Evangelista. He shook his head in an effort to dispel the momentary confusion cast over his mind by lack of sleep and too many extended flight missions in the last few days.

He slipped out of his bunk, going to the small devotional shrine that he maintained beside his personal locker. From nearby, one of the others—Zane thought it sounded like Lutjens, Altomare's irritatingly over-garrulous navigator—thrashed in his bunk and mumbled incoherently to himself before lying still again. They sense it too, Zane thought to himself. Even under the effects of the narco-seds taken by most off-duty attack craft pilots to counter the effects of the

stimms pumped into their bodies during flight missions, the other sleepers in the room also sensed whatever it was that had awakened Zane from his sleep.

He knelt before the shrine, studying the small icon images that he had placed there. The three holy faces of the Emperor: Mortal, Ascendant and Divine. The Blessed Helena of the Adepta Sororitas, martyred and defiled by heretic unbelievers but now revered as one of the greatest and most holy Defenders of the Imperial Faith. Zane prayed to her most of all, seeking answers to the growing disquiet within him.

Something was wrong, he realised. There was danger close at hand. Perhaps it was out there in the void, or down on the surface of the planet. Or perhaps even closer than that, perhaps even on the *Macharius* itself.

Something was definitely wrong.

FIFTEEN

The shuttle flew away from the carrier ship, the waiting trio of Fury fighters breaking off from their holding pattern and peeling away to take up protective positions around the shuttle. Together, the formation of Imperial craft descended from orbit to the surface of planet below.

Inside the titanium shell of the passenger capsule, through one of the capsule's small, armoured-glasteel windows, Semper looked back to see the familiar hull-shape of the *Macharius* as it slowly receded from view.

It had been months since he had left his ship—months more, even, since he made planetfall anywhere—and he took this rare opportunity to study the lines and shape of the vessel he commanded. At its front the familiar armoured beak common to most Imperial cruisers, many metres thick and composed of strengthened adamantium, the toughest material known to human science. At its rear were the massive array of plasma drive engines, which, together with the generarium reactors and arcane technology of the vessel's warp drive made up over a third of the *Macharius*'s mass. In between these two points was the main body of the ship: dozens of decks of gun batteries and magazine arsenals, flight bays and workshops, cargo holds and quartermaster stores, dormitories and infirmaries, chapel shrines and prison brigs.

Semper's eye roamed over the sheer sides of the ship's hull, seeing the often ancient scars of battle that pitted its armoured flanks, evidence of the venerable warship's long and honourable record of service to the Emperor. No two Imperium vessels—even those of the same class—were identical. Centuries, sometimes even millennia, of modifications and repairs using whatever local construction methods and materials were available in any of the countless different orbital repair yards and forge-world dry-docks maintained throughout the Imperium saw to that, but all followed broadly similar classic lines of design and purpose. Still, Semper was certain that even if the entire armed might of Battlefleet Obscuras itself were lined up before him, he would be able to invariably and instantly pick out his own vessel at a glance, so well did he know its individual lines and signature details.

More than ten thousand souls, from Semper himself to the lowliest convict rating or servitor drone, lived within its armoured hull. More than ten thousand, a figure greater than the fighting complement of the largest Imperial Guard regiment, and many of that ten thousand-plus doubled as fighting troops, trained to take part in the bloody close-quarters boarding assaults that were a frequent part of space warfare. Indeed, the captain of an Imperial Navy warship commanded destructive capabilities undreamt of by any mere Imperial Guard commander. Its hull-side batteries could raze whole cities with sustained orbital bombardments. Its attack craft—it carried more than a hundred of them—could reach across star systems to strike at enemy targets, while its warp engines carried it across the vast interstellar gulfs to wherever the Emperor's enemies might be. There was even space within its cargo holds and crew compartments to carry thousands of extra troops—as much as a full Imperial Guard infantry regiment, if need be—from one warzone to another, and with greater speed and safety than any slow and vulnerable troop transport vessel.

No other Imperial commander had such power at their disposal; no other Imperial commander was entrusted with such a singular instrument of awesome destruction than the master of an Imperial warship. "Like having one foot on the Golden Throne," were the traditional, only half-joking words that the captains of the Imperial Navy murmured in private and strictly only amongst themselves to describe the awesome power and authority at their direct command.

Which, Leoten Semper ruefully told himself, made his own current situation of impotent anger all the more galling and difficult to bear.

He remembered the words of Hyuga when the Departmento Munitorium official arrived aboard the *Macharius.* "I have been in communication with the governor-regent of Belatis. As an Adept Civitas of planetary overlord rank, he is accorded the right to be given personal safe escort by the ranking member of the naval evacuation force. The governor-regent has so informed me that he wishes to claim this right. Captain Ramas of the *Drachenfels* is the highest ranking ship's captain belonging to the evacuation escort force. However, for practical reasons involving Captain Ramas's battle-wound disabilities, as well as other factors…" Hyuga had paused here, flushing slightly, and Semper had almost smiled as he imagined the idea of the highly irascible and plain-speaking master of the *Drachenfels* being called upon to carry out any kind of delicate diplomatic duty.

“As I said, there are factors which regrettably make Captain Ramas unable to carry out this task, therefore the duty falls to the next ranking officer in the chain of command. Which would be you, Captain Semper.”

There had been an uncomfortable silence in the captain’s private quarters as all three senior officers present—Semper, Ulanti and Commissar Kyogen—stared in angry and unapologetic disbelief at the Munitorium official. Semper, not trusting himself to speak, glanced expectantly at Ulanti. The young aristocratic officer, raised amongst the great noble houses inhabiting the Spire peaks of the Necromundan hives and more familiar with the rituals of diplomatic speaking, took his cue.

“Honoured Adept Hyuga,” he had said. “We remain at full alert, and will do so until we are safely underway in the warp and with this Emperor-forsaken world far behind us. We are running round-the-clock attack craft missions and we are currently overseeing the final preparations for the evacuation fleet’s imminent departure. There are already several enemy scout vessels probably in hiding within this system, and at any moment a full enemy fleet together with their new and supposedly invincible weapons platform may emerge from the warp to attack us.”

Ulanti paused, looking directly at Hyuga, his voice taking on a harder and more scathing tone. “And now, in the midst of all this, you come to tell us that Captain Semper must abandon his command responsibilities and instead take part in some needless, trivial etiquette merely to pander to the whims of some local planetary dignitary?”

Hyuga had glared at Ulanti, drawing himself up to his full, if, unimpressive height. A small, balding and vainglorious man, Hyuga’s responsibilities as an official of the Departmento Munitorium were the organisation and equipping of the Imperium’s armed forces. Members of this powerful wing of the Adeptus Administratum usually either wore adept’s robes or, since many of most senior officials belonged to the great Imperium noble houses, garb appropriate to their high-born social rank. Hyuga, however, was dressed in a gaudy, custom-tailored military uniform which all three naval officers had suspected he had probably designed himself. Rank pips on the over-braided collar and shoulder epaulettes signified that the bureaucrat adept’s position carried with it the honorary rank of

a lieutenant-colonel within the Imperial Guard, while his uniform breast was ablaze with ribbons and decorations, none of which any of the naval men recognised, all of them probably awarded for deeds performed far from any battlefield.

“The House of Sarro has served the Emperor well for centuries,” Hyuga had said. “It is only fitting that they receive their due salute in accordance with Imperial custom as they prepare to give up their faithful custodianship of one of the Emperor’s subject possessions. I have consulted with the Arbites commander on Belatis, and it is his opinion too that we carry out this duty in the interests of proper Imperial protocol.”

“Very well,” Semper had said, already calculating how much time this pointless and unnecessarily risky diversion from his real duties would take. “Mister Ulanti, you have the bridge, at least until the honoured adept and I return from our trip to the planet’s surface.”

“You misunderstand, captain,” Hyuga had smiled apologetically. “My own duties take me back to the *Graf Orlok* as soon as I have finished here. I still have many details to attend to before the evacuation can be counted as completed.”

“I’m afraid that won’t be possible.” This time it had been Semper’s turn to smile, if only in feigned apology. “This vessel is currently under quarantine, and I cannot allow you to leave it to return to another Imperial Navy ship. I am sure that a vessel commander as prudent and cautious as Captain von Blucher would not wish to risk the danger of bringing any contagion aboard his ship.”

“Quarantine? Contagion?” Hyuga had stammered, too taken by surprise to pick up on Semper’s subtly scathing reference to von Blucher’s well-known reputation for an over-caution which, in the opinion of some of his brother captains, verged on outright cowardice.

“An outbreak of plague below decks. Mister Ulanti was just informing me of the problem as you came aboard.”

“Indeed,” Ulanti had said, smoothly picking up his captain’s intent. “A somewhat virulent strain, one that has so far defied our ship’s surgeon’s efforts to fully contain it. While the risk of infection to you so far is small, the longer

you stay aboard the *Macharius,* the greater the risk must become. And since navy quarantine regulations forbid you returning to the*Graf Orlok…"*

"…then it would be to your advantage to accompany me to the surface of Belatis," Semper had finished. "Not only would I have the honour of accompanying the governor-regent back to orbit, but I would have the privilege and pleasure of knowing that I was also safeguarding your own personal well-being into the bargain."

The colour visibly drained from the bureaucrat's face at the thought of setting foot on the surface of the doomed and Chaos-engulfed world below. Looking round, his panicked gaze fixed on the imposing and so far silent figure of Kyogen.

"Commissar," he had bleated, "this is outrageous. I demand at once that you see to it that I am given safe escort off this ship and back to the *Graf Orlok!"*

Kyogen, towering over the smaller man, looked down in contempt at the bureaucrat, casting a glance over Hyuga's rows of Administratum decorations. The Order of the Gothic Star, Battlefleet Gothic's highest award for valour, hung from his uniform breast, and Semper too wore the same decoration. Neither man wore the medal for reasons of vain pride, merely as simple statements of the personal authority by which they expected their commands to be carried out by other, lesser servants of the Emperor.

"There is an outbreak of disease, and naval regulations are quite explicit on such matters. It is my duty to see that those regulations are kept to, by force if necessary." Kyogen stepped forward, leaning down into Hyuga's face. "Better to take your chances with the captain, honoured adept. Who knows, perhaps you may be able to award yourself a real battle decoration when you return?"

Semper glanced up, seeing the still white-faced bureaucrat sitting strapped into an acceleration harness across on the other side of the spacious passenger capsule. Hyuga's two scribe-adept assistants sat beside him, both of them looking just as nervous as their master. The temperature inside the cabin was increasing noticeably and the entire shuttle bucked and shuddered violently on its high-speed descent down the gravity well and into Belatis's atmosphere. All

three Administratum officials looked as if they thought that the shuttle would tear apart around them any second.

Probably more used to slow, cruising descents aboard luxury Administratum craft than a high-speed navy shuttle drop into a warzone, thought Semper.

Aside from Semper and the Departmento Munitorium officials, there were four other occupants of the passenger cabin, all of them dressed in dark grey blue uniforms featuring the blue rank sashes of a navy petty officer. Three of them were petty officer class armsmen, Semper's familiar bodyguard retinue who accompanied the captain wherever he went on the*Macharius.* Semper often wondered which of these dependable but dull-witted watchdogs was Kyogen's secret informer, reporting back to the ship's commissar on the captain's every move and utterance. Probably Rahn, the least dull-witted of them, Semper thought—or possibly even all three.

Whichever it was, all three were united in purpose now, staring in sullen and hostile suspicion at the fourth figure slouched in the row of seats across from them. His muscle-bound form squeezed into a petty officer's uniform, Stranivar underhiver and Lubiyanka prison-gang tattoo markings clearly visible on the exposed parts of his skin at his wrists and neck and with the faint but unmistakeable aroma of chewed tajii root permeating the air around him, Maxim Borasa cut a strange and distinct figure from the other occupants of the shuttle.

Semper was still unsure why at the last moment he had relented to his second-in-command's urgings and decided to take the flag-lieutenant's personal bodyguard with him in addition to his own usual armsmen protectors. The man was a savage thug, little better than the scum of the convict work-gangs that carried out many of the more brutal and menial labour tasks aboard the *Macharius.* Emperor alone knew how he ever made the rank of petty officer, but there was a predatory danger and intelligence about him that made Semper suspect that Borusa was, as Ulanti had suggested, a good man to have on your side. One of those rare breed of born survivors who always seemed to find a way out of even the most extreme situations, and, if you were lucky and stayed close by him, perhaps might even take you with him while he was about it.

Semper turned his attention to the view out of the small cabin port-hole. They were deep within the planetary atmosphere now, passing through the thick cloud

layer that covered much of Belatis's equator regions during the planet's apparently frequent monsoon seasons. Little to nothing was visible for the next few minutes and then, suddenly, they dropped through the bottom of the cloud ceiling and the panoply of Belatis's capital city of Madina was spread out beneath them.

Semper saw neatly laid-out hab-zones and commerce districts built in a radial pattern spreading out from the central rocky spire of what must be the planetary governor's palace. Wide avenues bisected and divided each civic district, but Semper could clearly see the columns of refugees which choked those central thoroughfares, and the barricades and makeshift defence walls that had been placed across many of them to stem the human tide flocking into the stricken city. Even from this height, Semper could discern the tell-tale, swirling patterns of human melee signifying large-scale combat around those barricades. Elsewhere, the scars of anarchy and civil war were evident across the face of the city. Fires burned out of control everywhere, several districts were bombed-out ruins, most of the bridges across the wide river dividing the city had been destroyed and to the north a large industrial area was ablaze, casting a pall of poisonous black vapour across that entire quarter of the city and the suburbs and countryside beyond.

Looking at the evident chaos and destruction that had engulfed not only Madina but this entire world, Semper felt secret despair rising up within him once more. Despair at the course of the war, at the odds against them and—most secretly of all—at the way it was being conducted by the Imperium forces. After the victory at the Helia system, when the *Macharius*and its sister ships had repulsed the invasion of Helia IV, he had dared to hope that the Imperium was at last going on the offensive, striking back at the Chaos forces rather than merely holding the line against them. It had been Semper's recommendation that the remnants of the retreating Chaos warfleet be pursued into the warp and ruthlessly hunted down and destroyed before they could regroup to form the nucleus of another invasion armada. Instead, the *Macharius* and several of the other ships had been ordered to take part in the evacuation of Belatis, and now, rather than even merely trying to hold the line against the enemy advance, it seemed to be Battlefleet Command's intention to abandon entire worlds to the wrath of the Despoiler.

Semper and several of his fellow captains had, in private, railed against this policy, arguing that rather than protecting a planet-wide evacuation effort they

should be forming up into battle lines to meet the arrival of the Planet Killer fleet. With whatever support could be spared from other battle-groups, they could mount an effective defence of the Belatis system, if not defeating and destroying the Planet Killer fleet, then at least driving it back into the warp. The important thing, they argued, was to capitalize on the impetus of the victory at Helia and show the enemy that the forces of His Divine Majesty's Navy stood ready to meet them wherever and whenever necessary. All Gothic sector lived in fear that one day the shadow of the Planet Killer would fall upon their world. The effects on Imperial morale would be incalculable, Semper and a few brave others argued, if it could be shown that the Despoiler's terror weapon was not invincible, that the duty and purpose of the ships of Battlefleet Gothic to protect every Imperial world within the Gothic sector still counted for something.

In all respects, their every argument had been over-ruled.

There were not sufficient ships to spare to mount a concentrated counter-attack effort against the heavily-armed Planet Killer fleet, they were told. In time, they were told, the Planet Killer would be dealt with, but that time was not yet ready.

And, in the meantime, Semper thought bitterly to himself, the worlds of the Gothic sector would have to endure taking part in some sick lottery, the rules of which only the strategy planners of Battlefleet Command in Port Maw seemed to understand. Some, like Helia, would be spared, while others such as Belatis would be sacrificed wholesale, vital fleet resources that could be used to defend them instead expended on a cowardly and selective evacuation that, in Semper's eyes, was tantamount to betrayal of the Emperor's subjects and surrender to their enemies. How many more worlds do we sacrifice, he asked himself. How many more millions or billions do we betray before we turn and fight?

The shuttle suddenly lurched violently, banking steeply in the midst of its continued descent over the city. Semper saw bright shards of laser fire and tracer trails streak past the shuttle's wingtip, realising that they were coming under fire from ground-based anti-aircraft batteries. The shuttle lurched again, rolling ninety degrees to port and causing one of the scribe-adepts to cry out in fear as the pilot took extreme evasive manoeuvres to keep his craft out of the ground gunners' sights.

The pilot was Milos Caparan, Semper knew. Ulanti had instructed Remus Nyder

to assign his best flight crew to man the shuttle craft that would carry their captain to the planet's surface and back, and the *Macharius*'s chief ordnance officer had obliged with the commander and crew of the lead bomber from the best of his Starhawk squadrons. Between Ulanti's personal thug and the commander of Nemesis squadron, Semper thought, his second-in-command could hardly be accused of not taking adequate precautions to protect the life of his captain.

From beyond the shuttle cabin came the roar of thruster jets as one of the Fury escorts peeled away, darting down towards the source of the ground fire. A variant of the normal deep space fighter Fury design and specially adapted for planetary atmosphere operation, it glided in across the rooftops of the burning city, zeroing in on its target. Small-arms fire, near useless at this range and unable to penetrate the fighter's armour, crackled up from me hidden infantry positions on the ground. The Fury suddenly pulled up, its pilot hitting his lifter jets as he seeded the rains below with high-explosive incendiary death released from the dual bomb racks slung beneath its wings. The Fury surged back upwards, pursued by a column of phospherant fire that expanded rapidly to devour over two square kilometres of buildings and ruins, scouring them clean of all human life.

After that, there was no more ground fire directed at the shuttle and its escorts as they made their final approach on the governor-regent's palace.

In the shuttle's cockpit, Caparan cut their speed as they approached the shimmering energy barrier of the structure's defence shield. The three Furies passed close by, rolling over and dipping their wingtips in a traditional navy pilot's farewell, before arcing upwards on full engine boosters as they commenced their long, arduous climb back up into space orbit.

There was a slight shudder of impact as the shuttle passed through the field of the energy barrier, sending crackling ribbons of electromagnetic lightning dancing along the craft's hull and wing surfaces, and then it was through. Caparan brought it in on manoeuvring jets, guiding it towards and then through a beckoning open cave mouth set into the mountainous palace rock and then settled it gently down on the metal-decked landing bay within. Blast suit-protected ground crew and servitor slaves ran forward to secure coolant feeds to its overcharged power systems, heedless of fiery backwash from the shuttle's

landing thrusters.

There was a minute's pause as Caparan and his crew shut down the craft's flight systems, while enormous extractor fans within the bay dispersed the heat and vapours expelled by the shuttle's now silent engines, and then the main landing ramp opened and lowered itself to the deck. Semper's bodyguards were first to descend, stamping their boots noisily on the ramp's metal surface and glancing suspiciously around them. Semper came next, Maxim instinctively falling into step behind, and Hyuga and his two adepts following.

Semper paused at the foot of the ramp, aware after so long aboard the *Macharius* of the scent of air not filtered a thousand times through a ship's atmosphere recycling plant and sensing that traditional feeling of physical strangeness as his body adjusted to the subtly different and slightly higher gravity force of this world rather than that of the *Macharius*'s own artificial gravity systems. In time, he knew, would come the momentary sensations of agoraphobic fear when, after being used for so long to being enclosed by grey bulkhead walls and metal decking and ceiling, he stood for the first time in many months beneath open sky.

Not that he planned on being on this world long enough for that to happen, he reminded himself.

Semper stood to attention as an authoritative and daunting figure in black carapace armour and visored helm strode forward to meet him. Semper saluted formally, clicking his booted heels together, navy style, as he did so.

"Leoten Semper, His Divine Majesty's Ship *Lord Solar Macharius."*

"Byzantane, Marshal Primus, Adeptus Arbites," the figure answered, returning the salute and then taking the navy man by surprise by offering a gauntleted hand in welcome.

"My apologies, Captain Semper," said the big Arbitrator, "but it is because of me that you were summoned here on this fool's errand. What do you say we get this charade over with as quickly and painlessly as we can?"

SIXTEEN

Khoisan kicked aside the corpse of a Belatis planetary defence force trooper as he stepped through the blasted-open doors of the underground missile silo. The defenders of this silo and the others hidden amongst the slopes and valleys of these hills had fought hard, but Khoisan had been unstinting in his attack, throwing forward wave after wave of cultist attackers. He had personally led the principal attack, PDF deserters leading him and his troops on secret back-routes through the labyrinth of defence tunnels that honeycombed the area to mount a surprise assault on the main command bunker. The bunker had fallen quickly—the slaughter inside its rockcrete passages and chambers had been appalling. Khoisan remembered with a smile how the hand-picked force of his most fanatical followers had fallen with wild abandon on the unprepared defenders, and the other satellite silos and bunkers had succumbed in quick succession. Seizing control of the defence network's central wirenet communications systems and piping through to the other bunkers the screams and shrieks of those unfortunate enough to be taken alive during the attack on the command bunker had, thought the Chaos champion, been a masterstroke in demoralising cunning.

Khoisan had arrived on Belatis over a year ago, coming to the world via secret and hidden routes known only to the most arcane followers of the gods of Chaos. At first, he did not know what his purpose was, only that the currents of the warp and the will of the dark things that dwelled within it had drawn him here, but he had immediately set to work. He had formed the world's scattered groups of Chaos followers into an organized network of underground cells, terror groups ready to strike at the heart of the enemy's resources. He had reached out and found the weak and corruptible within the ranks of the great and good of Belatis, turning a few of the most vital-placed and easily malleable to the cause of Chaos. Under his direction, they had spread the secret gospel of the powers of the warp amongst those beneath them.

In short, he had prepared the way, and now the forces of the warp had made manifest their divine intent for this world, and for their servant Khoisan the Faceless.

The Planet Killer was on its way. All upon Belatis would die, but their deaths

would provide the motivating psychic energy to elevate Khoisan to his final reward. He would ride on the wings of the psychic death scream of this world's inhabitants, allowing it to carry him up into the far reaches of the warp where he would be gloriously reborn as one of the greatest and most powerful servants of the gods of Chaos. As a daemon prince of Chaos.

Khoisan staggered, feeling the flesh beneath his rune-inscribed power armour split and convulse, feeling his Chaos-changed innards flex and twist into even stranger new forms and purposes. With an effort, he concentrated, trying to bring his rebellious physical form back under control. The caul of featureless skin that covered the portion of his skull where his face should have been writhed and heaved, creating semi-formed flashes of a myriad other, often horrific flesh-masks that the champion had worn over his millennia of service to the cause of Chaos. Khoisan could pass for a normal human when it suited him—the ability to control his shifting flesh-forms was a boon granted by his devotions to Lord Tzeentch, the Changer of the Ways—but most of the time it suited him to maintain this faceless facade.

"Master!" called out one of his cultist bodyguards, moving forward to help him and then retreating back in terror as that aspect of the Blood God which the Chaos champion had taken into himself momentarily manifested itself, Khoisan's missing features changing into the snarling, bestial mask of a daemon servant of Khorne. Khoisan leant against the walkway's rail as he struggled to regain control of himself, his servants standing back in wary caution. The final physical changes heralding his ascension to the rank of daemon prince were coming, and his body was already starting to react in anticipation of its imminent rebirth and transformation. There would be pain, Khoisan knew, as there had been on those other occasions when his body had changed to manifest those marks of Chaos that were signs of his masters' favours, but it would be as nothing in comparison to the almost limitless power that would soon be his.

Khoisan beckoned one of his cultist lieutenants forward. In his previous life just two months ago, the man had been a prosperous merchant from one of the industrial combines that dominated Belatis's most northerly continent. Now he was a devoted follower of Chaos who had used his position to smuggle thousands of cultists posing as migrant workers into Madina, arming them with weapons manufactured in his combine's workshops, stockpiled in its commercial warehouses throughout the city.

Another faithful servant, thought Khoisan. Another fool who thinks I will save him from the Despoiler's weapon, another sacrifice to aid my elevation to daemonhood.

"Are the preparations complete?" growled Khoisan, his voice still thick with the last few lingering traces of the Khornate daemon that had briefly surfaced from inside him.

"Almost, master. The defence laser batteries are secured under our control and ready to fire."

"And the missiles?" asked the Chaos champion.

"The arming codes provided by our agents in the governor's palace have proved to be most satisfactory. Six of them here, another ten in the other silos. More than enough for our purposes. They are being refuelled and will be ready to launch in less than an hour."

"See to it," ordered Khoisan.

The cultist adept bowed, and retired to carry out his master's instructions. Khoisan moved to the edge of the walkway, looking down at the activity in the gallery below. On each side of the walkway stood the black metal towers of three giant orbital missiles, of a similar type to the torpedo missiles used by the accursed vessels of the Imperial Navy. Cultists and tech-adept deserters from the planetary defence force worked on them from the floors of the launch shaft bays, refuelling them and prepping them for launch. Other cultists swarmed up the gantry scaffolding that held the missiles in their launch cradles, carrying out the no less vital task of daubing them with Chaos runes and sigils, re-consecrating these weapons of the Imperium to the service of the powers of the warp.

More than enough for our purpose, thought Khoisan, knowing that within the hour these powerful weapons, intended to defend Belatis from orbital attack by the enemy vessels, would be thundering their way towards a very different kind of target. By that time, of course, he would be far from here. After the initial shock of the attack, the wrath of the orbiting Imperial warships would be swift and summary, and the reinforced rockcrete walls of these underground silos and

the hundred metres of rock and soil above their heads would offer little protection from sustained bombardment from the gun batteries of a Capital class warship.

Khoisan turned away, signalling to his bodyguards that it was time to return to the grav-hopper waiting to take him to Madina. He took one last look at the scurrying activity around the giant, deadly missiles, seeing no difference between the still-living cultists working there and the corpses strewn at his feet. To the Faceless One, they were all the same.

All sacrifices. All additions to the pyre of corpses which he must scale on his ascent to daemonhood.

SEVENTEEN

Dust fell from the ceiling of the underground cell, leaving a fine scattering over the broken figure strapped onto the interrogation slab. Korte couldn't tell whether the vibrations came from the impact of shells falling into the Arbites compound overhead or from the answering shots fired back by the defending macro-cannon turrets. After this long, the sounds of the artillery duel that had reduced much of the outer compound to smoking rubble now merged into one continuous ramble.

Korte looked down dispassionately at the body strapped down on the slab in front of him, seeing the signs of imminent death written on the man's broken and bloody features. "We're losing him again. Give him another stimm-shot," he ordered the Arbites surgeon.

"This is probably the last time I'll be able to revive him. His heart won't hold out much longer," warned the surgeon.

"He's not ready to die," growled Korte. "He hasn't told me everything he wants to yet."

The surgeon shrugged, adjusting the controls of the med-array and sending a carefully-measured amount of stimm-chem surging through the tubes leading into the man's skin. The patient convulsed as the artificial stimulants kick-started his body into life again. Gasping, he coughed up blood and tissue matter, which the surgeon automatically wiped away with a cloth. The man's torn lips opened and closed, forming silent words. Korte leaned in closer to hear what the dying man was straggling to say. It was not unknown for captured heretics to bite down on poison capsules hidden in their teeth, hoping to take their interrogators with them with their last toxin-filled breath. Korte was not worried: even if the prisoner's mouth had not already been checked, the man had no remaining unbroken teeth left in which to hide such a capsule.

Korte knew this man—he had been a captain in the PDF palace guard—and he knew too the phenomenon he was now witnessing. Captured in the latest and barely-repulsed ground attack on the courthouse's defences, the dying heretic

was recanting his treachery against the Emperor. Those weak and foolish dupes lured into the service of the Dark Powers often made such confessions, realising too late the true nature of the powers they had aligned themselves with.

Yes, Korte had done this many times before, just as he had heard the words—desperate pleas for forgiveness, pathetic rationales for the heretic's treachery, terrible and hate-filled retellings of the crimes they had committed in the name of their new masters—now issuing in a babbling, gurgling rush from the mouth of the dying man. He listened patiently, knowing he had to, and then silenced the prisoner with an upraised hand.

"Give me the name. Tell me the name of the one who commanded you to do all this."

The man stared at him with death-glazed eyes, soundlessly mouthing one word over and over again. Korte leant in close to hear it. One word. One name. One utterance that genuinely shocked the veteran Arbitrator, making him sick with realisation at just how far the taint of Chaos corruption had reached on this world.

All the way into the governor-regent's palace. All the way into the throne room itself.

Korte stared into the prisoner's eyes, searching for some last sign of Chaos-inspired falsehood but finding instead only a dying man's desperate need to be believed. A desperate need to be able to say one last truth after so many falsehoods and betrayals.

"The charge is heresy. The sentence is execution, granted with merciful absolution."

Korte drew his bolt pistol, firing one shot through the prisoner's heart. Swift and summary, this was the merciful absolution that the recanting heretic had craved. Unabsolved, the Arbitrators could have kept him alive and in agony for days on their specialist execution racks.

Korte left the interrogation cell, the other Arbitrators following in his wake. The underground detention levels were now eerily quiet. The constant, terrified

drumming on the thick metal doors sealing shut the areas where the general prisoners were held had ceased hours ago. As per standard Arbites procedure in the event of the courthouse fortress being captured or evacuated, poison gas had been flushed through the air vents into the detention caverns, killing the thousands held within them. It was a bloody, unpleasant business, Korte knew, but a necessary one. The prisoners would have been slaughtered anyway by the Chaos cultists, and many of them would have eagerly joined the heretic ranks.

An Arbitrator of provost marshal rank awaited them at the entrance to the surface levels. “A communication from the marshal. He sends word that we are to proceed without delay with the evacuation here. He will rendezvous with us in orbit aboard the *Retribution.”*

“Are we still in contact with him?” Korte asked.

The Arbitrator shook his head. “Communications with the governor-regent’s palace are poor, at best. The enemy could be trying to jam our signals, or it could even be interference from that Emperor-damned defence shield. You throw enough rainwater at that thing, it’ll generate enough static interference to block out most comm signals,” Korte grunted, unsurprised. So far, little about this evacuation had gone as planned.

On the surface, armoured Arbites Eagle shuttles emerged from their shell-proof bunkers, their pilots impatiently firing up their lifting thrusters in warning of imminent take-off. Arbitrators—all that remained of the Imperial presence on Belatis after the final evacuation of all non-Arbites personnel from within the Imperium compound—abandoned their positions on the courthouse walls, running through churned mud towards the shuttles’ open belly ramps. Shellfire landed around them as the enemy siege batteries intensified their bombardment, and Korte saw a group of running Arbites troopers suddenly enveloped in a roaring blast of flame and shrapnel as a direct hit landed amongst them.

On the walls, the macro-cannon turrets opened fire, and, over the sound of the big guns and shuttle engines, Korte could hear the howl of triumph from the surrounding heretic mob—more than ten thousand of them, the Arbites spotters estimated—as they realized that their moment of victory was at hand. Emerging from their hiding places amongst the pulverised ruins surrounding the Imperial compound, they charged forward in their thousands. Inside the macro-cannon

turrets, servitor gunners fired shell after shell of high-explosive and special anti-infantry grapeshot rounds, blowing open gaping, bloody holes in the enemy ranks, and still the cultists charged onwards. As they came closer, the air was filled with a terrifying staccato chatter as the courthouse's secondary defence line of heavy bolter emplacements opened fire en masse. The cultists died in their hundreds. Yet still they charged onwards.

Soon they would be amongst the minefields the Arbitrators had seeded in the ruins around the courthouse and after that they would be within range of the heavy flamer units that were the Arbites fortress's last line of defence. And it still wouldn't be enough to stop them. The blindly obedient servitors now manning the wall defences would perform their final duties well enough, Korte knew, but it would only be a matter of minutes before the cultist horde was inside the compound.

Or perhaps in even less time than that. "Vehicles!" reported a voice on Korte's helmet vox-cast link, coming from the Arbites pilot of one of the shuttles that had just taken off. From the air above the fortress, the pilot had a clear view of the cultist lines. "They're bringing up vehicles. Armoured tractor rigs, a whole column of them coming along Regent's Boulevard from the north."

Korte cursed. He knew the kind of rigs these would be: huge behemoths used in the forge works of the city's northern industrial fringe to haul extra-heavy loads of steel and adamantium alloy. At full power, one of those monsters could smash through the courthouse main gates with ease.

Yes, definitely time to be leaving, he grimly surmised.

"Mahan! Where's Mahan?" he yelled, standing at the foot of the last shuttle in line and counting heads as the last few Arbitrator stragglers boarded.

"Here!" The shout from across the compound echoed over Korte's helmet radio, and he saw the young Arbitrator commander racing with his squad across the open ground of the landing area. Shells landed around them, chasing them, almost as if the cultist gunners could see them. They had stayed behind longer than ordered, checking that all the servitor gunners were functioning properly in order to buy the final evacuation wave as much time as possible. Running through the falling hail of rain and shellfire, they charged up the loading ramp,

taking their places amongst the other Arbitrators now strapping themselves in for take-off. Korte took one last look round the now abandoned courthouse compound. A shell landed a direct hit on one of the macro-cannon turrets, tearing a hole through that section of the wall. From beyond the walls came another howl of triumph from the cultists. Korte spat in contempt into the bloody mud.

“Definitely time to be going,” he murmured, turning and walking up the ramp. The nervous pilot had his craft airborne even before the ramp had slid shut, the shuttle pirouetting at speed into the skies above the fortress, riding a path through the storm of small-arms fire that poured up at it from the ground. Opening its lifter thrusters, the craft accelerated upwards to join the rest of the shuttle formation.

The last Imperium forces had left the surface of Belatis. As of now, the planet had been officially abandoned to the Despoiler.

Inside the cockpit of the lead shuttle, the Arbites pilot took a last look out over the vista of the city. Other than the rocky peak of the governor’s palace and the soaring spires of the Ecclesiarch cathedral to the south of it, there were no other familiar landmarks remaining that he could see. The city generarium had been destroyed by sabotage weeks ago, and, as the gloom of night descended on the city, all that was visible were great dark patches spread out across the face of the blacked-out city, interspersed by the random blazes of burning buildings and the scattered constellations of cultist and refugee camp-fires amongst the rains. Occasionally, stuttering bursts of las-energy or phosphorous tracer fire arced up into the sky, although it was impossible to tell whether the fire was directed at anything specific or was just part of the heretics’ spreading madness as they celebrated victory amongst the burning ruins of the fallen capital city.

Suddenly, bright light splashed across the pilot’s photochromatic helmet visor. He looked up in alarm, thinking that his shuttle was being targeted by anti-aircraft fire, but seeing nothing.

“There! Over there!” urged his co-pilot, pointing out towards the blank darkness. And then, suddenly, there it was again, emanating from somewhere amongst the thickly forested hills to the north of the city. Brilliant, angry fingers of laser

energy stabbing up into the night sky. Reaching up to grasp and pull down the bright, star-like lights of the ships orbiting overhead.

The planet’s orbital defence laser batteries were opening fire.

EIGHTEEN

The first volley of lance fire from the planet's surface struck the *Graf Orlok* on its underside, just fore of its main engine array. Like many officers of his kind, Titus von Blucher mistook a maniacally strict adherence to every rule, regulation and tenet as being marks of the true worth of a vessel's captain, and drilled his crew rigorously and continuously. It was this blind obedience to navy regulation, ironically, which was to save his vessel from catastrophe.

The *Graf Orlok* was orbiting at fifty per cent full void shield capacity, as prescribed in navy regulations. In practice, few commanders maintained this "minimum half power" rule. Void shields were a heavy drain on a ship's energy resources, and constant operation of the complex and often temperamental void shield generators greatly increased the risks of them failing when they were most needed, during battle. Here, in orbit above an Imperium world, with other navy vessels patrolling out-system and able to provide ample warning against enemy attack, many naval commanders would have quietly satisfied themselves with running void shield generators at minimum power.

The volley of defence laser fire impacted against the cruiser's void shields, burning through them in seconds but expending the greater part of its energy in the effort. What was left struck the Imperial ship's underbelly, scoring through the armoured hull and into the mechanical innards of its engines' power feeds. Had the void shields been at any lower level, the lance beams would have punched through into the ship's generarium core, erupting amongst its volatile plasma reactors and possibly destroying the entire vessel in a catastrophic chain reaction.

On the *Graf Orlok*'s command deck, Titus von Blucher screamed death and damnation at his crew, threatening them with the direst court martial and summary execution offences if they didn't get the void shields up to full power immediately. If they didn't restore full power to the engine systems. If they didn't give him a complete damage report. If they didn't locate the exact source of the enemy fire coming at them from the planet's surface. Despite their captain's haranguing and often contradictory commands, his crew were able to able to accomplish the most immediately vital of these tasks. When the

recharged defence batteries struck again less than a minute later, their deadly beams exploded harmlessly against the Lunar class cruiser's now fully-restored void shields.

Elsewhere amongst the orbiting fleet, vessels fired up main drives and manoeuvring thrusters, seeking to escape the batteries' high orbital reach. Aboard warships, gunnery officers shouted angry instructions to surveyor officers and tech-priests, demanding target co-ordinates for their batteries to zero in on, while in the generariums of almost two dozen transports, armies of sweating engineers encased in bulky, heat-resistant suits struggled to divert power from aged reactors to weak and unreliable void shield generators.

Meanwhile, on Belatis, in command bunkers buried below the planet's surface, cultist gunnery commanders cursed their foolishness in targeting their first shots at a large and well-armoured warship vessel, and frantically dialled in new target co-ordinates.

There were, after all, many other more vulnerable targets to choose from.

The *Arcona* was just another aged, decommissioned transport hulk that had been hurriedly refitted and called back into active service at the outbreak of the war, but for Lito it was the first spacecraft he had ever been on, and consequently the grandest thing he had ever seen. The shuttle journey up from Belatis had been a voyage of marvels; the final embarkation aboard the *Arcona* another such world of discoveries. Lito was confined to the lower chambers of the passenger decks along with the other novice acolytes, but what little of the vessel that he had been allowed to see seemed to him to be an endless source of wonders and mysteries. The ship echoed with strange sounds and vibrations, and while at first they filled the impressionable young novice with great fear, he soon became accustomed to these strange, apparently meaningless phenomena that rang up from the depths of the ship's mechanical bowels. This was the realm of the strange and terrible Machine God, he knew; the unknowable—and false, the preachers and confessors of the Ecclesiarch thundered mightily from their pulpits—deity worshipped by the tech-priests. Lito secretly wondered if the sounds he heard were not the Machine God calling out in anger at the presence aboard one of his vessels of the rival priests and adepts of the Imperial Faith.

So it was that, when he and the rest of the congregation of Ecclesiarch evacuees were gathered in the immense cavern space of the ship's main hold for a service of thanksgiving, Lito at first thought little of the faint but insistent sound of klaxon alarms which could be heard emanating from the other decks. Then there came a thick booming ramble from somewhere deep below their feet, and the definite sensation of movement.

They were moving, Lito realised in thrilled terror! The ship's mighty engines had been activated, and they were moving! Perhaps they were even about to ascend into the empyrean itself, he thought to himself with an even greater rash of fearful excitement. Others obviously had similar thoughts, and a hubbub of nervous and whispered excitement broke out amongst the ranks of the assembled adepts. Angry lector-priests armed with whipping canes moved swiftly to quell the disturbance, but even the cardinal astral himself had broken off in confusion from his droning sermon of thanksgiving as the rumblings and klaxon sounds grew even louder.

Suddenly, a tremendous impact threw Lito and all around him to the ground. From the far end of the chamber came a blinding flash, and he heard the voices of the adepts rise in one single choir of screams. For a moment, he wondered if all ascensions into the empyrean were as dramatic and terrible as this, and then he saw the wall of flame gushing along the hold towards him, immolating all in its path. For reasons that Lito would never now understand, his last thoughts were somehow of his blind astropath master, left behind on the world below. Seconds later, the stricken *Arcona* blew apart as the deadly focused streams of energy lancing up from the surface of Belatis cut it in half.

Further out-system, Erwin Ramas, master of the *Drachenfels*, tried to make sense of the first confused reports coming in from the evacuation fleet orbiting the doomed world. The Belatis system was not a large one—scarcely a third of the size of the Terran system—but the *Drachenfels*, maintaining watch over the outer system approaches, was still several light minutes distant from the rest of the Imperial force. The subsequent delay in normal communication channels—at this distance, it would take almost quarter of an hour to receive and send back the simplest vox message—necessitated the use of astropaths to instantaneously relay vital battle orders and communiqués between vessels in the same star system. Ramas could only wait as his ship's astropath received word from his

brethren aboard the other Imperial vessels, communicating to the *Drachenfels*'s command crew who would in turn feed it through to their incapacitated captain inside the strategium shell which was both his prison and nurturing shelter.

Partially linked into the pulsing machine-mind of his vessel, Ramas sifted through the streams of data fed to him not only by the crew of the command deck, but also by the ship itself. From the reports from his astropath and bridge officers, he knew that the evacuation fleet was under attack, but the ship whispered to him of a threat closer and more immediate than that. From the very edge of its surveyor senses, the ship sensed something amiss, whispering the first word of it in soundless electronic murmurings too faint for the vigilant but dull-witted surveyor monitor servitors to yet pick up. Only Ramas heard it. More than any other vessel commander within Battlefleet Gothic, aboard the *Drachenfels* captain and vessel truly were as one. Ramas heard the ship's warning, and was already reacting even as the first spoken confirmation crackled over the command deck's comm-net link with its patrolling escort craft.

"*Pegasus* reporting. We are in surveyor contact with five or more enemy vessels, including one capital ship. Emperor knows where they came from, but they're moving in-system at speed, heading for the evacuation fleet. We're directly in their path, and after that they'll be coming your way. We'll try and hold them as long as we can. Good hunting, *Drachenfels. Pegasus* out."

Ramas said nothing, knowing that the *Pegasus* was already doomed, and respecting the frigate commander's decision to go down fighting rather than retreat, buying time for the rest of the Imperial fleet. Ramas turned his attention to checking his ship's status and issuing orders to his crew. One of the Emperor's ships may already be lost, but his vessel and crew were still very much alive, and soon they would have a battle to fight.

Emerging from its hiding place amongst the gas giant's upper atmosphere, the Chaos flotilla swept in-system, the*Charybdis* at its centre, shielded by the protective fan of its Infidel class torpedo ship escorts. Faster than their Imperial equivalents, and armed with longer-ranged weapons batteries, they were moving in attack formation, intent on destroying any enemy vessel in their path.

The *Pegasus* was the first to fall, advancing bravely into the face of the

oncoming Chaos formation, but destroyed in a wave of Infidel-launched torpedoes before it could bring its own formidable but shorter-ranged laser battery armaments to bear. One of its sister Sword class vessels, the *Achilles,* fared only slightly better. Making a darting flank attack on the Chaos formation, it succeeded in crippling one of the Infidel raiders in a brief but withering storm of laser fire. But, before the craft could recharge its weapon batteries' depleted energy reserves, an answering blast from the *Charybdis*'s enormous starboard plasma cannon batteries tore off the *Achilles*'s prow and destroyed its internal power relay systems. Drifting crippled and powerless, the *Achilles* was completely defenceless yet the Chaos ships contemptuously spurned the chance to complete its destruction, sweeping on past it in-system and towards a far more rewarding target. Towards the*Drachenfels.*

Erwin Ramas had heard the princeps commanders of the Legiones Titanicus described as "gods of battle", linked into the living minds of their Titan war machines, striding across the battlefield like angry, vengeful gods, leaving armies of men and other, lesser machines crushed and broken in their wake. Those who had seen the terrifying spectacle of Titans in battle—and Ramas himself had—never forgot it, but Ramas laughed at the notion of such power being described as godlike. No, the power to traverse the warp and travel anywhere within the almost limitless bounds of the Imperium of Mankind; the power to rain fire down from the heavens on the heads of the Emperor's enemies; the power to enter battle in command of an Imperial warship, to feel blows that would crush the greatest Titan war-machine deflect harmlessly off your armoured flanks, to send back volleys of fire that would destroy an entire Titan legion with one blast.

That was power, Ramas thought. Perhaps the greatest power any mortal could ever know. To be linked into the mind of a warship, as he was, was to have only the merest inkling of what it was to be truly godlike.

Ramas called his attention away from such blasphemous thoughts and back to the matter at hand. Checking the surveyor information being fed through to him, he saw the Chaos formation bearing down hard on his vessel like a pack of wolves, the faster-moving escorts ranging ahead of the slower but more powerful Murder class cruiser.

“All ahead full,” he ordered, feeling the surge of power ran through the ship as additional energy was channelled through to engine systems already burning with the heat of a miniature sun.

For a while, he allowed his mind to drift through the maze of information made available to him, checking status reports, issuing and clarifying further, lesser orders, and comm-net communing with his second-in-command on the ship’s bridge. Finally, when he shifted his attention back to the surveyors, he saw that the moment was almost at hand. The escorts were pursuing him like eager young wolf cubs, closing on the *Drachenfels* but surging too far ahead of the enemy cruiser.

“Burn retros,” he ordered, feeling the flow of power course through the ship in the opposite direction, towards its forward-firing braking thrusters.

“Hard to port, ninety degrees!” he ordered, feeling, even hearing, the ship’s ancient infrastructure groaning in protest at the strain being put upon it as the entire vessel swung ponderously round in space. A difficult and dangerous manoeuvre—vessels had broken in two or fractured their reactors attempting it—but Ramas knew his ship and he knew his crew, and felt sure that neither would fail him now.

The *Drachenfels* was now lying abeam of its pursuers, ceasing all forward movement and presenting its broad port side to the enemy’s sights. Ramas could imagine the simultaneous fear and excitement aboard the Chaos vessels. The Imperial cruiser had presented itself as an easy target, but at the same time it was now able to bring its fearsome portside batteries of lance turrets to bear on its pursuers. The next few moments would be vital, Ramas knew, and he intently studied the images on the strategium’s surveyor screens.

Overconfident, sure of another victory, the Chaos raiders surged onwards, closing to firing range. Had that eldar torpedo strike of so long ago left Ramas with any lips, he would have smiled with them right now.

“Lock on,” he commanded. “Open fire, portside batteries!”

Thick streams of energy blasted out from the *Drachenfels*’s lance armaments, flickering across the gulf of space to find the line of Chaos vessels. The lance

beams played over two of the Infidels, exploding one apart, sending the other one drifting helpless and dying, its internal compartments and atmosphere set alight by the star-hot lance beams. Ramas did not allow himself any moment of pleasure or triumph; he knew what was about to happen.

Closing to attack range, the Infidels had loosed their torpedoes. Watching the surveyor screens, Ramas could see eight of the deadly missiles—one of the lance-struck vessels had succeeded in firing its torpedoes before it was destroyed—darting towards the *Drachenfels.*

“Brace for impact!” ordered Ramas. All over the Gothic class cruiser, his crew rushed to complete the command, sealing off decks and bays, shutting off non-vital power relays, manning fire control stations, taking shelter in specially-prepared, blast-proof compartments.

The *Drachenfels*’s anti-ordnance defences opened fire, destroying two of the missiles. Another two went astray, failing to acquire their target. The remaining four torpedoes hit the *Drachenfels* in close succession.

Two of them smashed into the rear portside turret batteries, one of them completely destroying Turret Octo, the other striking the thickly armoured mantle of its twin, Turret Sextus, damaging its turning mechanism. Turret Sextus would fire again, but not in this battle.

The remaining two torpedoes impacted against the cruiser’s hull armour, one of them causing widespread explosive damage to one of the upper engineering decks. The damage was not serious, but the casualties of several hundred skilled and difficult to replace engineers were troubling.

In his strategium, Ramas felt the ship’s systems react to the damage done to them even as his officers were still formulating their initial damage reports. Although no follower of the strange creed of the tech-priests of the Adeptus Mechanicus, Ramas felt, as any true navy man did, that his ship was a living thing, and through his link with its numerous power systems he felt his vessel’s pain as it struggled to recover from the wounds just dealt to it.

Bleeding energy from severed power feeds, the *Drachenfels* fired up its manoeuvring thrusters, swinging round to present its lethal torpedo-armed prow

to the Chaos formation and shielding its injured portside from any further attack. Damaged as it was, the Imperial cruiser was still quite battleworthy, and more than ready to prove so to its opponents. The next move was the enemy's, Ramas knew. In tandem with the Murder class cruiser, the Infidels could out-manoeuvre and out-gun the Imperial ship, but almost certainly not without further loss to themselves.

The veteran naval commander watched, unsurprised, as the changing images on the surveyor screens showed the Chaos vessels withdrawing back towards the protective cover of the Murder class cruiser's batteries. Over the comm-net, he heard cheering amongst the crew of his command deck, but Ramas knew better than to celebrate.

The Chaos force had achieved its objectives, although perhaps with greater losses than they had imagined. They had struck at the Imperial force and driven it back in-system, leaving them in command of the main approach to the Belatis system from its chief edge-of-system warp jump point.

They're waiting for something, Ramas realised. And they know that it's coming. Coming soon.

Somewhere within the *Macharius,* a life-force totally unlike the other thousands aboard the vessel also sensed the imminent glories to be. It had found another, safer burrow deeper within the ship's metal innards. There had been other creatures in the burrow—more of the weak, squealing prey things that infested the ship—but it had dealt with them swiftly and brutally, revelling in its newfound strength and powers. Nesting amongst their torn, rotting remains, it began the work of its next stage of transformation. It had subsumed much of its prey's flesh into itself, filtered it through the disease factories of its own poisoned viscera, and now it felt horrid new life ripening within it. Its body was gross and obscene, splitting into two as another being—its plague-twin—emerged slowly out of it like some monstrous tumour growth.

As the entity gestated alone in the dark, it felt the growing purpose for its existence continue to slowly but surely reveal itself. It saw now that its original intent—to spread its plague gifts amongst the prey creatures—was too small and base. It was a daemon-creature of Chaos, a child of Grandfather Nurgle, meant

for far greater things than skulking and hiding in the dark.

It felt the source of its existence approaching towards it through the warp. It would wait for it, the entity decided. It knew the moment of glorious fulfilment was coming. And coming soon.

From orbit, the batteries of the Imperial warships spoke in reply to the glittering lance beams still piercing up from the planet's surface. As well as the damage done to the *Graf Orlok* and the destruction of the *Arcona*, the cultist-seized defence laser batteries had struck twice more, the probing, flickering fingers of energy each time seeking and finding targets within the cluster of convoy vessels. The promethium tanker-freighter *Brennus* had taken a direct hit, erupting with spectacular effect and sending a rain of burning promethium down into the upper atmosphere of the planet. Moments later, the forward transport holds of the troop carrier *Varus* had been eviscerated by a lance strike; when the 48th Valetta Imperial Guard regiment went into action on whatever world it was next destined for, it would have to do so two full infantry battalions short.

Now, however, the gunners of the *Graf Orlok*, the *Borodino* and the *Inviolable Retribution* had finally zeroed in on the cultist-seized defence laser batteries.

In the planet's capital, to the terrified and shell-shocked populace still sheltering amongst the shattered ruins of Madina, it seemed that the very stars were raining death down upon them, as a curtain of solid light descended down to envelop the hills that surrounded the city.

Armaments that could hurl energy hundreds of thousands of kilometres across space now turned their power on the planet's surface in an awesome display of destructive capability, gouging wounds hundreds of metres deep into the rock and soil of the hills in search of the silos, command bunkers and generator caverns buried there.

In the ruins of a township at the foot of the hills, a congregation of almost a thousand Chaos cultists assumed that the Planet Killer had come at last. They danced and howled in maddened, orgiastic joy in celebration of their impending deaths, commending their souls to the powers of the warp. A gunnery officer aboard the *Borodino* unwillingly granted their wish, directing a mis-aimed salvo

of energy blasts away from its intended target down the hillside and onto the heads of the cultists, wiping the township and all it contained off the face of the planet.

Inside one of these buried bunkers, the loyal servant that Khoisan had left in command of the cultist forces there felt the growing, rumbling tremors as the impacts from the Imperial bombardment pushed closer and deeper into the rock strata. In front of him was a control console linked into the chain of missile silos hidden throughout the area, a series of blinking status runes on it signalling which missiles were ready to launch. On the floor behind him lay the body of the merchant, his throat slashed, his usefulness to the cause of Chaos over. The servant felt the booming vibrations grow closer; saw the glow-lamp lighting in the chamber start to flicker and fail; saw dust fall from *the* low, rockcrete ceiling as a network of growing cracks spread across its surface.

“For the Warmaster,” he intoned, leaning across the console and activating the launch runes. “For the ascension of Khoisan the Faceless. I give my life for your greater glory, master, gladly and willingly.”

Seconds later, the roof of the chamber caved in. A split-second after that, the entire bunker complex was obliterated, vaporised, in the all-consuming furnace of white-hot plasma. But by that time it was too late.

In silos studded throughout the rock of the surrounding hills, missile engines roared into life. In several of those silos, launch preparations were not yet complete and work-crews of cultists, still inside the launch silos at the time, were immolated by the engines’ fiery ignition blast. Missiles shot out of their hidden silos, several of them barely clearing the ground before they were caught and destroyed in the storm of energy being hurled down from orbit. It didn’t matter. As the now dead merchant-cultist puppet had told Khoisan, there were still more than enough of them for the Chaos champion’s purposes.

“Missile launch! Incoming torpedo wave detected from the planet’s surface!”

Ulanti looked up sharply at the surveyor officer’s alert. Through the command deck’s viewing bays, he could see the continued confusion amongst the evacuation fleet. Ships firing up their engines to evade the targeting scopes of

the surface-based laser batteries, their panicked manoeuvrings ironically taking them out of defensive formation and making them more vulnerable to attack. The lifeless corpse of the *Arcona*, broken in half and surrounded by a nimbus halo of wreckage fragments. The wounded bulk of the *Varus*, the burned and decompression-exploded remains of the men of two Imperial Guard battalions still spilling out of the jagged tears in its hull.

And, moving amongst it all, the bright silver-hulled darts of the Fury Interceptors, launched just moments ago by the*Macharius* as it sped back to rejoin the rest of the convoy.

“Mister Nyder?” queried Ulanti, aware of the mood of unease aboard the *Macharius*’s command deck since Semper’s departure. Aware of the appraising gaze upon him of the command deck crew. Aware that his hive world noble house heritage still did not sit well with many of his brother officers. Aware that, even if the most hidebound of them would now have to admit—grudgingly, perhaps—that he had proven himself to be a highly able flag officer, there was still a world of difference between standing in the captain’s pulpit, and relaying orders issued from it. Aware that there were many here on the bridge who would question whether the young hive world aristocrat was ready to make the transition between the two positions.

Standing in his captain’s customary place on the command deck’s central nave and surrounded by over two hundred command crew, Hito Ulanti was learning just what a lonely place the bridge of an Imperial warship could be for the man who was supposed to be the vessel’s master.

If the *Macharius*’s Master of Ordnance held any such doubts about going into combat under Ulanti’s temporary captaincy, there was no clue to be found in the characteristic, gruff, clipped tones of his reply. In all matters relating to the conduct of his duties and the operation of his precious attack craft squadrons, Remus Nyder was every part the experienced and no-nonsense naval man.

“Twelve missiles,” reported Nyder, reading off the information on his lectern screen. “All of them of are orbit-capable. We have elements of *Storm* and *Tempest* squadrons already launched and on course to intercept them. I also have Starhawks from *Firedrake* outfitted for planetary atmosphere operations and warming up in the launch bays. With your permission, I

recommend we send them in to pick over anything left down there on the ground when the gunnery crews on the *Orlok*and the *Borodino* have finished their work."

Ulanti nodded his assent, turning to watch the events of the battle outside the viewing bay windows.

"Vandire's oath!" cursed Kaether, sharply jinking his fighter craft out of the path of high-density streams of massed but unfocussed autocannon fire that poured out of from the underbelly of the transport freighter. "Someone tell those Emperor-damned idiots aboard that junker heap to cease fire with their defence turrets until my interceptors are out of the way and the targets they're supposed to firing at are actually within range!"

A brief touch on the manoeuvring thrusters brought his Fury back into position alongside those of Altomare and Zane, the three of them forming up into a wide intercept pattern. He didn't have to check his surveyor screen to see the target coming up towards them; its engine flare showed starkly against the darkness of the night-side surface of the planet below. "Concentrated, intersecting fire," he told his wingmen, quite unnecessarily, he realised. "Remember, it takes a lot to stop these brutes. We'll only get one shot at it. Let's make sure we do it right."

"Check, commander," came back Vale's typically relaxed and comradely mocking reply. "And, after that, you want to remind us not to open our cockpit canopy seals until we're safely landed back aboard the Mach again?"

From Zane, there was only the appropriately cold, curt sound of a brief comm-net acknowledgement blip.

Ahead of them, Kaether saw the darkness light up with the tell-tale flickering light-lines of lascannon fire, followed seconds later by the bright corona flash of a missile harmlessly exploding just beyond the upper fringes of the upper atmosphere of Belatis. That's one of the brutes gone, thought Kaether, just as he fired his own wing-mounted laser weapons in tandem with Vale and Zane. The triple streams of las-fire reached out to intersect the oncoming missile, which blindly passed right into the Furies' intended kill-zone. Las-blasts hammered against the dense shell of its warhead armour, ripped off fused and shattered

chunks of its body casing, ruptured into almost spent fuel tanks and reduced engine components to melted slag. Finally, after long seconds of intensive punishment, the missile exploded apart.

The Fury formation cruised through the outer fringes of the explosion, already searching for the next target.

“Commander, I have another missile target on my screen, one hundred and sixty kilometres away and closing. It’s—” Over the comm-net, Zane’s voice suddenly broke off in a momentary lapse of almost human-sounding surprise, before returning seconds later, its usual cold and unemotional tone once again in place.

“Commander, the missile is firing retro thrusters and radically changing course. It is no longer heading towards any of the transport vessels. It is falling back towards the planet’s surface.”

“Towards Belatis?”

Ulanti checked the readings on the pulpit’s lectern screen, what he saw only confirming the report relayed to him by the command deck’s surveyor section.

“Confirmed, captain,” reported a metal-masked tech-priest. “Five of the missiles have so far been successfully intercepted by our attack craft. One has been destroyed by the target vessel’s own anti-ordnance defences. Four of the remaining missiles have changed course and are falling back at speed towards the planetary surface.”

“A guidance system malfunction?” asked Nyder, questioning doubt in his voice.

“Doubtful,” answered the servant of the Machine God, pausing in his reply as he communed with the ship’s own machine-mind, checking complex, matriculator-spun probabilities and calculations. “From the nature of their matching trajectories, it seems most likely that they have been converted to atmospheric ballistic missile use and deliberately targeted at a pre-planned target on the planetary surface.

“What target?” enquired Ulanti sharply.

Another pause as the tech-priest again checked equations fed through from the ship’s ancient and complex logic engines.

“The capital city, Madina. Most likely, the palace of the planetary governor.”

NINETEEN

Panic, bund and instinctive, numbing and all-consuming, reigned supreme inside much of the governor-regent's palace.

It had begun some hours earlier at the base of the rocky pinnacle, amongst the still-loyal planetary defence force units which had been guarding the main ground-level entrances against the threat of enemy infantry sallies through the defence shield barrier. As those at the top of the palace peak made their final preparations for departure, sealing off the upper palace from the lower levels, panic and outrage set in amongst the planetary defence force troopers as it became obvious that they were being abandoned to die along with the rest of the planet's population, in breach of what their commanding officers had promised them.

Their numbers swelled by the crowds of lower level household servants similarly betrayed by their governor-regent master, the troopers tried to storm the upper levels of the palace and seize the shuttle bays there, clashing head to head with the units of elite and still-loyal palace guard troops set to guard the entrances to the upper palace.

Sounds of combat echoed through lift shafts and stairways that traversed the rock of the ancient palace. Several of the lower levels were now on fire, abandoned to the cultists and refugees now streaming past the abandoned ground-level defences. Panic, along with the heat and smoke and sounds of screams and gunfire, now rose up through the palace in a palpable wave, penetrating even into the sanctified surroundings of the Sarro family chapel.

At the last moment, the governor-regent had decided that if the living branch of the House of Sarro were to escape the planet's destruction, then so too would the mortal remains of his honoured ancestors. The congregation of nobles and family retainers visibly fidgeted with impatience as Vitas Sarro went about the business of conducting the necessary but time-consuming prayers and rituals involved in the disinterment of his ancestors' sacred ashes.

Coin-counting while the Imperial palace burns, thought Semper to himself,

remembering the legend of the chancellery adept who had insisted on conducting a review of the holdings of the Imperial palace treasury as the shells of the Traitor Warmaster's renegade Space Marine legions rained down on the palace's inner walls.

Still, even Sarro started to hurry through the final litanies as the sounds of conflict from the levels below grew noticeably closer, and then broke off altogether as flashes of violent red light flared through the high stained-glass windows of the chapel, accompanied by distant sounds similar to the dry crack of a lasgun firing but magnified a hundredfold. As one, the congregation pushed out onto the chapel's outer balconies, staring in terrified awe at the scene beyond the city's edges, where dancing beams of laser light flickered up from the hills, the flash of their firing reflected in the dull mirror of the cloud ceiling that hung over the city.

"What is happening?" asked the governor-regent, his voice tight with fear and growing panic. "The defence laser batteries are firing! I did not order this! What are they firing at? Surely the Planet Killer cannot be here already?"

Sarro looked to his first minister and the commander of his planetary defence force for answers, but Kale and General Brod could only stare at the display flickering defence laser beams in confused incomprehension.

"I… I don't understand, your lordship," stammered Brod, unable to tear his gaze away from the lines of flickering laser beams that continued to knife upwards, piercing through the cloud cover towards their targets in orbit. "The enemy must have seized the batteries, using them to fire upon the vessels in orbit."

"How could this be allowed to happen?" shrieked Sarro, apparently forgetting the fact that his entire world had now almost completely descended into anarchy and disorder. Suddenly, a second, more immediately vital, point occurred to the governor-regent.

"These weapons, could they be used to fire upon the palace?"

It was Semper, pushing his way towards the governor-regent through the crowd of panicked nobles and retainers, who answered.

“They are orbital-aimed weapons, your lordship. Their elevation is too high to fire upon surface-based targets, but that is not the issue. The issue is that we cannot delay our departure any further. The safety of the evacuation fleet is paramount. If the orbital defence batteries have fallen into the hands of the enemy, then the area of space around Belatis is no longer secure. The commanders of the navy escort vessels will order an end to the evacuation operation and the immediate departure of the convoy fleet from Belatis, no matter if all the Emperor’s servants—even one as significant as the planetary governor—have not yet been safely evacuated. That is what any vessel commander would order under such circumstances.”

Including myself, without any hesitation whatsoever, Semper thought to himself bitterly, if I were where I belong on the command deck of the *Macharius* instead of down here pandering to a weakling idiot like you.

“What the captain says is correct, brother,” said the Lady Malissa, taking hold of Sarro’s hand and comforting him by holding it against the smooth, pale skin of her face. “You have already done all you can, and none will ever doubt your bravery or your devotion to our beloved homeworld, but now it is time to leave this place and take up your duties in the service of the Emperor elsewhere.”

“Yes, yes, of course. You are always so right, always so good at knowing the correct thing to do, dear sister,” murmured Sarro, allowing his sister to guide him away from the balcony and towards his waiting attendants.

The milling crowd of nobles and servants followed him, knowing that he was their sole remaining lifeline to safety. An eruption of light and sound, greater than anything that had come already, suddenly made them turn back towards the scene on the hills, where they saw solid lines of fire fall down through the cloud cover to envelop the hillsides where the defence laser batteries lay hidden. A thrill of fear ran through the assembled watchers, many of them crying out in terror. Even Semper, who had stood on the bridge of a warship and watched the phenomenon from high orbit, felt a clutch of fear as he witnessed first hand the tremendous energy now being hurled down from space by the orbiting warships of the Imperial Navy. The energy blasts and cannonades of shells and missiles tore through the veil of clouds, impacting deep into the bedrock of the hills and sending powerful blast waves rippling out over the city below.

Looking up through the swirling-edged rents in the cloud cover, Semper could see the tell-tale flashes in the night sky firmament that signified the massed firing of a warship's weapons batteries. He saw also the unmistakeable flickering glow of a ship ablaze in orbit, and scattered comet trails of fire emanating from another damaged or destroyed vessel as debris from it fell, burning, down through the planet's atmosphere.

Which one was the *Macharius*, he wondered? Which one of those flashing broadsides was his vessel? Or could it even be that doomed vessel which appeared from the surface as only a glowing ember of light, beginning to dim now as the fires that raged through its broken hull consumed the last of its atmosphere gases? He cursed the futility of his presence here on the planet's surface. His vessel was in combat—in danger—and meanwhile he was trapped on this world, a helpless bystander to events that by all rights he should be participating in, perhaps even to the extent of being able to influence the final outcome.

As if on cue, he saw and heard roaring rocket trails shoot up skywards from amongst the conflagration of the burning hills. "Orbital torpedoes!" muttered Judda Kale in stunned disbelief, standing beside Semper and looking in naked terror at the lines of fire now tracing a path up into the space. "Emperor's mercy, we've been betrayed! I never knew, I never—"

"Quickly, to the shuttles!" called the Lady Malissa urgently, drowning out whatever else the governor-regent's first minister had to say. The panicked mob of courtiers needed little encouragement, and stampeded for the doors from the chapel. Fighting against the surging movement of the crowd, Semper looked around for the familiar dark blue uniforms of Battlefleet Gothic, spotting with relief the bulky figure of Maxim Borusa pushing towards him, followed by his other three petty officer bodyguards, all of them using fists and weapon butts to clear a path through the milling, panicked herd of Belatis nobility. Reaching him, the four armsmen formed a protective shield around the *Macharius*'s captain.

"I'd say it was high time we were getting back to the Mach, sir," said Borusa, with the casual and contemptuous indifference to matters of rank and formality that Semper already realised was the distinctive mark of the man.

"Agreed, petty officer," said Semper, removing a vox-caster from his

cummerbund sash, talking into it through the heavy crackle of static interference still emanating from the palace defence shield. The personal vox-caster's signal could not penetrate the shield and allow him to make contact with his ship, but it could still certainly reach the ship's shuttle waiting in the landing bay several levels below.

"Semper to *Macharius* shuttle. We are on our way back to you now. Stand by to take off as soon as we are aboard."

"The mood's turning ugly down here, captain," warned the voice of Milos Caparan. "We've got some of their ground-pounder troops guarding the entrances to the bay, but they look like they're thinking about bailing out on us or perhaps even trying to storm aboard before we can take off. What orders?"

In the cockpit of the shuttle, there was a pause, and then came Semper's answer.

"Clear the landing bay, by force of arms if necessary, and secure the entrances using your own crewmen, commander. If it comes through the doors and it isn't wearing a Battlefleet uniform, then by all means feel free to shoot it on sight."

Dozens of kilometres overhead, doom descended on the governor's palace. Launched out of synch with the other retargeted missiles, the first orbital torpedo reached the apex of its upwards launch trajectory. Internal gyros revolved and changed, manoeuvring thrusters fired, and the missile tumbled back towards the planet's surface, its simple logic engine machine-mind finding and zeroing in on its new target. Its main drive spluttered and died, its fuel cells exhausted by the arduous climb up into the upper fringes of the atmosphere. Now only gravity, and a few well-timed, final bursts of manoeuvring thrusters, would carry it to its target.

The first missile hit the palace at tremendous speed, passing harmlessly through the defence shield as it was designed to, just as if the energy screen were the void shields of a target space vessel. By chance, it crashed through the roof dome of the governor-regent's throne room, completely obliterating the chamber. Designed to penetrate through adamantium hulls and thick bulkhead walls, the densely-armoured warhead cut through the comparatively light stonework structure of the palace, ploughing on down through the building, before finally

exploding in the kitchens and stockrooms levels, some twelve storeys below.

The impact and detonation of the missile rocked the palace rock to its core. Ceilings and passageway roofs collapsed onto the heads of the palace's screaming inhabitants, killing them or burying them alive. Fire and blast wave damage roared through combat-filled stairways and elevator shafts, killing everything in their path. An entire surface section of the rocky spire that the palace was built on gave way, raining hundreds of tons of rock down onto the mobs still milling about at the base of the palace rock. In the generarium level, buried deep within the rock itself, the impact destroyed or interrupted many of the power feeds to the shield projectors studded across the outer surface of the rock. The shimmering defence shield suddenly stuttered and then vanished.

Not that it was needed any longer, anyway. High overhead, the remaining three missiles were even now reaching the apex point of their own upwards trajectories before turning back down towards their shared target on the planet's surface.

The impact of the blast threw Semper to the ground, dust and debris raining down upon him from the collapsed passageway ceiling behind him. The main palace lighting cut out, to be replaced by the dim radiance of glow-globes set low into the passage walls. One of his armsmen bodyguards helped him to his feet, the man even respectfully and ludicrously taking the time to brush some of the coating of dust from his captain's uniform. All around him, Semper heard screams of panic and groans and cries of the injured buried in the rubble behind him. From somewhere close came the bark of gunfire. Either the battle in the lower levels had spilled up to the upper palace, or the nobility of Belatis and their servants were turning on each other in maddened panic to secure themselves a place on the evacuation shuttles. What had already been a confused rash to the landing bays now turned into a blind stampede.

"Captain Semper!"

Semper turned, seeing Byzantane and a squad of fully-armed Arbitrators shouldering their way through the press of bodies towards him from along a side passage. Gunfire chased them along the corridor, and the troopers at the rear of the Arbites squad turned to fire roaring shotgun broadsides into the darkness

behind them.

“Your shuttle is closer than mine. Get to it, and get this fat fool and his companions out of here.” Byzantane gestured to the huddled group of Sarro and his retinue. Semper saw the cringing, terrified figure of Hyuga with them, although there was no sign of the Munitorium adept’s two scribe assistants, no doubt lost or abandoned somewhere in the confusion.

“Get moving. That was a torpedo hit, and apparently there’s more of the same already on the way,” continued Byzantane. “My men and I will hold this junction and herd the rest of these wretches to the other bays on the next level down.”

The Arbites commander grinned in mirthless humour, seeing the questioning, doubting look in the eyes of the Imperial Navy captain. “Don’t worry, captain. I have no wish to sacrifice my men or end my service to the Emperor today, or any other days in the foreseeable future. Now get moving, and we’ll see each other again in high orbit.”

“I look forward to it, marshal,” said Semper, offering his hand to Byzantane, “and to seeing this world disappearing from view behind me on my ship’s rear scanners.” The two men clasped hands again, Byzantane pulling Semper close. “Watch them. Watch them all, captain. Do not turn your back on any of them,” Byzantane hissed urgently into his ear. Semper looked in surprise at this strange Imperial lawkeeper, and then nodded in unspoken understanding. And, with Byzantane’s warning still ringing in his ears, Semper led his group off down the main corridor to the shuttle bay.

Twice on their brief journey, they encountered resistance. Once, a bank of elevators had spilled open to disgorge a terrified mass of humanity: servants and mutineer PDF troopers fleeing the destruction and battle that now filled the levels below. Semper had hesitated to give the necessary command to clear a path through them, but Borusa had not.

“Open fire!” he yelled, even as the armed mob surged towards them.

The four armsmen’s shotcannons, designed for use in the target-packed close confines of a space vessel’s corridors and airlocks, were perfect for this kind of butchery, and several combined blasts from them sent the remainder of the mob

fleeing away up another corridor, leaving the shrapnel-torn bodies of their dead and dying behind them.

Further ahead, at the entrance to the shuttle bay, they ran straight into an ambush, black-garbed cultists firing upon them from the top of a nearby stairway, or from amongst the cover of the pillar-lined antechamber hall to the shuttle bay. A volley of shots cut through the group of fleeing navy men and Belatisite nobles as they ran the gauntlet across the open space towards the bay entrance. Semper saw two of Sarro's aides cut down by a burst of autogun fire, one of the shots also catching General Brod in the shoulder.

A las-blast felled the armsman beside Semper. The captain grabbed the man as he fell, intending to drag him into the bay, but then found himself staring into the excavated crater of the man's skull, where the las-shot had blown half his head away. Semper let the corpse drop, but snatched up the dead man's shotcannon, sighting it at the nearest black-cloaked figure hiding behind a stone pillar. He may have hesitated to fire upon panicked Imperial subjects just a few moments ago, but he had no such qualms concerning the servants of Chaos. He fired, seeing his target disappear from view in a burst of exploded flesh and shattered stonework. Before he could find another target, he was shoved brusquely from behind, Maxim Borusa propelling him out of the firing line and into the relative safety of the shuttle bay. The others scrambled in behind him, one young nobleman pausing in the entranceway to return fire at the cultists, only to be instantly gunned down in a blast of lasfire.

They ran towards the beckoning open belly of the shuttle, the rising scream of the shuttle's engines drowning out the sound of gunfire from behind them. Blood maddened, the cultists charged after them into the open bay. Inside the craft, First Gunner Daksha swivelled round in his top turret, panning the barrels of his quad-mounted autocannon across the mouth of the bay entrance. At the press of a trigger, firepower intended to blow apart armoured starfighters in an unstoppable hail of armour-piercing shells was unleashed upon the Chaos followers, indiscriminately reducing them to a sprayed mess of pulped matter.

Maxim Borusa stood at the top of the ramp, screaming brutal-sounding Stranivarite obscenities at the ruling elite of Belatis as he hurried them on into the interior of the passenger cabin. He paused on the ramp, checking that there was no one else left to come. A cultist, maddened with bloodlust, made it

unscathed through the hail of turret fire and charged up the ramp towards him, brandishing a blood-dripping chainsword. Maxim allowed him to get almost within striking range and then raised his bolt pistol and shot the madman through the face, dismissively kicking his falling corpse over the side of the ramp before stepping back into the shuttle cabin, hitting the ramp seal rune as he did so.

“All aboard. For Volkk’s sake, go! Go! Go!”

Upfront in the shuttle cockpit, Caparan needed little encouragement. He pushed forward heavily on the guidance stick as he fed power through to the main lifting jets. In a roar of blinding thruster fire, the shuttle touched off, blasting out of the open bay at reckless speed.

Beyond, in the darkness of the rain-soaked Belatis night, Caparan and Torr saw the running lights of a clutch of other shuttle craft blasting away from the palace rock. Above them, through the cockpit canopy, they saw the blazing engine trails of the three missiles now streaking down towards the palace. Caparan hit the main engine thrusters, sending the shuttle coursing away up out of reach of the torpedoes’ blast radius.

They almost made it.

The remaining three missiles hit the palace in close synchronisation, blasting apart the entire upper palace. One of the warheads, still unexploded, burrowed down into the living rock of the spire the palace was built upon, finally detonating near the generarium. The reactor, powered by thermal energy pumped up from deep below the planet’s surface, exploded immediately, cracking open the entire palace rock as the energy stored within it surged outwards at incredible speed.

From a distance, it looked as though the palace and the rock it was built upon simply erupted apart like a volcano.

The blast-wave swept away everything in its path, levelling the centre of Madina and hurling huge pieces of flaming rock for kilometres in every direction. Caparan and his co-pilot fought for control of the shuttle craft as it was caught up in the initial blast-wave. For a moment, they thought they had succeeded in riding out the worst of it, and then the craft was struck by the hail of rock

missiles thrown out by the explosion. One of the starboard engines exploded, struck by a rock chunk travelling with all the deadly velocity and impact of a macro-cannon shell. Instantly transformed into shards of shrapnel, pieces of the shattered engine workings flew off, peppering into the wing and fuselage of the shuttle and causing further damage. One of the shrapnel fragments, a jagged piece of engine casing as large and as flat as a manhole covering, tore through the side of the passenger cabin, spinning like a buzz-saw blade through the cabin and decapitating two of the governor-regent's court advisors as they sat strapped into their acceleration couches. Sitting behind them, Semper felt the spray of blood strike him across the face, although it took him several seconds to realise that it was not his own.

In the cockpit, Caparan felt the craft begin to die around him. The controls were sluggish and unresponsive, and the panel in front of him was lit up with a rash of red, flashing warning runes. From the rear of the cockpit came the smell of burning flesh and wiring as one of Shanyin Ko's servitors and the console system it was plugged into overloaded and caught fire. Caparan and Torr looked at each other, both of them sharing the same realisation.

"We'll be lucky if we can even stay airborne another few minutes, never mind make it back up into orbit. We need to find somewhere to put it down onto the ground."

"Where?" replied Torr, looking down on the darkened city below and seeing nothing but dense, built-up ruins, no doubt crawling with more heretic madmen. Caparan brought the shuttle round in a long, slow turn in an attempt to maintain altitude while they scanned the ground below for a landing place, instead seeing only ruins and burning buildings. Then, briefly, a tall, instantly recognisable spire shape stood starkly silhouetted against the night-time horizon.

"There!" Caparan pointed excitedly. "The Ecclesiarchy cathedral. If it's like every other one I've ever seen then it'll have a wide, open square around it, maybe even an inner courtyard we can try and touch down in." He glanced at his co-pilot, suddenly remembering something else.

"And didn't someone say something about it still being under Ministorum control? Be good to have some friendly Imperium faces around us while we wait for a rescue shuttle from the Mach to come and pick us up."

Devane woke from a dream-troubled sleep. He had seen himself naked and alone on an empty and barren plain, running from some vast and nameless threat which was close behind and pursuing him.

He dared not look behind him to see what it was, but he could see its massive shadow reaching out towards him, stretching past him to blot out everything around him. The shadow of the thing spread out over the entire world, and no matter how far or how fast he ran, he knew he would never escape it…

It was not the first time he had had the dream in these last few weeks, and he knew from private talks with the members of his adopted flock when they came to share their doubts and worries with him, that many others here had experienced similar nightmares, but tonight the dream had seemed far more vivid. Far more immediate and terrifying.

“Father confessor!” A hand gently but nervously shook him, trying to rouse his still sleep-dulled senses. Devane automatically reached for the power sword lying beside him, assuming that the heretics had returned in force yet again to mount another attack on the barricades, but the frateris elder who was bending down over him laid his hand on the scabbarded hilt of the weapon.

“No, father confessor, not another attack. But there is something outside you must see.”

The Imperial preacher followed the frateris across the great floor of the cathedral, taking care not to step on any of the blanket- or cloak-wrapped figures huddled everywhere around his feet. Many of them were sleeping, trying to snatch a precious few hours’ rest, as Devane had been doing, after the latest heretic assault had been successfully repulsed. Several of the sleepers cried out or moaned in their sleep, perhaps haunted by dreams similar to Devane’s, while from elsewhere around him came the differently pitched moans of the injured and dying. The cathedral infirmary was full to overflowing, and now the white-habited sisters of the Adepta Sororitas Order Hospitalier attended to them out here too, amongst the thousands of other pilgrim refugees sheltering inside the Emperor’s house.

From outside, Devane heard the sounds of distant but powerful explosions, the Imperial Guard veteran in him immediately identifying it as a naval barrage. He was not surprised that the orbiting warships were now firing upon the planet's surface—to Devane, it was merely a sign that the planet-wide civil breakdown was entering its final agonising stages—merely by the fact that he must have been so exhausted that he, and hundreds of other exhausted frateris fighters, had actually managed to sleep through the noise and earth-shaking impacts of an orbital bombardment.

Frateris brethren crowded the barricades outside, although Devane couldn't help but notice just how thinned their ranks were compared to even just a few days ago. The heretic attacks, although beaten off for the moment, had taken a heavy toll on his flock. The brethren manning the barricades were pointing in nervous excitement to the fiery glow on the horizon, and Devane could still see orbital barrage fire streaking down from space to strike at whatever hapless target there had incurred the wrath of the mighty Imperial Navy. It was the other glow—closer and brighter—though, that caught his attention. Unless he was much mistaken, it was coming from where the governor's palace was situated, but…

Suddenly, something else caught Devane's attention. A thin, whining noise, like the sound of a shuttle's engines. Distant, but apparently coming closer. "Quiet!" he called. "Listen! Where is it coming from?"

"There!" one of the frateris pointed. "Over there!" Devane saw the running lights of the approaching shuttle, coming towards them, skimming low across the night sky, and almost instantly realised that something was very wrong. As it came closer, he saw why. What he thought were additional, irregularly flashing running lights were flames licking around its tail and starboard wing, and there was a pained, worryingly vulnerable tone to the craft's struggling engine sound.

It dropped down fast, too fast, towards the cathedral square. Devane saw flame-scorched naval markings on the underside of its wings, and even though its pilot somehow managed to pull it out of the dive and prevent it crashing nose-first into the middle of the square, its tail still clipped and broke against the rooftop of one of the townhouse buildings that surrounded the open forum.

"Look out! Take cover!" shouted Devane, pulling gawping frateris down away from the barricades as the shuttle craft belly-flopped down towards them.

It hit the ground hard, landing on its underside, shattering the cobbled surface and ploughing a ragged furrow across the already scarred face of the square. Fire from the remains of the heretic force still hiding out in the buildings on the other side of the square rattled off its broken, armoured hull, but even the enemy seemed too stunned by its sudden, dramatic appearance to properly bring their guns to bear. Its nose smashed through the barricade on the northern side of the square, the impact snapping off one of its wings and spinning it round in a hull-crashing but highly effective braking motion.

For a second, no one moved, and then the first shots started ringing out from those few brave or foolhardy frateris brethren who had remained at their posts on the barricade, as they opened fire at the scattered line of heretics who were attempting to charge across the square in the wake of the crashed shuttle. More frateris rejoined their brethren on the barricade, and the heretics quickly and wisely retreated back to cover again.

Devane warily approached the crashed wreck of the shuttle, hearing the first groans of pain and sounds of movement from within its split-open fuselage. A human shape—so big that for a split second Devane almost thought it might be a that of a Space Marine—stumbled forward through one of these rents. Nervous frateris raised their weapons in alarm, but Devane recognised the uniform the figure was wearing as being that of a Imperial Navy petty officer, and signalled for them to lower their weapons.

Maxim Borusa nursed his crash injuries, spitting out a mouthful of bloody saliva and shattered teeth fragments as he studied his surroundings, finding himself confronted by an Imperial preacher and the assembled ranks of the frateris faithful.

“Volkk me,” he muttered, favouring Devane and his flock with a savage bloody-toothed grin of impious bemusement. “Either I’m dead, and, despite everything, still managed to end up in the same place as all the rest of you miserable, prayer-mumbling bastards, or I’m alive but still stuck on this rain-sodden dump of a world. All things considered, I’m not sure which idea I like least.”

TWENTY

Somewhere far out on the fringes of the Belatis system, something vast and terrible ripped its way out of warp space and back into the realm of the real universe. Following in its wake, dragged through the breach in the fabric of reality by the pull of the object's massive warp drive field were numerous smaller vessels, some of them formidable weapons of war in their own right, but none of them as terrible and powerful as the object they clustered around. This far out-system, it would take many light-minutes for the energy of the object's unique and massive warp-burst signature to register on the surveyor screens of the Imperial vessels gathered further in-system, but already the strong but localised disturbances in the currents of the warp caused by the object's arrival would have been sensed by every psychically-sensitive being in the Belatis system.

On every Imperial vessel amongst the evacuation fleet, astropaths and navigators suddenly reeled in shock and nausea as an overwhelmingly powerful wave of warp-born energy surged through their minds. Even before they had begun to recover from the shock of the assault on their psychic senses, they were already putting through emergency comm-net calls to their vessels' captains.

In the deepest reaches of the lowest decks of the *Macharius*, the growing daemon-thing thrashed in spastic ecstasy, its disease-ridden, otherworldly flesh reacting in instinctive symphony with the waves of invisible warp energy that lashed through it. It blindly realised something of the nature of the object that now sat on the system's edge, but it also sensed out there the presence of something far more important and personal to it. Something familiar. Something, like it, that was blessed with the gifts of the Grandfather. In paroxysms of joy at this knowledge, the daemon-thing entered the final stages of its transformation.

On the surface of Belatis, on the outskirts of Madina, Khoisan the Faceless turned his featureless visage up to the clouded night sky, sensing the arrival of the blessed object. Another involuntary shudder of imminent and glorious transformation ran through his Chaos-warped body. His moment of ascendance

would come soon now, he knew, but he sensed also that there was still one more task required of him. He cast his eyeless gaze around him, studying the darkened horizon of the ruined city. Behind him, the hills to the north were ablaze, still the target of the thunderous orbital bombardment. Ahead of him was the smoking pyre of the governor's palace. Something further to the south drew his attention, and he saw the dark spires and turrets of another edifice jutting up from amongst the jagged ruins around it.

Khoisan nodded to himself in understanding. The Ecclesiarch cathedral, somehow miraculously untouched by the destruction which had been visited on the rest of the city.

Around him, his cultist followers howled and gibbered in fear and excitement, sensing in their own crude way the arrival of the object on the edge of their planetary system. Khoisan silenced them all with a curt gesture, pointing at the spired peaks in the distance.

"Gather others of our kind from amongst the ruins," he commanded. "There is still work to be done."

Sobek let the Imperial tarot pack fall from his hands, seeing in his mind's eye, even before it happened, the thin, brittle and impossibly precious material of the cards shatter on impact with the hard stone floor. He would have no more need of them now. With one last exception, the time of visions and prophecies was over. The worst was now known, and had finally come to pass.

The Planet Killer had arrived in the Belatis system, and the time to the planet's imminent destruction could be measured not in weeks or days but now in mere hours.

Riding in the rearguard of the Chaos fleet, the *Virulent* swept into the Belatis system in the warp wake of the massive Planet Killer vessel. During the journey through the warp, many vessels had joined with or departed from the giant weapon's escort fleet, either despatched to other tasks or summoned by the will or whim of the Despoiler. The *Virulent*had joined the fleet from choice, following its own psychic call through the warp which, by coincidence or

otherwise, had led it to the same destination as the Planet Killer.

From the bridge of the plague ship, Bulus Sirl sensed the presence of the thing that had unknowingly called out to him through the warp, the thing that had drawn him here in pursuit of his prey. It was one of his own plague-children, birthed from the disease gift that he had bestowed on one of his followers, now hatched out and growing in secret in the belly of the hated enemy vessel *Macharius.*

The Imperial fleet would flee before the Planet Killer's advance, Sirl was sure, but there would be no easy escape for the*Macharius.* Psychically linked to his daemonic plague-child aboard that ship, he would take steps to ensure it. For himself and for Grandfather Nurgle, Sirl would take revenge on the *Macharius* and its crew for both the destruction of the Grandfather's warship *Contagion* and the humiliation of the defeat at Helia IV.

PART FIVE

EXECUTION HOUR

TWENTY-ONE

Like thieves in the night, the evacuation fleet slipped out of orbit and stole away into the stellar darkness, heading away from doomed Belatis.

Aboard the *Macharius,* the mood on the command deck was sombre and subdued. It had been several hours since the final wave of evacuation shuttles had docked with the cruiser *Inviolable Retribution,* carrying the last of the planet's Adeptus Arbites garrison force. In their wake had come a battered, damaged Arbites Eagle shuttle craft, barely managing to limp its way up out of the gravity well. The heavily armoured shuttle, designed for combat operations, had just managed to survive the blast-wave of the explosion that had destroyed the governor-regent's palace. Its passengers—the Arbites commander and his squad, and a handful of local dignitaries—had been the only ones to escape the destruction. It was now presumed that all the other evacuees, including Captain Semper and the governor-regent, had perished in the explosion.

Ulanti stood at the wide viewing bay to the rear of the command deck, mulling over the comm-net conference that had just ended between the captains of the convoy's principal warships. The conference had been short and succinct, and had not ended well, at least from Ulanti's point of view.

"Your request is denied, *Macharius.* You will take your place in the escort line and continue underway to the jump point with the rest of the convoy formation."

All Imperial communications had been disrupted since the arrival of the Planet Killer in the Belatis system—just one of the Chaos weapon's many strange and unsettling technological properties which the Imperium's tech-priests had so far been unable to explain—but even over the fluctuating comm-channel, Ulanti had still been able to detect the arrogant disdain in the voice of the captain of the *Graf Orlok.* Titus von Blucher had always been jealous of Captain Semper's growing reputation within Battlefleet Command. Bitterly, Ulanti had wondered how much von Blucher's response was part of his maniacal adherence to orders and correct naval procedure, and how much was motivated by personal animosity.

Next had come Erwin Ramas, his rasping, mechanical-aided voice cutting sharply through the blanket of static. “Reluctantly, *Drachenfels* must agree with *Graf Orlok*. The safety of the convoy is all that matters now, more than the life of one man, even one such as Leoten Semper. We have advancing renegade ships all over our long-range surveyor screens, and maybe not so far behind them is the Planet Killer itself. Both my vessel and the *Graf Orlok* are damaged, and it’s still a damnably long way to the system’s edge, especially at the crawling speed those junker transports move at.”

Ramas’s voice had softened for a moment, belaying the popular image of him as the stone-hearted, flint-edged terror of Battlefleet Gothic. “Leoten was a friend of mine, Ulanti, and your loyalty to him is commendable, but it’s been hours now, and there’s no sign of his shuttle returning from the planet’s surface. The last thing he would have wanted would be for his ship to be endangered in some foolish and pointless solo action. Leoten was a fine commander, one of the best I have had the honour to serve with, but a good captain knows when to fight, and when to break off. Semper was a good captain, lad. Honour his memory, and follow his example.”

“*Borodino* concurs,” spoke the voice of Lupis Fiske. Now captain of the Lunar class cruiser, Fiske had been a comrade of Semper’s since their days together as cadets at the harsh naval training colleges on Cypra Mundi. “There’ll be other battles, *Macharius*, other times to avenge your former captain’s memory.”

And so Ulanti had given the necessary orders, taking the *Macharius* out of Belatis orbit to take its place amongst the fleeing evacuation convoy. All upon the command deck had heard the comm-net conference with the other captains, and all knew that he had tried his best, but it did not make Ulanti’s sense of failure any easier to bear. He wanted confirmation that his captain was truly dead before he abandoned his orbital vigil, and now he felt as if he had betrayed both Semper and the ship itself. He watched as Belatis receded into the distance behind the retreating evacuation convoy. It was a tomb now, he thought to himself, not just for Semper but for all still left alive upon it. They had less than a day to live, if the estimates of the astrogation lexmechanics were correct. For, moving through the outer system towards Belatis was the Planet Killer, closing slowly but inexorably on its target. Long-range surveyor scans showed that most of its escort fleet were still with it, moving slowly in-system at the same ponderous speed as the gargantuan vessel itself, but other vessels were speeding

ahead of the main fleet, rushing to secure the target world in advance of the Planet Killer's arrival.

Elsewhere out there, closer still, was that Murder class cruiser and its Infidel escorts, shadowing the trail of the retreating Imperial convoy. The *Macharius* was now bringing up the rear of the group, sending out attack craft patrols to shepherd lines of transport vessels into secure formation. The furthest rearward Starhawk patrols had twice come into contact with Infidels, each time driving them off with fusillades of armour-piercing missiles. The enemy scout vessels were probing the convoy's defences, testing it for weaknesses as they awaited the arrival of the first reinforcements now speeding to join them.

At its present speed—agonisingly slow by the standards of a warship vessel, but as fast as many of the aged and barely spaceworthy transports could manage—the convoy should be safely out of reach by the time the Planet Killer arrived in-system, but Ulanti still knew that it would be a long and nerve-wracking run towards the new jump point at the system's far fringes.

"A bad business all round, captain, but all that happens does so by the will of the Emperor."

Ulanti turned in surprise at the sound of the unfamiliar voice from behind him. Standing before him was the powerful, daunting figure of an Imperial Arbitrator, the gold rank flashes on his shoulder pads and the silver Imperial eagle badge emblem on his carapace-armoured breastplate gleaming under the command deck's low-key illumination. His helmet was removed, revealing a strong, proud face marked with the faded pattern lines of some kind of ritualistic scarring common amongst many of the less civilised peoples of the Imperium. His dark eyes shone with a keen, shrewd intelligence. The Arbitrators on Necromunda had, for the most part, been brutal, unimaginative killers, often little better than the hive-trash gangers they frequently hunted down and exterminated in the labyrinths of the Underhive. This one, Ulanti realised, was quite unlike such badge-wearing thugs.

His name was Byzantane, Ulanti knew, the Arbites commander of the only shuttle to escape the destruction that had claimed the life of the *Macharius*'s captain. Badly damaged and leaking fuel and air, the shuttle had had to

emergency dock with the closest friendly vessel as soon as it reached high orbit, the *Macharius*. Now, with the convoy underway and heading at maximum possible speed towards its jump point, there had been no opportunity for him to be returned to his own vessel.

“You truly believe that, marshal?”

“I believe it is my duty to serve the Emperor’s will, even though the meaning and purpose of that will may not always be apparent to me. I am merely mortal, but the Emperor is divine. Where I see defeat and ignominious retreat, I must believe that he sees the seeds of later victory. Where I have failed to serve him properly, I must believe that he already knows that other, more able, servants than I will later succeed where I have failed. Other than that,” he added with a grimacing half-smile, “and whenever possible, I leave the philosophising to the Ministorum’s worthy brethren and instead just try to do my duty bringing law to the lawless, heretic rabble that it pleases us to know as the Emperor’s loyal subjects.”

Byzantane looked out of the viewing bay at the dim and receding point of light that was Belatis. He sensed what was on the young naval officer’s mind.

“He struck me as a capable man, your captain. He was a loyal servant of the Emperor. His death will not go unavenged.”

“He was an officer in the Imperial Navy,” answered Ulanti. “If it was the Emperor’s will that he was to die, it should have been here where he belonged. On this bridge, in command of his vessel. That is what Captain Semper would have wanted. That is the only proper death for a ship’s captain.”

Byzantane nodded to himself, only able to agree with this naval man’s sentiments. When his time came to be called to the Emperor’s side, he did not wish it to come with him lying sick and dying in some Arbites precinct house infirmary, greedily fighting to hold on to the last pathetic dregs of life like all those wretched tech-priests who lived on for centuries, replacing their failing human organs with machine parts, trying to deny their own mortality and turning themselves into something less than human in imitation of their damnable Machine God. No, when he died, it would be as he lived, with a bolt pistol in one hand and a power maul in the other, fighting the enemies of the Imperium

and maintaining the iron rule of the Emperor's Law.

Looking through the viewing bay at the starfield beyond, Byzantane thought of the comm-net message he had received from Korte, aboard the *Inviolable Retribution.* Byzantane had always seen the strike cruiser's name as a good omen, summing up as it did his own personal belief in his role as an Arbitrator. Inviolable retribution: the promise that, no matter the cost or risk, the guilty will always be pursued and punished. Again, Byzantane thought of the name that Korte had told him, the name of the secret traitor who had betrayed the Imperium and deliberately engineered the downfall of Belatis. His instinct about there being a Chaos agent in the governor-regent's palace had been correct, but not even he had suspected just how highly-placed the traitor had been within the planet's ruling hierarchy. They were dead now, killed along with so many others during the escape from the palace, and many might consider that just punishment of a kind.

Not Byzantane.

He could only think that the traitor had escaped true punishment. The traitor's death during the destruction of the palace would have been swift and merciful, carrying with it none of the righteous retribution that the Emperor's stern laws required. Looking back at the retreating speck of light that was Belatis, he realised that he and this naval officer shared something in common. Both of them had been cheated by the Planet Killer's arrival. For one, it was a matter of honour, the desire to not to abandon hope when there was a still a chance—no matter how slight—that a comrade might still be alive. For the other, it was a matter of duty, a need to know that no traitor ever escaped unpunished. But, for both of them, the ignominious flight from Belatis represented the same thing. Unfinished business.

"Emperor's mercy!" choked the lead armsman, recoiling back from the open mouth of the filth-choked hatchway in front of him. Koba Kyogen brusquely pushed the man aside, but even he staggered back in revulsion at the wave of foulness that welled up from the compartment beyond.

They were somewhere deep within the lower decks of the ship, moving through the maze of ancient, lightless passageways and compartments that no schematic

or plan of the ship's layout, no matter how old or detailed, would ever admit to. All vessels held areas like this, abandoned completely or inhabited only by the very lowest, least important crew dregs, and they were the perfect hiding place for deserters or even for the secret, illicit cabals—either criminal or heretical—that often flourished aboard even the most vigilant Imperial vessel.

Or for stowaways, thought Kyogen.

It had been suspected for some time that there was some kind of enemy stowaway aboard the *Macharius,* a survivor of the boarding action assault from the Battle of Helia IV. First there had been the outbreaks of disease amongst the crew of the lower decks, then several deaths and disappearances. The foolish and superstitious wretches that inhabited these lowest and most dismal areas of the ship spoke in terror of a daemon creature in their midst, but unnerving reports from Astropath Adeptus Rapavna and Navigator Solon Cassander, the two most senior Imperial psykers aboard ship, also spoke of the possibility of there being something hostile and malefic aboard the vessel. Augurs had been cast, alerts sounded, and at last squads of armsmen had descended in force into the bowels of the ship.

Kyogen paused before the hatchway, aware that the eyes of the crewmen were upon him and trying not to gag at the foul stench wafting through from the chill darkness beyond. The smell was indescribable, somehow seeping through the supposed protection of his rebreather mask. It carried with it the reek of corruption and decay, and something else. Something unknown and terrible. From behind Kyogen came the soft chanting of one of the ship's Ministorum preachers as he offered up prayers of protection and swung a strongly perfumed incense burner to ward off the threat of disease that hung in the foul-smelling air. The commissar considered himself to be a pious man, but, in matters of protection, he looked more to the chainsword in his hand and the full dozen shot-cannon-wielding armsmen accompanying him than one prayer-chanting and incense-burning priest.

"Light! Give me light!" he called, climbing through the hatchway. Armsmen scrambled through after him, shining their weapon-mounted lux-beams to reveal the compartment beyond. They might fear whatever might be lurking in there, but Kyogen knew they feared him even more. Aboard the *Macharius,* Ship's Commissar Kyogen was a figure of fear and respect. Mostly fear, Kyogen

always thought to himself, satisfied that his role aboard ship was as it should be.

Inside the compartment, several of the armsmen, the preacher amongst them, stifled gasps of shock and revulsion. Kyogen had entered charnel places before —had seen the human devastation left by fire, vacuum and blast-shock in ships' compartments destroyed during space combat—but he had never seen anything such as this, and prayed that he never would again.

There were bodies here, many bodies, although how many was now impossible to say, since all that remained of them was a thick, fleshy paste that had been smeared across the walls, ceiling and floor of the chamber. Jagged pieces of bone and other, less recognisable but no less human and organic components jutted out from the mess, and things moved amongst it all: crawling pieces of corruption that had hatched out of the pustule-like egg clusters that grew and ripened amongst the bloody filth. The big Imperial commissar saw the corruption was eating into the very stuff of the ship, opening up brittle, flaking wounds in plasma-forged alloys made to last for centuries. Metal bulkheads and pillars were shot through with streaks of decay. The whole compartment was a living canker growing within the body of the ship; left unchecked, it would spread to consume the whole of the *Macharius.*

Kyogen turned, about to call up the flamer units from the rear of the armsmen squad, intending to scour clean the source of the Chaos infestation within his vessel, when the disease daemon came at them.

The lead armsman swung his shotcannon up, the beam of the lamp mounted on its barrel catching sight of something tattered and pestilent as it rushed at him from out of the darkness, detaching itself from where it had been nesting amongst the rotted filth of its victims. The light from the lux-lamp suddenly turned red, bathing everything it illuminated in shocking tones of scarlet, as the armsman's blood splashed across its crystal face, his throat ripped open by one sweep of the Chaos creature's bone-shard claws.

The interior of the compartment became a riot of sound and light as the creature descended on its would-be hunters. Lux-beams danced round in search of targets, and there was the strobe-flash of shotcannon muzzles firing as confused and terrified armsmen shot blindly into the darkness. Five armsmen died in as many seconds, at least one of them killed by unaimed panic fire from his own

comrades. Kyogen saw the daemon close its clawed hand over the face of the Ministorum preacher, heard the Ecclesiarch servant's falsetto shrieks of agony as sickly yellow fluid wept from the open mouth-wounds on the creature's palms, the fluid burning through the preacher's rebreather mask and into the flesh then bone off his face.

Kyogen tore a shotcannon from the grasp of a terrified arms-man, turning it on the creature and firing it on full auto-spread, mercifully blowing apart the screaming preacher. The creature staggered under *the* impact of the explosive shotcannon shells, its tattered flesh knitting and reforming almost as quickly as the shotcannon shells tore and ripped it apart. Kyogen looked down at the weapon's ammo counter, seeing with a shock of fear that at his current rate of fire the shotcannon's ammunition cylinder would be completely emptied in the next few seconds, and that the daemon creature showed no signs of dying before despite the heavy damage being inflicted on it.

"To me!" he called, rallying the surviving armsmen around him. "Send this warp-spawn back to the hell it crawled from!"

First one armsman, then another, and then a third joined their commanding officer, sending non-stop volleys of explosive-head shotcannon shells into the body of the daemon creature. The creature reeled back, now suffering damage at a rate faster than its body could regenerate. Under impact from the hail of gunfire, the creature's flesh seemed to unravel itself, exposing the new horrors of its disease-warped innards to the eyes of its attackers.

Kyogen's gun clicked empty. Seconds later, the weapons of the others followed suit. To their horror and disbelief, the daemon instantly started to recover once more. It screeched in anger, and in response, ribbons of flesh detached themselves from the organic mess smeared onto the surfaces all around it. They reached out towards the daemon, wrapping themselves round its gunfire-ravaged form, clothing it in horribly borrowed new flesh. In seconds, Kyogen knew, the creature would be fully regenerated and on the attack again.

"Flamers! Where are those flamers?" he barked. "If you've got one, show me that you haven't forgotten how to use it!"

Two armsmen stumbled forward, clearly terrified of approaching the creature.

Still, Kyogen's fearsome reputation terrified them even more, just as it should, and they took up position at the commissar's command, triggering their bulky flamer weapons and playing long jets of burning promethium chem-mix over the screaming creature.

Kyogen watched the creature thrash and burn. Unfastening his gleaming leather holster, he drew his bolt pistol, aiming it at the creature and slowly and deliberately pumping one bolter shell after another into its fire-melted form. Only when the pistol in his hand clicked empty, only when the volatile flamer fuel had completely consumed the creature and all that remained of it was a foul, greasy stink hanging thickly in the air of the chamber did he finally cease fire.

The compartment would have to be scoured free of the Chaos contamination that had taken root here, and after that the area would be ritually purified by the ship's appointed Ministorum Confessor and then probably sealed off and quarantined for a period that might stretch into decades, but for now, Commissar Kyogen was satisfied that he had done his duty.

Re-holstering his side-arm, he activated his communicator; this deep below decks, the comm-link with the command deck more than three dozen decks overhead crackled and buzzed with interference from the ship's power systems and dense hull structure.

"Kyogen to command deck. Mission accomplished. Acting captain Ulanti will have my full report before the end of this quarter day-cycle, but the contagion has been found and eradicated."

Tens of millions of kilometres distant, Bulus Sirl finally broke off psychic contact with his plague-spawn, sensing the last of its spirit fade back into the warp just as the glowing phosphorus flames consumed the last of its corporeal form. The effort of maintaining the active psychic link with his disease-child was taxing in the extreme, especially over such vast physical distances, but Sirl found the experience to be joyously rewarding. Confined to the bridge of the *Virulent* by the nature of the plague-gifts and body-altering mutants that Grandfather Nurgle in his munificence had bestowed upon him, Sirl had almost forgotten the vicarious pleasures of close-quarters combat, and, after so long viewing battles on a ship's surveyor screen, it had been a bloody-edged thrill to

experience through the mind of the plague creature the sensation of killing at close-range with claws and teeth.

Besides, he half-smiled to himself, what proud parent couldn't be excused for indulging itself in a few precious moments of enjoyment at the precocious deeds of one of its own children?

Although the plague-vessel's captain had severed the link with the vanquished Chaos daemon, he did not yet allow his mystic warp-gaze to rejoin his resting body. Instead, he probed deeper into the innards of the enemy ship, searching through ducts and conduits, pipeways and maintenance shafts, instinctively homing in on the mind of the other creature now crawling through these cramped and secret byways.

His other plague-child. The glistening newly-birthed twin to the one now killed by the weak and foolish Imperial scum. On its own, the first creature had at first busied itself spreading its plague-gifts amongst the crew of the Imperial vessel, but its actions, while pure in motive, had been blind and instinctive, lacking direction and planning. Its presence aboard their vessel had been detected too early by the weakling humans, and so it had had to be sacrificed. It was an old and brutally expedient naval ruse, Sirl knew: sacrifice one vessel to the guns of the enemy, creating a diversion and allowing another vessel to pass undetected through their defences.

Making contact with the newborn, Sirl spoke to it in its mind, soothing and comforting it. It was weak and vulnerable, but there was one important task that he required of it.

He suddenly relinquished contact, his mind snapping back aboard the bridge of his vessel as, irritated, he became aware that there were matters that required his attention.

"Signal from the main fleet, lord," reported his unctuous new second-in-command. "We are commanded to reduce speed and rejoin the second rank of escorts protecting the Warmaster's vessel's starboard flank."

"Maintain present speed and heading," ordered Sirl, fighting down a wave of dangerous irritation, knowing that he must keep his mind clear of strong emotion

if he was to maintain the fragile link with the newborn aboard the *Macharius.*

“But, my lord, the Warmaster himself commands—”

The second-in-command’s bleating objections were silenced by Sirl’s angry hiss. Nesting at their master’s feet, playing amongst the festering filth that littered the floor of the plague-vessel’s command deck, the swarm of Nurgle spawn yelped in sudden excitement, perhaps sensing another unexpected treat that might soon come their way, gifted to them by their master’s anger.

“We obey the will of Grandfather Nurgle, not the Warmaster,” warned Sirl. “You would do well to remember that, if you are to remain in my service for very much longer. Continue on course. Our target and objective is the *Macharius!”*

This time, the second-in-command’s tone was measured and respectful, carefully free of any hint of criticism or reproach.

This one learns fast, mused Sirl. Perhaps, if he continues like this, he might even live out the rest of the year.

“The *Macharius* is amongst the rest of the enemy convoy, lord, heading directly away from us and the rest of the Warmaster’s fleet. Even at our current speed, it is unlikely that we will catch it before it reaches the edge of the system and escapes into the warp.”

Perhaps not, thought Sirl, revising his earlier estimate of his second-in-command’s life expectancy chances. Perhaps not even the duration of this current voyage. “Fool, attend to your charts and estimates. Meanwhile, I will prepare to do the Grandfather’s bidding and bring his vengeance upon those that have already defied him twice already now. The *Macharius*shall not escape us again. The Plague-Father and I will see to that.”

Sirl closed his eyes in concentration, focussing again on the faint psychic aura of the daemon-spawn creature aboard the enemy cruiser. It had a hard and dangerous journey ahead of it, crawling through the kilometres of pipes and conduits that twisted though the entire gargantuan bulk of the warship, but already Sirl could sense the signs of the creature’s eventual destination, and he guided it in that direction accordingly. Towards the source of the heavy, deep-set

vibrations that shuddered along the length of the ship’s hull from its main drive engines. Towards the source of the growing blasts of heat that swept through the maze of conduits from the heart of the ship’s power systems.

Towards the vital and highly vulnerable generarium core that powered the *Macharius*’s engines, weapons and defences.

TWENTY-TWO

“Anything?”

Semper bent down to peer into the exposed mechanics of the cathedral vox-ark, watching as the nimble, surgically-adapted hands of the tech-priest sifted through the tangle of wiring and rune-covered circuit boards. Despite the tech-priest’s best efforts, the gargoyle speakers atop the ark remained stubbornly silent, emitting only a low, steady snarl of static.

“Nothing, sir,” answered Caparan, wincing from the pain from his injured, sling-held arm as he tried to stand to attention in the presence of his captain. Semper waved off such formalities; under the circumstances, with them all probably only a day or so away from extinction, normal naval protocol now seemed strangely unnecessary. “It’s working, but we can’t send or receive anything. Looks like we’re on our own, after all.”

Semper cursed. The comm-systems aboard the shuttle were destroyed, and his personal vox-caster was only good at short, sub-orbital ranges, but the cathedral’s powerful vox-ark, linked into the miraculously-unscathed antenna of the building’s cloud-piercing spire, should be able to reach anything within the borders of the planetary system. Looking at the bronze-sculpted features of the ark’s ornamental speaker, listening to the strange, almost rhythmic, bursts of static emanating from it, a disquieting thought occurred to Semper.

“Tech-adept, could it be that our signals are being somehow jammed or blocked? There have been unconfirmed reports that worlds targeted by the Planet Killer experience planet-wide communications blackouts shortly before they are attacked. Could this be what we are encountering now?”

Shanyin Ko paused to consider the question in that strange, considered way distinctive to so many members of the Adeptus Mechanicus. Unlike many of his brethren, the Starhawk tech-adept was unmasked, but perhaps he felt no need to be so. At some point in the past, the tech-adept’s face had been removed, and Semper could clearly see the surgical scars left by the procedure. Beneath the man’s paper-like skin, patterns of gold and platinum wire circuit diagrams had

been woven into the bone and musculature of his skull prior to his skin being grafted back on again, giving the adept's face an eerie, death-mask-like appearance.

"That would be the most likely possibility, captain," ventured Ko, after consulting whatever augmented thought processes the Mechanicus surgeon-priests of Mars had gifted him with. "However, the power and jamming systems required to effect a total, planet-wide communications blackout from that far out in space would be…"

The tech-adept's voice tailed away in confusion. Semper and Caparan exchanged glances; it was not often that one of the servants of the Machine God was lost for words when discussing technical computations, but the forces of the Imperium had never faced a weapon such as Abaddon's Planet Killer before.

"Just one of the many, many things we still don't know about this new weapon's capabilities," grunted Semper.

"And how are we to learn anything about it," replied Caparan, "if all we do is turn and run away from it every time it is used against us?"

"You suggest attacking from a position of ignorance, squadron commander? Squandering precious and thinly-stretched military resources against a target that has so far proven invulnerable?" Ulanti would have recognised this favourite tactic of Semper's, but Caparan had little direct experience with his ship's captain, and did not realise that he was being tested.

"Invulnerable?" answered Caparan, refusing to be cowed by his captain's tone. "Only because we refuse to put that legend to the test. I've faced supposedly unbeatable foes and their super-weapons before. When I was a novice pilot, we were told by the tutors at the flight academy that there was nothing in the Imperium's armouries to match the capabilities of the attack craft of the eldar. Maybe that was true once, but we developed new tactics to deal with those alien ghosts, and now I've lost count of how many debris clouds from destroyed eldar corsair fighters I've seen splashed across my cockpit surveyor screens. New tactics, captain, and a willingness not to believe a damned word any time anyone tells you anything about invincible enemies and their unbeatable weapons. That's all it takes."

Semper clapped Caparan on his uninjured shoulder, favouring the surprised-looking Starhawk commander with a grim smile. “I agree wholeheartedly, captain. Would that there were more at Battlefleet Command who thought the same as you and I.”

We need more men like this, thought Semper. More men like this Starhawk commander and that Imperial preacher, if we are to win this war. Men who simply do their duty to the Emperor without wasting time considering the enemy’s supposed invincibility or in counting the odds against them.

In considering his own position, Semper had to acknowledge that the odds were certainly against him, but that did not stop him trying to continue to do his duty, despite the circumstances. A day ago, he mused, he had commanded one of his Divine Majesty’s mighty warships, with a crew of ten thousand under him. Now he was here, trapped on the surface of a world destined for destruction, taking refuge with these ragged and ill-equipped pilgrims, and with scarcely half a dozen naval crewmen left to command.

They had survived the shuttle crash, but not without cost. The reinforced armoured shell of the shuttle’s passenger cabin had functioned as intended, with its occupants suffering on the most part nothing more serious than a few broken bones, but the rest of shuttle had not withstood the impact of the landing so well, and neither had its crew. Caparan’s co-pilot had been crushed against the brass and bronze levers and fittings of his cockpit instrumentation panel, and now lay injured—probably dying—in the cathedral infirmary below. The corpses of the nose turret gunners were still trapped within the remains of the shuttle’s smashed front. Caparan himself had suffered a fractured arm and had been lucky to avoid being crushed to death amongst the tangled wreckage of the destroyed cockpit, but by far the worst of the casualties had been the shuttle crewmen stationed in the craft’s cargo compartments and belly gun turret, killed instantly on impact as the shuttle struck the ground and ploughed across the stone surface of the cathedral square, completely ripping away its underside. Even the craft’s complement of servitors was no more, dying at the same time as the onboard power systems that they had been plugged directly into.

Now, besides Caparan and Ko, the only other crew of the *Macharius* left under Semper’s command was Caparan’s barbaric tail-gunner Daksha, and Borusa and Rahn, Semper’s two remaining petty officer bodyguards. Six men—so much for

having one foot on the steps of the Golden Throne, he thought to himself wryly.

Ko gathered up his tools and resealed the instrumentation panels of the vox-ark, intoning the necessary purification rites as he did so. Together, he, Semper and Caparan descended the narrow stone stairs back down to the main hall of the cathedral. There they found the Ecclesiarch preacher Devane and a group of his frateris followers kneeling in a huddled circle around the altar of a side-chapel. Semper would have guessed they were praying or conducting some kind of sacred Ministorum rite, but, as he came closer, he recognised the situation for what it truly was: a pre-battle briefing. Devane was issuing orders to the leaders of the frateris combat squads. The faces of the assembled men—and several women—were tight with concentration as they listened urgently to their commander's instructions. Like most officers of the Imperial military, Semper thought of the forces of the Frateris Militia as a disorganised, ill-disciplined rabble, only to be used to wage the Emperor's wars in the last resort, in want of other, more professional and dependable forces. Now, seeing the determined looks on the faces of these warriors as they prepared once more for battle, knowing, whether they were victorious or not, that they still faced imminent death, Semper realised that he would willingly exchange these frateris brethren for any few thousand of his own crew.

The Imperial preacher glanced up the approach of the navy men. He looked expectantly at Semper, but the look in his eyes suggested that he already knew the answer to his unspoken question.

"It would seem, Preacher Devane, that my men and I will be remaining here rather longer than we imagined," confirmed Semper, with a wry smile. "We are at your command. What would you have us do?"

"The spotters on the barricades say that the heretics are massing again on both the northern and eastern sides of the square, no doubt getting ready to attack us again. We'll need every able-bodied servant of the Emperor we can get on those barricades when they do."

Devane broke off, staring doubtfully at the bloody and bandaged figures of the navy men, and especially at Semper's full dress uniform, now smeared with blood and grime. He indicated the sheathed sabre and bolstered laspistol that Semper wore along with his ceremonial crimson cummerbund. "You know how

to use those things?”

Semper drew the sabre, showing Devane the sword-blade’s gleaming, razor-tempered edge. “I’ll admit it’s been a while, Confessor Devane, but I haven’t always merely seen combat from the bridge of a warship.” He smiled thinly, touching first the jagged, ancient scar that split one side of his face and then the distinctive Order of the Gothic Star decoration on his tunic breast. “After all, how else do you think I earned these?”

“Very well. I’ll take the north side, you take the east. We’re short of warm bodies on the east barricades, but I’ll try and send you whatever we can spare from the south and west sides.”

“No need to risk weakening our defences elsewhere, confessor. If they attack us on the north and east, it might only be as feints to make us draw defenders away from our other flanks. Don’t worry, though. I know where I can find a few extra bodies to fill the gaps in my line.”

Devane followed Semper’s gaze, looking over to a side-chapel off the main cathedral floor. A group of figures sat there, shying away from the rest of the mass of wretched humanity huddled all around, a line of tall, armed guardsmen in palace guard uniforms making sure that none of the pilgrims approached the group sheltering in the side-chapel. Devane looked back at Semper, sharing his smile.

“The governor-regent has several times expressed just how much he shares his peoples’ suffering. If he suffers with them, I’m sure he wouldn’t mind fighting alongside them either.”

The great and the good of Belatis aristocracy took some convincing before coming round to Semper’s way of thinking.

Maxim Borusa broke the wrist of the first guard officer who tried to bar Semper’s way as the *Macharius* captain marched up towards the assembled dignitaries. When the second tried to draw his laspistol on Semper, Maxim merely took the weapon off the man and used it to club its owner unconscious, mindful of Semper’s instructions to do as little crippling damage as possible to

anyone who tried to stop him. They would, after all, be needing these men soon enough in the defence of the cathedral barricades. A warning stare from the hulking hiveworlder, backed up by the weapons in the hands of Caparan, Daksha and several of Devane's frateris brethren, quickly dissuaded the rest of the governor-regent's bodyguards from any further interference.

"What is the meaning of this?" spluttered First Minister Kale, standing to face Semper. Behind him, Sarro huddled with his sister, clutching at his chain of regal office as if it were some protective talisman that could ward off the awful reality of the situation that the governor-regent now found himself in. Sarro's eyes were wide with disbelief, his shell-shocked gaze that of a man trying to convince himself that none of this was really happening.

Semper had seen that look many times before, mostly on the faces of navy pressgang victims as they were brought unconscious aboard ship and awoke to find themselves unwilling new recruits of His Divine Majesty's Imperial Navy, condemned to a brutal and often short-lived slave existence aboard the strange and dangerous surroundings of an Imperial warship, doomed never to see their friends, family and entire homeworld again.

"His highness the governor-regent is still the Emperor's appointed representative and is still in command here, captain," continued Kale, with all the false dignity and authority that he could manage. "By all means take what few men we can spare from his personal guard, but you surely can't expect any of the rest of us to fight?"

"I can, and I do," replied Semper, gesturing at the ranks of the frateris around them. "The light of the Emperor has been withdrawn from this world. The protection of the Imperium is gone. Rank and privilege mean nothing now. Take a look around you, Kale, take a look at these people. They are the poor and low-born of this world. Their kind count for nothing to the likes of the Emperor's worthiest servants, to the ministers and governors of the Emperor's world and the commanders of the Emperor's fleets, and yet their dedication to the service of the Master of Mankind shames us all. They have been fighting here for days. They know they are soon to die, and yet still they keep on fighting. This is the Emperor's house, and we are still his servants. What other choice do we have but to join them in this final duty?"

Behind Semper, Kale and the others saw only the sullen, hostile stares of the frateris. Devane had gathered his flock from amongst the populations of the impoverished rural districts far from the prosperous planetary capital. To these simple, Emperor-fearing people, Governor-Regent Sarro and the rest of the planetary nobility were remote and obscure figures, decadent and debauched aristocrats of the kind that Imperial preachers frequently railed against from the pulpits of their rural parish churches. Most of the wealth and all of the power of Belatis was concentrated in its capital of Madina, and many of the frateris peasants here would have come from ancestral estates owned by the nobles; ancestral estates which many of those nobles would never even have visited, seeing them merely as distant but useful additional sources of income, appointing harsh and merciless estate managers to squeeze every extra piece of worth out of these agricultural lands and the peasants who were expected to work them. No, clearly the people here bore little love for Governor-Regent Sarro and the rest of the ruling elite of Belatis, and Kale's insistence on the governor-regent's continued authority would find few supporters amongst them.

Sarro's bodyguards, sensing the increasingly tense mood in the chapel and completely outnumbered by the frateris facing them, shifted nervously, their fingers edging towards the firing studs of their las-weapons. It was the Lady Malissa, stepping forward into the firing line between the two groups, gesturing to her brother's bodyguards to lower their weapons, who diffused the situation.

"We are all fellow Belatisites here, captain, all loyal servants of his Divine Majesty. Our nobles and guards will be glad to serve alongside Confessor Devane's brave frateris brethren in their defence of this holy place. I and my servants will be glad to serve alongside the Sororitas sisters in the infirmary, tending to the injured and dying. All I ask," she said, stepping forward towards Semper, her voice softening as she indicated with a subtle and graceful gesture back towards the quivering form of the governor-regent, "is that my brother be excused for the moment from taking his place with the other defenders. The events of this last day and the suffering of his people have temporarily disordered his mind, but he will find solace here in the Emperor's house, and I feel sure, when the final time comes, he will be ready to take his ordained place amongst his beloved subjects on the barricades."

Semper nodded in acquiescence, realising, as Byzantane had before him, that it was the House of Sarro's misfortune, and the planet of Belatis's as a whole, that

the local laws of regal succession did not allow a woman to sit on the governor-regent's throne.

General Brod, his uniform stiff with dried blood from his shoulder wound, came forward to organise the remaining troops and nobles. Other than the bandaged sling he wore on his injured arm, Brod had refused all medical attention, refused to be given a place amongst the rest of the wounded, even though it was plain to see that he was in much pain. Barking hoarse-voiced orders and supported by one of his few remaining aides, he moved stiffly through the throng, pausing to rearrange the details of his uniform. To Semper, he looked like a man who had failed once in his duty and was determined not to do so again. He looked, thought Semper, like a man preparing to buy back his honour at the willing price of his own life.

Looking round, Semper also saw a frateris-cloaked figure stealing away from the main group, lurking behind the side chapel's holy statuary.

"Adept Hyuga," called Semper. "Eager for battle so soon? No need to join the ranks of the frateris brethren. I will be honoured to have you with me on the eastern barricades, in the first line of defenders."

Even as the *Macharius* captain spoke, Maxim Borusa materialised in the Munitorium adept's path, pulling away the tattered cloak disguise to reveal the rows of glittering decorations on the terrified Munitorium official's gaudy uniform tunic and the ornate, hand-crafted laspistol tucked into his waist sash.

In panic, Hyuga reached for the pistol, squealing in pain as Maxim's huge, paw-like hand shot out and seized his wrist, almost crushing it.

"Nice gun," Maxim growled, taking the weapon off the official and studying it with a practised eye. Studded with gems and made from finely wrought platinum and other precious metals, the pistol was probably worth enough to equip an entire company of Imperial Guard. And, decorative toy that it was, would probably explode the first time it was actually fired, thought Maxim.

Deftly tucking the pistol into his own belt, Maxim selected a heavy stubber handgun from the brace of pistols he himself wore in a bandolier across his chest. "Here, have a real weapon instead," he said, pressing it into Hyuga's hand.

“It’s not as pretty as yours, but it’ll do the job a whole lot better than that little thing.”

Semper called out to Maxim. “Petty Officer Borusa, we can’t have the lord adept wandering off and getting himself injured. I’m detailing you to watch over him. Make sure he never leaves your side, no matter what happens.”

“Gladly, sir,” growled Maxim, grinning down at Hyuga, relishing the adept’s fear. Maxim had been at the mercy of men such as Hyuga all his life, the high and mighty lords of the Imperium, who decided the fates of millions, often on an apparent whim. On Stranivar, it had been men such as Hyuga who had sent the Arbitrators downhive to conduct a brutal cull of the population of the lower levels. Tens of thousands had been killed, thousands more rounded up and consigned to the labour camps on the prison moon Lubiyanka, Maxim amongst them. And again, it had been a Munitorium official such as Hyuga, perhaps even Hyuga himself, who had issued the orders that would have eventually led to Maxim being press-ganged into the Imperial Navy and ending up aboard the *Macharius*, as the gulag camps of Lubiyanka were emptied to provide fresh fodder to try and stem the ever-increasing crew casualties suffered by Battlefleet Gothic.

Men such as this had always been in command, controlling Maxim’s destiny from afar. Now, at last, he was able to look one of them in the face. He was not best impressed with what he saw.

“Cheer up, lord adept,” he grinned at the cringing senior bureaucrat, unaware that he was almost directly echoing the earlier words and sentiments of Commissar Kyogen. “Fight well, and maybe you’ll die earning the right to wear one of those fancy baubles on your chest. Who knows, if you put up a good enough fight, maybe I’ll even think about giving you some bullets to load into that gun I just gave you.”

Nearby, amongst the remaining nobles and dignitaries, one mind did not share the same concerns as the others around it. Those other, lesser, minds were filled with a mixture of emotions. Fear. Confusion. Pious devotion. A grim determination to do their duty to the bitter end. This mind felt none of these things. It only thought of how it could escape this situation or turn it to its

advantage, as it had turned so many other accidents and incidents to its advantage, and to the advantage of the powers of the warp.

Yes, something had clearly gone wrong, realised the owner of that most cold and incisive of minds. That fat fool Sarro had delayed their escape from the palace too long, and, somehow, missiles that should have been targeted at the evacuation transports and the Arbites courthouse had instead been sent to destroy the governor's palace, and the owner of the mind had almost been killed along with so many others. Particularly galling was the fact that it was only through the clandestine efforts of the mind's owner that the forces of the Faceless One even had the arming codes that had allowed them to re-target and fire the missiles in the first place. Lesser, more feeble, intellects would have suspected betrayal—one of the tricks and falsehoods that the fools of the Ministorum would have all believe were typical of the of the powers of the warp—but this mind knew better. It simply had too much to offer its new masters, and, once safely away from this miserable, warp-begotten rock, would yet prove to be an invaluable agent to the cause of Chaos, working from within the ranks of the Imperium to ensure the final victory of the forces of the Despoiler here within the Gothic sector.

For the traitor had no doubt that it would escape the fate that would soon befall the rest of Belatis, just as it had no doubt that Chaos would finally prevail in this war. The escape from the palace had been a close thing, but it realised now that its survival had all along been pre-ordained. The Powers of Chaos were watching over the life of their new and faithful servant, for it was, it knew, simply too valuable an asset to their cause to be left to die with the rest of these fools.

And, of course, the Faceless One was still here, and it was clear that a being as cunning and powerful as a champion of Chaos would not allow itself to be destroyed along with the rest when the Planet Killer finally hung in the heavens above the doomed world. The Faceless One would have his escape already prepared, and would take his most useful and valuable allies with him, the traitor was sure of it.

All it had to do, it knew, was be patient and wait for whatever means of escape its new Chaos masters had prepared for it.

From all over Madina they came, like rats scurrying through the rains of the dying city, to answer the call of the Faceless One. The insane and the blood-crazed, subsuming themselves completely to the aura of madness that now hung over the doomed world; the weak and the foolish, still believing against all available evidence that the Powers of Chaos would somehow spare them in return for their new-sworn loyalty; the faithful and devout, commending their souls to the ever-hungry powers of the warp, all too eager to give up their lives at the whim and command of their uncaring daemonic overlords.

Khoisan the Faceless did not care why his army of followers came to die—and die they would, either now or in less than a day's time—just as long as they did so obediently and at his command.

Looking out over the corpse-strewn rain of the cathedral square, he sensed the invisible energies stirring around him. Through the warp, bleeding through the surface skin of reality, he felt the rippling currents of energy that announced the presence of the Planet Killer, now within the planetary system and approaching its target. Inside him, he sensed his body preparing for its final, glorious transformation, the rhythms of this imminent metamorphosis building in synch with the growing, almost palpable, sensation of the Planet Killer's approach.

And now, from across the square, from amongst the milling, pitiful throng of the defenders of the house of the false Emperor, Khoisan sensed something else, perhaps the reason some intuitive sense had drawn him here in the first place. Some other, new task was expected of him here, Khoisan realised. The powers of the warp still required one final act of obedience to their will before his ascendance would be complete.

Khoisan concentrated for a second, allowing that aspect of the Blood God which he had accepted into his flesh to manifest itself. He smiled, running a long, drooling tongue over newly-formed lips and fangs, relishing the hot rush of blood-lust that welled up unbidden from within him. He raised a hand that had now been transformed into a scale-covered, blood-dripping claw, pointing the blade of his power sword at the line of defenders sheltering behind the cover of the barricades. "The Blood God is angry. He awakens and calls for nourishment," he snarled in an string of guttural barks that no human throat could ever have produced. "Go, feed him."

As one, their minds filled with a growing bloodlust that their master had deliberately infected them with, the dense wave of cultists moved forward out of cover. Seconds later, the first sounds of gunfire rang out across the wide square.

Gunfire… He could hear gunfire coming from somewhere below. The cathedral square, perhaps, but why would there be gunfire coming from there? Perhaps Lito would know… He would ask the boy when he finally got here… And where was that Emperor-forsaken young fool, anyway? Sobek had been ringing the bell to summon his novice servant for what seemed like an eternity, and there was still no sign of—

Lito. In his mind's eye, the astropath saw the face of his novice initiate, his screaming features suddenly illuminated in a flash of star-hot light. He saw plasma fire engulfing the barbican towers of a star vessel, and then he remembered.

Lito was dead. Belatis was now without the light of the Emperor, had been abandoned to the enemy. The Planet Killer was here, now almost upon them. Sobek could feel its leviathan presence pressing against the barriers of his mind, its all-consuming shadow blotting out the greater part of his mystic vision. The aftermath of its arrival out of the warp—psychic Shockwaves rippling out to touch the minds of every sentient being in the Belatis system—had almost overwhelmed Sobek's formidable mental defences. A less experienced astropath might have been killed by the experience, and, as it was, Sobek knew that he had suffered a stroke—several, perhaps—triggered by the effects of the psychic shockwave. He knew that he was probably dying, that parts of his mind were already dead or dying; that his memory and mystic vision were already starting to fail him.

Still, aged as he was, he was a psyker, his power fortified by the agonies of the soul bonding rites with the mind of the God-Emperor himself, and a psyker was far more than mere weak flesh and blood. The Emperor still required one more task of him before he was allowed to die. Gathering his failing strength, Sobek staggered to his feet, making for the doorway out of his chamber and the corridor beyond. His inner vision was dimmed, its clarity and range curtailed by the spreading damage to his brain, but he had walked this way countless times before. He knew every flagstone beneath his sandaled feet, every turn of the

corridor and worn step of the descending stairs beyond. He had walked these chambers and halls for the last sixty-eight years; even truly blind and without his psychic gift, he could have found his way through them with ease. Now he travelled this way for the last time, leaving the chamber where he had lived for nearly seven decades and heading down towards the main body of the cathedral.

Towards the sound of the gunfire.

TWENTY-THREE

The wave of cultists swept across the rain-soaked square, trampling underfoot the torn and blasted bodies of their erstwhile comrades from previous attacks. Volleys of gunfire rang out from the frateris defenders sheltering behind the cover of the barricades, finding easy targets amongst the first ranks of the attackers. Figures screamed and fell, joining the litter of corpses on the ground; those unlucky enough not to be instantly killed by the gunfire would soon be crushed to death by the stampede of feet.

The fire from the barricades increased in intensity as the cultist attack came within full range of most of the defenders' guns. Increased—and then suddenly faltered and almost died away completely as the frateris defenders realised what it was they were firing at.

The heretics were employing new tactics. They had found themselves an army of human shields. A living wall, fully five ranks deep. Women and children, the sick and infirm, none had been spared, all of them rounded up in their hundreds from their hiding places amongst the rains and pressed into the service of Khoisan the Faceless. Lines of blood-maddened cultist killers followed close behind the packed ranks of the shield wall, howling their devotions to the powers of the warp, shooting and stabbing their weapons into the backs of the captured civilians, driving them forward in a terrified stampede into the gunsights of the cathedral defenders.

A low moan of collective despair rose up from the line of frateris defenders. They were prepared to die, they were eager to die fighting the Emperor's enemies and to take as many of the heretic traitors as possible with them. They were not prepared for this.

Semper and Devane saw the danger immediately. Every second the human shield survived brought the cultist attack wave a step closer to the cathedral defences. Intact, it would quickly overwhelm and sweep aside the defenders on the barricades. Nervous frateris brethren cast questioning glances at the two Imperial commanders. Both men knew what must be done, but both men hesitated to give the required order.

It fell to Maxim Borusa, hive-scum criminal and killer, to do what was necessary.

“Open fire!” he bellowed, charging up and down the line of defenders and lashing out in anger at them with his heavy jackboots. “Open fire, you bunch of prayer-mumbling sob sisters! They’re good as dead anyway. We all are! So what are you waiting for!”

The gunners on the eastern side of the square opened fire at the hiveworlder’s command, many of them whispering silent prayers for forgiveness as they pressed the triggers and firing studs of their weapons. Moments later, there came a second, answering crash of gunfire from the northern side of the barricade defences as the frateris gunners there followed suit. A hail of bullets and las-fire smashed into the human wall, cutting through flesh, blowing apart bone and tissue.

In the forefront of the firing positions, Semper saw and heard the pitiful screams and pleas for mercy as the living components of the human shield wall were mown down in their hundreds. He saw a lone child—probably no more than six or seven years old—standing alone amongst the carnage screaming for its parents, only seconds later to disappear beneath the crushing weight of the bodies charging forward from behind it. He saw a mother protectively clutching a swaddled bundle of cloth that could only be an infant baby just as a burst of heavy bolter fire ripped through the ranks of the living shield wall, mercifully obliterating her from view.

Semper saw all this, and then tried to blank it all from his mind, tried to see nothing else but target objects and the vile enemies sheltering behind them as he fired his laspistol over and over again, sending shot after shot of searing las-fire into the screaming, pleading mass of humanity.

Semper kept firing, until there were no more of the target objects left standing before him, only living enemies. The laspistol’s plastic and metal grip burned against his hand and the whole weapon was dangerously over-heated, its power pack almost fully depleted from cyclic over-firing. Semper discarded it without a second glance and drew his sabre, knowing what would come next. As a young and ambitious officer, Leoten Semper had led many boarding assaults on enemy vessels or commanded repulsing counter-assaults on enemy boarding attacks on

his own vessel. Always he had been first into the fray, always he ended up fighting in the thick of the action. It had been years since he had taken part in this kind of vicious close-quarters fighting, and, before this, he might have doubted whether he was still capable of that kind of bloody-handed savagery again. Now, seeing the lines of loathsome, black-garbed enemies charging forwards towards him, seeing the cultists ruthlessly cutting down the few remaining civilians who stood in the way between them and the barricade defenders, Semper knew that he would be more than capable of the required level of blood-thirsty savagery. Killing scum like this would be a distinct pleasure, over and above being his duty to the Emperor and Imperium.

“Stand ready!” he called, brandishing his sabre as he scaled the lip of the barricade. “Give them a greeting to take back to their masters in the warp.”

With the shield wall gone, a second hail of fire rang out from the barricade defenders, ripping into the mass of heretics. Dozens of them were killed in seconds. Hundreds more, unharmed, charged on, weathering the storm of gunfire, crashing against the barricade like a living wave.

Maddened with fear and bloodlust, the first ranks of cultists threw themselves at the makeshift bulwark of the barricades, fighting amongst themselves to be the first to scale over it.

Those who succeeded were instantly met and attacked by the frateris defenders waiting there. Other cultists tore at the barricade foundations with their bare hands, trying to pull sections of it down, or thrust gun barrels through any available apertures or breaches in its structure, firing blindly in the hope of hitting those hiding on the other side.

In front of Semper, the black-cloaked followers of the powers of the warp swarmed over the top of the barricades, falling on the defenders. Semper thrust his sabre point through the throat of the first wild-eyed madman to come at him, stepping back sharply to avoid the man’s falling body. Another killing thrust with the sabre dispatched the next enemy in line, but more bodies pressed forward to take the places of the men Semper had killed. A hail of rag-lit, promethium-filled glass bottle and clay pot missiles—which side had thrown them, it was impossible to tell—landed all along the top of the barricade, engulfing attacker and defender alike in a blanket of flame and instantly setting

ablaze sections of the barricade. Men, soaked in burning promethium, rolled across the rain-slick cobbles on the ground in a vain attempt to put out the hungry, chemically-fuelled flame now consuming them. Semper silenced the screams of one man with a stab of his sabre, not knowing whether he had killed another enemy or mercy-killed a fellow servant of the Emperor.

More black-cloaked figures scrambled over the barricade top, leaping through the wall of flame, many of them setting themselves alight in the process and running amok, still burning, through the ranks of the defenders, their screams of pain and joy an insane epiphany to their daemon masters. One of the burning figures ran shrieking at Semper, waving a fiery scythe weapon above its head, only to be pulled down seconds later by a group of frateris secondary defenders. They hacked at it with knives and makeshift tool weapons until its thrashing and shrieks finally ceased, although even in its death-throes it proved a deadly opponent, spitting one of the frateris on the cruel blade of its burning weapon.

Glancing round, Semper found it impossible to tell how the battle was going. Everywhere he looked, he saw chaos and confusion, the ordered lines of defence falling into a bloody struggle for survival as the tide of cultists continued to sweep across the now-broken barricade defences.

Rain fell unceasingly from the skies, muffling the sounds of screams, cries and gunfire from all around, mixing with the gory detritus of battle to form treacherous, blood-filled puddles on the cobbled ground.

A cultist stepped out in front of him, a brace of severed heads hanging from the braided human hair belt around his waist. The man giggled insanely, swinging a gore-dripping cleaver at the Imperial Navy commander. Semper parried the attack with ease, splitting the heretic butcher’s skull with his return blow.

A deformed hand thrust a pistol muzzle towards Semper’s belly. Semper severed it with a sabre blow before it could pull the trigger.

A young woman leapt at him, reaching out for his face, eyes and exposed throat with fingers twisted into long cartilage-formed talons. Semper ran her through with his sabre, using her own momentum to impale her through the heart.

He pulled the blade free as her body tumbled to join the others on the corpse-littered cobbles. All around him, he saw the black- and brown-cloaked figures of the heretics and frateris. Nowhere did he see the navy blue of any of his own crewmen. Rahn had been with him minutes ago at the beginning of the battle, faithfully watching his back, but Semper had not seen him since the battle had descended into this bloody and confused melee. Grimly, he wondered if he was the last surviving crew member of the *Macharius* left on Belatis, and then the next wave of heretics swarmed forward, calling his attention back to more immediately urgent matters.

Roaring in angry defiance, throat raw from bellowing a nonstop stream of Stranivarite curses, Maxim swung his chainsword like a maul, using it to shatter the skull of yet another black-cloaked madman. The weapon had ceased functioning minutes ago—it was either out of power or the workings of its whirring monomolecular chain-blade had become clogged with gore—but Maxim had preferred to keep hold of it. Its jagged razor teeth could still tear through flesh and its heavy, solid blade casing could still crush bone, particularly when wielded by someone of Maxim's strength.

Adept Hyuga lay nearby, face staring up into the sky, rainwater splashing into his dead, sightless eyes. His bravery had given way as soon as the Chaos charge began. With a whimper of terror, he had turned and ran back towards the safety of the cathedral. Mindful of his captain's orders, Maxim had let him take all of five or six steps before turning and smartly putting three heavy slug pistol rounds between his shoulder blades. Frateris defenders had contemptuously scooped up the adept's still-twitching corpse and added it to the others, using their own dead as makeshift building blocks to fill the breaches in the barricade defences. Stacked with these other gruesome human sandbags, Honoured Adept Munitorium Hyuga contributed more in death to the valiant, desperate defence of the Ecclesiarchy cathedral than he ever could have in life.

Maxim kept on fighting, killing everything in front of him that came clambering over the barricade. Frateris defenders, awe-struck by the terrifying sight of this blood-drenched, bellowing giant striking down the Emperor's enemies, rallied around him, throwing themselves at their attacker with renewed energy.

Maxim roared with savage laughter as he swung the broken chainsword,

smashing it through the ribcage of one cultist, sending its jagged blade teeth slicing through the spine of another. Somewhere deep inside himself, Maxim began to wonder if he wouldn't actually somehow survive all this. After all, he had been born amongst the clanless dregs of the Stranivar hive, into the lowest strata of hive society, where the average life expectancy was twenty years or less, and he had survived that, just as he had later survived and even flourished amongst the brutal and lawless ganger culture of the Stranivar underhive. And then too there had been the Arbitrator cull and enforced slavery on Lubiyanka's gulag factories, before finally coming aboard the *Macharius* where again he had not only survived but flourished, a combination of strange fortune and calculated ruthlessness elevating him from indentured slave crewman to petty officer rank in a matter of months.

Maxim remembered the words one of the ganger women had whispered to him as they lay together in his underhive crib, surrounded by the rest of his gang. She had been a strange, wild one, Tanyara, with more than a touch of the wyrd sight about her. Exhausted by the night's revels, intoxicated by tajii root and fiery underhive-brewed liquor, he had listened as she told him that she had seen him in her visions. He had been on the bridge of one of the mighty vessels which sailed between worlds. He was wearing an officer's uniform, and there was the gleam of medals on his broad chest. Maxim had laughed at the idea then, thinking that it was the liquor and tajii root talking, knowing that, like all his nameless forbears before him, he would live and die on Stranivar without ever seeing—or wanting to see—anything of the other worlds that lay across the unimaginable gulfs of the Emperor's space.

Tanyara was probably long-dead now—if the Arbitrators hadn't got her, then the Ecclesiarch witch hunters or Redemptionist maniacs almost certainly would have—but Maxim no longer laughed at the memory of her words. After all, part of her vision had already come true. He had stood on the bridge of one of the Emperor's warships, had he not? Crucially, though, the uniform was that of a NCO petty officer, and there weren't any medals on his tunic breast.

At least, not yet.

Did that mean that the girl's vision was of a time yet to come? If so, then that meant that Maxim wasn't fated to die here with the rest of these prayer-mumbling madmen. Which meant that, somehow, he was destined to escape

from here.

Laughing, he got ready to swing his chainsword again, and was almost disappointed to see no more black-cloaked cultists rushing lemming-like over the top of the barricade to offer themselves to his blade. All over what was left of the cathedral defence line, the thinned and scattered line of the remnants of the latest cultist assault wave was in retreat. Maxim threw the chainsword after them, drawing a pair of stub pistols from the bandolier of holsters and emptied them into the backs of the fleeing cultists, sending the survivors on their way with a stream of bullets and coarse Stranivarite curses. Blood mixed with rainwater ran down his face from a scalp wound that he didn't even remember receiving. Maxim ran his tongue round his lips, tasting the blood that coursed down his face, laughing again because at least it meant that he was still alive.

Alive, and destined to stay that way, or so he fervently hoped.

Khoisan watched dispassionately as the ragged remains of his force retreated back to the ill-assumed safety of their own lines. He had intended to order his own gunners to open fire at them, but a better idea now occurred to him. "Round them up and disarm them," he ordered an acolyte lieutenant, the man's face rotting off in tattered strips as the new mutant form gifted to him by the powers of warp grew out from underneath. "They can serve as the shield wall for the next attack."

In truth, the failure of this attack did not surprise or even greatly disappoint the Chaos warlord. The troops employed had been a disorganised rabble, little better than the human shield wall prisoners whose place they would now take in the next attack. Other, better, troops were on their way, called away from the plunder of the Arbites courthouse fortress on the other side of the city.

With a trained mental effort, he had quelled the Blood God aspect of his no longer human soul, instead giving free rein to the part of him that belonged to the Lord Tzeentch, observing the battle with the clinical, cold intelligence of a servant of the Great Conspirator, studying it for evidence of his enemies' strengths and potential weaknesses. The cathedral defenders were close to breaking point, he suspected, their ammunition and fighting strength almost exhausted by repulsing this attack. The next attack, supported by captured

artillery and even armoured vehicles that were also on their way, would smash through what remained of the hitherto stubborn cathedral defences with relative ease.

Casting out his Tzeentch-blessed mystic senses, Khoisan divined the purpose of the final task that was expected of him here. There were several important servants of the false Emperor amongst the cathedral's defenders. All of them would die, of course, but one amongst them in particular must perish, the voices of the warp whispered to him. A simple task, and easily achieved, thought Khoisan.

His minions waited around him: weak, fallible things every one of them, scarcely able to understand the transformation that he would soon undergo. He favoured them with a commanding glance. "There is one amongst the defenders, a captain in the false Emperor's navy. Issue commands that, when we begin the final attack, care is to be taken that he is not killed or injured. His death is promised to me alone."

The minions bowed in compliance. Khoisan did not know why this one servant of the false Emperor had been so marked for death by the powers of the warp, but die he would, if that was their divine command. In his time, the Chaos champion had personally killed untold thousands of the weakling servants of the false Emperor. What difference was one more now?

Semper gathered what was left of his force in the leeway of the cathedral doors. By his estimate, there were scarcely a hundred able-bodied defenders left to man the shattered barricades, and, of that number, probably less than half had a clip or more of ammunition left for their weapons. The next enemy attack, if it came in anything like the ferocity and numbers of that last one, would simply roll right over the top of them. Caparan was there, supported by the turret gunner, Daksha. Both of them were wounded, but still willing to fight. Daksha's weapon of choice—a strangely curved, heavy-bladed chopping weapon which he referred to as a *kukri*—was clotted with gore, and now the quiet and reserved little feralworlder was ritually cleaning it, mumbling prayers to himself as he did so. Rahn was dead—Semper had seen his headless corpse amongst the rains of the barricades—but Borasa was still with them. Looking at the big hiveworlder, swigging out of a bottle of no doubt potent liquor that he had apparently spirited

out of nowhere, laughing to himself at some private joke, his arms and face painted with dried blood to add to his skin collage of ganger tattoos, Semper wondered if anything could kill the man.

The members of the governor-regent's court had acquitted themselves surprisingly well and with honour, but had suffered casualties accordingly. Only a handful of them, mainly palace guard officers, was still alive. General Brod lay back there on the barricades, his lifeless, bullet-riddled corpse surrounded by a litter of enemy dead. Whatever redemption the general had sought, he had now found.

Nearby, Jarra Kale lay slumped against a pile of fallen masonry, staring down in incomprehension at the gaping wound in his stomach that he had received from a ripping knife thrust.

"No… This can't be happening. This wasn't how it was all meant to happen," Kale mumbled to himself over and over again, watching gaunt-faced as his life's blood spilled out of him, pooling on the cobbles around him before being washed away by the ever-present torrent of rain. Two frateris orderlies carefully lifted him up and bore him off inside. The wound was almost certainly fatal. The cathedral infirmary had run out of even the most basic medical supplies and the Sororitas sisters and their attendants there could now offer the many wounded little other than prayers of comfort. Semper did not expect to see the former first minister again.

Devane too had survived. He had lost three fingers on his left hand at some point during the battle, and sat crouched in the cover of a row of statuary, the graven images of stern-faced heroes of the Imperial Faith looking down in disapproval at him as he bound up his crippled hand, cursing loudly in language rarely heard from any Imperial preacher pulpit. Looking up, he caught Semper watching him, and grinned despite the pain of his wound.

"You hear them howling? I think they're getting ready to make another attack. Ready to do it all again, captain?"

"With what?" answered Semper, not yet ready to greet the prospect of his own imminent death with the same grim humour as Devane. "The barricade line is almost gone, and we've hardly enough men left to defend one side of the square,

never mind all four. We should fall back to defend the cathedral entrances."

"Agreed," replied Devane, and then added with a laugh, "and at least we'll be out of the damned rain."

"Some more firepower would be a fine thing. That way, when they come through these doors, we could turn the hallway beyond into one long, cover-free shooting gallery." No one disagreed with Semper's choice of the word *when* rather than *if.*The heretics' final victory seemed assured; the only matter still in dispute was how many of them the defenders would kill in the process. Semper looked round, spotting the remains of the shuttle that had brought him and his crew here. Whole sections of it had been cannibalised to provide more material for the barricades and what little remained was a stripped-down wreck. "Tech-Adept Ko, are any of the turret weapons aboard the shuttle still useable?"

The non-combatant tech-priest stood nearby, displaying the unnerving calmness typical of the servants of the Machine God. "Three of them, captain," he answered, "although the craft's power systems are irreparably damaged. Hence they cannot be made to fire."

"Can they be removed from their turret mountings on the shuttle?" Semper asked. "If we find other power units, could they be set up somewhere else, perhaps inside the cathedral?"

"There are several portable power generators in the storage chamber in the vaults," said Devane, excitedly. "We found them when we were searching for weapons. Emperor knows if they're in any kind of usable condition."

Caparan rose to his feet, helped by Daksha. "If they are, we'll get them up and running. It'll be a job getting those guns out of their mountings, though."

"Take as many of the brethren as you need to help you. You'll need some covering fire too, to protect you from those damned snipers." Devane turned, grinning at Semper. "A good plan, captain. If we can set up even one of those guns inside that hallway, they'll have to wade through their own blood to get to us. Maybe we'll take a few more of them with us than they were counting on."

"Captain Semper."

Semper looked up in astonishment at the grey-habited figure standing before him that had seemingly materialised out of nowhere, seeing the distinctive psychic warding tattoos on the man's aged face, seeing the blank stare of his hollowed-out, empty eye sockets and recognising him instantly for what he was—an astropath, capable of sending messages through the warp to his brethren in other far-distant star systems. Or even, thought Semper, those aboard not-so-distant Imperial warships.

"Captain Semper," repeated Sobek in the strange, sonorous tones so distinctive of those of the astropath caste. "It is not the Emperor's will that you die here today. That is why he has commanded me to live this far. That is why he has guided me to you."

TWENTY-FOUR

“A matter of the greatest urgency, *Drachenfels*. We have received an astropathic communication from Captain Semper. He is alive, and trapped on Belatis, along with the survivors of his shuttle crew, the governor-regent of Belatis and members of his court. I am requesting permission to leave the convoy and return to Belatis to pick them up.”

There was silence on the command deck of the *Macharius*, before the voice of Ramas crackled over the comm-net. When he spoke, his voice was heavy with disbelief. “From Semper? How can you be sure? The malign powers always seek to deceive, Ulanti. There are many false and misleading voices in the warp. How can you be sure that it comes from Semper?”

“With respect, Captain Ramas, I believe the message is genuine,” answered Ulanti. “It carries Captain Semper’s personal command codex known only to him and this vessel’s chief astropath. Adeptus Rapavna is a loyal and experienced servant of the Astra Telepathica, and swears that the message transmitted to him is true, with no hint of the false or malefic. Speaking for myself, I am convinced it is from the captain.” Ulanti glanced towards the impassive figure of Kyogen standing nearby, who nodded at him in silent assent. “Other senior officers aboard *Macharius,* including Ship’s Commissar Kyogen, also concur with me in this respect. We are certain that if anyone could have escaped the destruction of the palace and survived the growing anarchy on Belatis, it would be Captain Semper.”

“And what would you have us do, *Macharius!”* barked Ramas over the open comm-net channel. “Turn back to rescue him? Risk the entire convoy for the life of one man?” Ulanti had been expecting the question. His reply was considered and succinct.

“Our mission was to safely evacuate from Belatis all valued servants of the Emperor before that world’s destruction. That mission is not yet complete, not while Captain Semper and the planetary governor remain trapped there.”

“I still cannot countenance releasing any vessels to return to Belatis, no matter

the reason. The evacuation of Belatis is complete. Our first duty is to the Emperor and Battlefleet Gothic, not the life of one man, even if it is that of Leoten Semper. Maintain current speed and course, *Macharius.* I too grieve for Captain Semper, but, regretfully, your request is again denied. *Drachenfels* out."

An angry murmur of dissent ran round the command deck. Like Ulanti, the command crew's loyalties were with their captain. Then, from beyond the bridge's central nave, a figure stepped forward, gesturing for the tech-adepts manning the communications section to hold open the comm-net link with the master of the *Drachenfels.*

"Captain Ramas, I am Marshal Primus Jamahl Byzantane of the Adeptus Arbites, commander of the garrison on Belatis. Matters have come to my attention regarding the continued presence of Imperium servants on the world behind us." Byzantane held out his hand, gesturing for the data slate in the flag-lieutenant's hand. "Lieutenant Ulanti, may I see the transcript of the message received by your astropath."

Byzantane scrolled quickly through the message, which was composed in the terse, abbreviated style typical of most astropath-conveyed communications, analysing Semper's brief version of the events, together with the names of the survivors and their current dire circumstances inside the fragile safety of the besieged cathedral. Grimly satisfied, he handed the data device back to Ulanti.

"It is as I thought, Captain Ramas," he said, his deep voice taking on a new, extra tone of authority. "Amongst the list of those who have survived along with Captain Semper is the name of one who I now know to be a traitor to the Imperium and agent of the malign powers. It is perhaps solely due to this person's treachery that the crisis on Belatis escalated as rapidly and disastrously as it did. Such treachery cannot be allowed to go unpunished. I concur with acting Captain Ulanti's plan to return to Belatis immediately to effect the rescue of Captain Semper and punish the one who has betrayed us all."

"My reply to you is the same as it was to the flag-lieutenant, marshal. I cannot —" Ramas's voice was abruptly interrupted by Byzantane's own, booming command.

"You misunderstand, Captain Ramas. I am an Arbitrator, and the only power I

answer to is the Emperor's sacred law. I do not need your permission. I am telling you what I intend to do."

There was a long pause over the comm-net link. When Ramas spoke again, there was a new tone of slyly amused understanding in his voice. "Very well, marshal. I wish the record to show that I object in the strongest terms to your actions, but, that as a loyal servant of the Emperor and his law, I realise my hands are tied. Good hunting, *Macharius.* Bring your captain back to us safe and unharmed. Battlefleet Gothic is the poorer without a man of his abilities. *Drachenfels* out."

Byzantane turned to Ulanti, seeing the look of confusion on the navy officer's face. "This vessel is no longer part of Battlefleet Gothic, lieutenant. In the Emperor's name, by the authority invested in me as one of the keepers of his sacred law, I'm commandeering this vessel and its crew." Byzantane smiled, relishing the look of surprise on Ulanti's face. "This vessel is now under the command of the Adeptus Arbites, at least for the time being. Issue your orders to your helmsmen, lieutenant. You may change course back to Belatis whenever you are ready."

Kyogen stepped forward. At over two metres in height and wearing the imposing black uniform and silver-skull rank insignia of an Imperial commissar, Kyogen was used to putting the fear of the Emperor into just about every crewman aboard the *Macharius*; with Byzantane, who stood almost as tall in his bulky black-armoured uniform, he enjoyed no such advantage. The word of a ship's commissar was law on a navy vessel, but the word of an Arbites marshal was immutable law on every world throughout the Imperium. Byzantane locked eyes with the commissar, the two servants of Imperial justice facing up to each other.

"You intend to force a way through the pursuing enemy vessels with just one ship?" asked Kyogen. "I have no qualms with your intentions, marshal, and I recognise that your authority is greater than mine, but as ship's commissar I must speak if I believe that the security of this ship is threatened by foolish or suicidal orders which must surely result in its wasteful destruction."

"I assure you that we will not be alone, comrade commissar. After all, the *Macharius* is not the only Arbites vessel in this convoy," said Byzantane, gesturing again to the communications adepts.

“Open a comm-net channel to the *Inviolable Retribution.”*

Seconds later, the thick, hiveworld-accented voice of Marshal Secundus Korte sounded over the command deck vox-speakers. “I have been monitoring your communications, marshal. What orders?”

“Come about full,” instructed Byzantane. “Form up with your new Arbites sister vessel *Macharius* and make with all speed on a return course back in-system. Justice awaits, Marshal Secundus. We have unfinished business to settle back on Belatis.”

Linked into his ship’s surveyor senses, Ramas watched as the *Macharius* and the Arbites strike cruiser broke ranks with the rest of the Imperial convoy and set course back for Belatis. Reaching out with a fire-withered claw-hand, Ramas opened up an internal comm-channel to his vessel’s bridge. “Signal the rest of the convoy to proceed as planned,” he ordered his second-in-command. “We will fall back and take up the rearguard position vacated by the *Macharius.”* He paused, and then ordered, almost as an afterthought, “And instruct Magos Herihor to make good the damage done to our main drive systems.”

“Sir?” queried the voice of Ramas’s long-suffering second-in-command, confusion evident in his tone. “The main engines are fully operational. Those Infidel torpedoes caused only minor damage to our drive systems, all of which has now been repaired, according to the magos.”

“Then tell that blasted Machine God groveller to check the systems again,” suggested Ramas, a conspiratorial tone creeping into his voice. “I fear that not all the damage may have been found and repaired. It would be unfortunate indeed if we were forced to drop out of the convoy due to any kind of engine malfunction or the need to make urgent battlefield repairs.”

His second-in-command, by now used to the irascible captain’s often unpredictable ways, finally took the hint. “Most unfortunate, captain,” he smiled, realisation dawning in his voice. “I shall make the necessary arrangements without further delay.”

On the bridge of another warship, another captain and his underlings were in

urgent conference.

“Two of them, commander,” reported the captain of one of the forward Infidel escorts from over the *Charybdis*’s command deck comm-net. “A Dictator class cruiser and another warship. Its configuration is unfamiliar, although we believe it is some kind of light scouting cruiser. They are both heading directly back towards us. What are your orders?”

The captain of the Murder class Chaos cruiser considered the question. He knew that he had already risked the Despoiler’s displeasure by his squadron’s failure to destroy the *Drachenfels* and attack the Imperial evacuation fleet as it lay in vulnerable orbit position above the Planet Killer target world. The Despoiler did not suffer failure, or even over-cautiousness, in his commanders, and the master of the *Charybdis* knew that he must throw caution to the wind if he were to regain the Warmaster’s favour. Death in space combat could come in many different forms, but any of them would be better than the kind of fates reserved for those who had displeased Abaddon the Despoiler. The Chaos captain did not know why two of the Imperial warships had broken away from the convoy, but he knew that in doing so they offered him a chance to redeem himself to the Warmaster.

“*Charybdis* to squadron,” he commanded. “Form up for attack.”

Through his mind link with the plague creature now worming its way through the *Macharius*’s metal innards, Sirl was aware of his prey’s change of course minutes before it registered on his vessel’s long-range surveyor screens. Reverberating through the pipeways and ducts along which his puppet creature now crawled, he felt and heard the rumbling boom of the enemy vessel’s main engine drive firing up to full capacity; he felt that strange, tell-tale, invisible tugging sensation that came as a vessel’s artificial gravity field shifted to compensate for sudden changes in its course and trajectory. The *Macharius* was radically coming about, he realised excitedly, turning away from the rest of the convoy and accelerating away on a return course back to Belatis.

Sirl did not know or understand why his prey was now hurrying back towards him, towards its doom, but he knew that this unexpected turn of events would only make his task all the easier. The Chaos captain smiled to himself. The

powers of the warp were clearly with him; Grandfather Nurgle himself must be watching over the fortunes of his loyal servant.

“Faster. The Grandfather grows impatient,” he snapped to his crew, looking at the display on the command deck surveyor screen. Ship icons glowed in sickly shades of colour through the crystal cataract-clouded surface of the screen. The*Charybdis* and its escorts were already racing to intercept the *Macharius* and its still unknown companion vessel, but Sirl was not concerned, knowing now that the destruction of the hated Imperial ship was fated to him alone. Around the*Virulent*, in the vanguard of the Chaos fleet, other ships swarmed forward, their captains eagerly slipping free of their leashes as enemy targets of opportunity now presented themselves to their vessels’ surveyor senses.

And, behind them all, came the Planet Killer, its massive energy presence blossoming urgently across surveyor screens. Crackling bursts of seething energy flowed freely around the spires and turrets of the huge weapons platform as it drew power directly from the warp itself, powering up its terrifying armageddon gun weapon array in readiness for unleashing that energy, magnified many times over by the arcane technologies used in the vessel’s construction, on its chosen target.

For Belatis and all upon it, execution hour was here at last.

Alarm peels sounded through the many decks of the *Macharius*, calling its crew to arms. Armsmen and shouting petty officers roused men from what meagre rest they were allowed, kicking and cursing them as they herded them out of their bunk rooms to their appointed duty stations. Teams of sweating, straining gunnery ratings dragged colossal platform-mounted guns along wide metal tracks, locking them into position and making them ready for firing. Chain-gang crews of indentured workers hauled on pulley chains thicker than a man’s body, opening up gun ports in preparation for battle. Deep in the ship’s generarium core, armour-suited engineers and prayer-intoning tech-priests nursed the ship’s ancient plasma reactor hearts, bleeding additional amounts of energy through to feed the hungry demands of the vessel’s thousands of power systems.

In a small chapel shrine below the main crew decks, Reth Zane finished off his prayers, and hastily gathered up his collection of personal relics and charms,

wrapping them in the woven prayer mat which he tucked inside the thick, padded jacket of his flight suit. It was uncomfortably hot and humid in the shrine room—thick energy conduits, humming with power, passed through the bulkhead walls around it—but Zane preferred to carry out his devotions here, in private, away from the main shrines on the busy crew decks above. Still, he would now have to hurry back to the flight deck in answer to the general alert signal now sounding.

"*Zane*."

Zane stopped short in the corridor outside, uncertain whether he had really heard the faint, whispering voice. Perhaps he had just imagined it amongst the dull throb of the ship's engines and the distant but distinct clamour of voices from the decks above. And then, from out of the darkness, he heard it again.

"*Do your duty, Zane*."

A spectral figure, encircled by a pale, dancing nimbus of light, stood at the turn of the passageway. Zane felt the eerie radiance play over his face. Within the light, few details were visible: only the shining face of the haloed figure and the sacred runes glow-etched into its archaic power armour. Zane had seen that face —so impossibly beautiful—before. Years ago. As a young Ministrorum novice acolyte. On Sacra Evangelista.

With a shock of recognition, he fell to his knees. "My lady," he gasped, bowing his head, unable to look the blessed vision in the face.

"*Do your duty, Zane. To your ship. To the Emperor. To me. Serve me. Be my Avenging Fury!*"

The nimbus of light shifted from his face. He dared to look up, seeing the light fade away, disappearing round the corner of the passageway. From behind him came the sound of the alarm bell, calling him to his duty as a crewman aboard a vessel of the Divine Emperor's Imperial Navy. Ahead of him was a summons to a far different, higher, duty. It had been almost a quarter of a century—a lifetime ago—since the warrior angel had appeared to him, changing his life forever. Now it had come to him again. He had obeyed its call once; what other choice did he have now?

Zane drew the short, snub-nosed laspistol from the holster-pocket of his flight suit and moved off up the dank passageway, following the nimbus of light in the distance.

Following it into the unknown darkness.

Jarra Kale wanted to sit up, but the pain from his torn belly and guts seared like white hot fire whenever he tried to move. With a newfound clarity that only comes too late to men such as himself, he realised that he had been tricked. There would be none of the pleasures and rewards which the one who had bewitched him had promised. He realised now that he had been played for a fool all along, that there would be no escape in death, that he had damned his soul to an eternity of suffering within the hungry coils of the things that waited for him in the warp.

With a trembling hand, he reached out to grasp the robes of a passing Sororitas nurse, pulling urgently on the hem. “Sister,” he gasped, “you must help me. The confessor or the navy captain, you must bring them to me. There is something… Please, I beg you. There is much they must be told.

The Sororitas sister looked into the face of the dying man. She had seen so much death and pain here amongst the infirmary’s inmates in the last few days. She was inured to the horrors of so many dying, suffering patients, to their delirious babbling and their begging cries for relief from the pain, and yet there was something in this one’s eyes—an unexpected, desperate intensity—that struck a chord within her. Had Korte been here, he could have told her what it was; the desperate need to confess at the moment of death, to be able to say one last truth after so many falsehoods and betrayals.

She clasped Kale’s clutching hand, squeezing it on a small but genuine gesture of assurance. “Wait, I will bring someone to you. One of the seraphim sisters or a preacher, if one can be found.”

Kale waited, drifting in and out of pain-edged unconsciousness. He was awoken again by a dark-robed figure kneeling over him. His vision was blurred and indistinct, his sight failing as the life ebbed out of him. “Father,” he began, “I must speak with someone. I must—”

A jewel-ringed hand clamped over his mouth, cutting off the words of his final confession. The figure leant down over him, hissing urgently into his ear. “Fool, did you really think I would let you betray me now?”

Kale tried to straggle, tried to cry out, but who would notice one more moaning, weakly thrashing figure amongst the hundreds of other seriously injured that filled the infirmary to overflowing? He felt the figure’s other hand close at his throat, felt the bite of a tiny cutting edge against his skin and remembered the crystal venom ring that his betrayer always wore.

A brief second’s straggle, as the coursing venom wracked his body with a final spasm of agony, and then it was all over. His killer knelt for a few seconds more over the body, touching a hand to its neck, satisfied that there was no pulse. To an observer, the dark-cloaked figure could have been any of the infirmary’s Ministorum attendants, conducting the rituals of the last rites over the body of a dead or dying man.

When the Sororitas sister returned a few minutes later with a sister superior—the nearest thing she could find to a preacher—she found that her efforts had all been in vain. Whatever First Minister Jarra Kale had had to say, he had taken the secrets of his deathbed confession with him to the warp.

“They are coming,” gasped the dying astropath.

Sobek reached out, running his hands over Semper’s face as the navy commander leaned down to support him, one arm round his shoulders. It was the only means of “vision” the astropath had left. The mental effort of piercing the maelstrom of psychic energy thrown out by the Despoiler’s terrible exterminator weapon had been too much for the old man, and now the last of his psychic vision had deserted him as the numbing paralysis spread through his still-haemorrhaging brain.

“You are sure? You have received word from my ship’s astropath?”

“My senses are deaf to the voices of my brethren now, but I know that your vessel and another are coming,” Sobek replied. “I have seen it in the visions that have been granted to me. It is not the Emperor’s will that you die here this day,

Leoten Semper He has other tasks in mind for you, perhaps."

"What other tasks? Why would I be spared? Why not any of these others?" asked Semper, gesturing at the pathetic, heroic remnants of the frateris pilgrims around him. "Their faith and devotion is stronger than mine."

Sobek's reply was a sighing whisper, barely audible against the rising din of the heretic chants from outside. Semper lent in close, straining to hear the dying astropath's last words. "We are all called to serve the Emperor as he sees fit, captain. Remember the sacrifice of those you see around you now. Remember it, for perhaps one day it will be your duty to avenge it."

"Coming! They're coming!"

Semper, with Devane kneeling close beside him, looked up sharply at the shouts of the young frateris brother as he ran towards them down the aisle of the cathedral hall, calling out the message sent back from the defenders outside. "They're coming! The heretics are coming! In their thousands, they come!" When Semper and the Imperial preacher glanced back at the figure lying on the floor between them, they saw the lifeless and strangely peaceful features of the astropath looking up at them. The two men glanced at each other.

"If your ship is coming for you, it had better hurry," noted Devane, bending down to perform the Blessing of the Fallen over the corpse, pulling the astropath's hood down over his sightless face in a final gesture of respect.

"Destiny or not, I'm not planning on leaving here just yet," replied Semper, accepting and checking the ammo-load of the autopistol that Devane wordlessly handed him. Together, the two Imperial servants gathered up their troops and led them at a sprint toward the cathedral doors.

Seconds later, the first heretic artillery shells crashed into the ancient walls of the cathedral. Inside the building, the wounded and the families of the frateris defenders moaned in despair. The final, surely overwhelming heretic attack had begun. It was now only a matter of time before the place fell to the enemy.

TWENTY-FIVE

The Chaos fleet was unfamiliar with the design and capabilities of the Arbites Punisher class vessel, mistaking it for some kind of new variant of the Dauntless class scouting cruiser familiar to them from so many other encounters with the armed forces of Battlefleet Gothic. Aboard the *Charybdis*, the Chaos commander quickly realised the enormity of the mistake as the *Macharius* and the *Inviolable Retribution* smashed into his forward line of Infidel escorts.

Furies launched from the *Macharius* swept away *the* wave of torpedoes fired by the Infidels, immediately blunting the Chaos attack. Even as the crews of the enemy raider vessels' torpedo rooms struggled to reload more of the titanic ordnance missiles into the firing tubes, the Imperial ships struck back. Four squadrons of Starhawks swarmed out of the*Macharius*'s launch bays, forming up into attack formation and quickly speeding towards the line of enemy escorts.

Even before they got there, the line had disintegrated. The Arbites strike cruiser's formidable bombardment cannons opened fire, their linear accelerator systems hurtling a stream of lethal magma bomb warheads through the void at something approaching quarter light speed. The salvo of warheads exploded across the line of Chaos ships with terrifying accuracy. One of them disappeared in a white flash, a hundred thousand tonnes of metal and machinery simply vaporised out of existence. Another tumbled out of formation, already breaking apart into burning fragments. The last remaining raider manoeuvred away in panic, abandoning its attack as its captain frantically sought to disengage from the battle. The pursuing Starhawks fell upon it with gleeful abandon, crippling its main drive and detonating its reactor core in a blizzard of armour-piercing missiles.

Now the *Charybdis* entered the battle, its void shields flaring angrily as it passed through the expanding clouds of debris and residual energy vapour which only minutes ago had been its squadron of escort ships. It struck out with its forward lance batteries, beams of brilliant energy cutting through the *Macharius*'s void shields and striking its prow, scoring burn lines metres thick into the super-dense material of the cruiser's armoured beak. On the bridge of the *Macharius,* Ulanti felt the shudder of the impact run through the hull of the vessel and saw the

nervous, edgy glances being cast at him by the command deck crew.

“Helm, hold her steady. Ordnance, be ready to fire torpedoes on my command.”

“Target is changing course, sir,” reported the urgent voice of one of the surveyor section officers. “Its energy emission profile is changing. It’s trying to disengage!”

Outgunned, the Chaos ship was attempting to break off from battle, radically changing course and cutting off the flow of power to its main systems, rendering it invisible to the surveyor senses of other vessels. It was a standard manoeuvre, and, if successful, the Chaos cruiser would simply fade off the *Macharius*’s target screens, drifting away unscathed and undetected. Ulanti had no intention of allowing that to happen.

“Mister Nyder?”

“That renegade scum’s going nowhere, captain. We have it on lock on,” confirmed Nyder with a snarling grin.

“Fire all torpedoes,” instructed Ulanti.

In a pre-arranged manoeuvre between the two vessels, the *Inviolable Retribution* fired its bombardment cannons at the same time, the combined salvo finding and striking its target with devastating force, ripping open the Murder class cruiser’s underside and blowing apart its starboard flank. On the *Macharius*’s surveyor screens, instead of fading away, the target icon of the enemy vessel burned bright and fierce, its position clearly marked by the energy now burning out of the crippled ship.

“Helm, full ahead. Gunnery, prepare to fire starboard batteries.”

At Ulanti’s command, the *Macharius* moved forward in tandem with the Arbites cruiser, the two Imperial vessels manoeuvring to pass on either side of the stricken Chaos cruiser. At a given signal, they opened fire simultaneously once more, pummelling the *Charybdis* with dual broadsides and catching it in a merciless crossfire. The enemy ship struck back with its still-functioning portside armaments, lashing the *Inviolable Retribution* with a hail of fire from its still fearsome array of plasma cannon batteries. Explosions ripped along the hull

of the Arbites craft, the *Retribution*'s own gunners trading blow for blow with their counterparts aboard the *Charybdis.* Attacked from both sides, already badly damaged, the Chaos ship quickly succumbed to the inevitable. The two Imperial ships sped on towards Belatis, leaving behind them the burning wreck of the enemy ship that they had so clinically destroyed.

There were cheers amongst the junior officers of the *Macharius*'s command deck crew, but Ulanti knew that the task ahead of them would not be so simply achieved. Enemy ship icons crowded the long-range surveyor screens, all of them closing rapidly on the doomed world. At their rear came the Planet Killer, its target icon almost burning out of the screen with the truly incalculable amount of energy now flowing through it.

"Shuttle ready for launch," reported Nyder in response to Ulanti's questioning glance. Ulanti nodded, and Nyder sent the order through to the craft waiting patiently in their launch bays. Seconds later, a large troop transporter shuttle fell away from the *Macharius*, its pilot hitting his main engine thrusters as soon as he was clear of the carrier ship. It was quickly joined by a squadron of Eagle craft launched from the Arbites cruiser. Circling Fury Interceptors took up position fore and aft of the shuttle formation, forming a protective phalanx around them. The combined formation moved off at speed towards the shining disk of the planet, the two slower-moving warships following behind at a more stately pace.

On the command deck, Ulanti cast a concerned glance at Nyder. "How long is their flight time?" he asked.

"We estimate one hour at full speed, perhaps a little more." Nyder looked at the command deck's main tactical display, seeing the enemy target icons spilling across it towards them. "They'll get there alright, but it'll be a hell of a fight getting them back aboard again."

"Prepare your squadrons, Mr. Nyder," instructed Ulanti. "I want everything we've got launched to give them the cover they need."

Kaether looked up as Altomare came running towards him, the stocky, heavy-set fighter pilot weaving through the lines of bomb- and missile-laden loading

trolleys that trundled across the cluttered expanse of the busy flight deck. The air was filled with the shouted instructions of ground crew, the clanging sound of metal on metal as payloads were secured aboard attack craft and the rising whine of thruster engines being test-fired. Altomare had to shout above the din to be heard by his squadron commander.

“Nothing. No sign of him anywhere.”

Kaether cursed volubly and blasphemously, drawing a disapproving stare from a nearby preacher who was bestowing sacred blessings on a payload stack of melta missiles as they were loaded into the belly bay of a Starhawk. “Look again,” said the commander of *Storm* squadron. “Check every shrine and chapel on the ship. Use whoever else you can get hold of to help you, but find him.”

Altomare hurried off again, already shouting commands at the nearest of *Storm* squadron’s ground crew personnel, instructing them to stop whatever they were doing and to join him. Kaether cursed again. Every squadron aboard ship had been given its launch alert. Every available attack craft was being pressed into service. Tech-priests and ground crews were hurriedly conducting desperate quick-fix repairs to damaged fighters and bombers that should, by all rights, have been sent to the workshop forges for major overhauls. And now, in the midst of all this, his best pilot had gone missing.

Vandire’s teeth, Kaether cursed to himself once more. Where in the name of the Golden Throne was Reth Zane?

Zane bent down over the corpse. He was somewhere in the maintenance sub-levels below the generarium core, he knew, and the corpse was that of one of the servitor things that inhabited such places. The blood and hydraulic fluids that were splashed on the walls of the passage—little more than a crawl-space, in truth—were still fresh, but the organic, human parts of the creature were already rotting away, revealing metal and wire beneath the grey, slick flesh. It had been killed not so long ago, the wet bloodstains said, but the amount of decay that had already set in suggested that it had lain rotting here for days.

There was something unnatural here, Zane knew. Something secret and foul. And he was getting closer to it all the time. Checking the power level of his

laspistol one more time, he set off into the darkness again. He was not afraid, he told himself. He was a warrior in the service of the Master of Mankind. He was one of the Divine Emperor’s Avenging Furies.

TWENTY-SIX

From up high on the corner battlements, Daksha had a clear field of fire across the open area of the square in front of the cathedral's main entrance. It had been a difficult and laborious task hauling the turret autocannon weapon up here, but the effort was worth it. Panning the weapon left and right, he sent withering lines of shellfire across the square, right into the mass of cultists that filled area below. Another one of the large armoured tractor rigs rumbled forward across the square, crushing the bodies of the dead and wounded beneath its thick tracks. Daksha swung the weapon round, barely even bothering to bring his sights to bear on it. He was used to firing at the swift, darting shapes of enemy fighters as they flitted briefly across his gunsights, often at extreme distance. The slow-moving, lumbering rig was a laughably easy target in comparison. His first stream of shots blew apart the vehicle's armoured cab and the driver inside, but he continued firing. Riddling the freight space behind the cab with high-velocity armour-piercing shells, ripping apart the human cargo of armed heretics inside. Shattering the vehicle's caterpillar tracks for good measure.

Exploding the vehicle's fuel tank and showering the troops sheltering behind it with a blanket of burning promethium.

Two of the spinning barrels of the autocannon quad weapon stuttered and died. Daksha emitted a short curse in his native tongue. The barrels had jammed again, overheated by constant firing. Steam hissed from the barrels of the weapon as the frateris crew assisting him poured buckets of water over the red-hot metal. In the absence of the weapon's normal auto-coolant systems, this was the best compromise they could find.

Only one of the over-heated barrels commenced firing again. Daksha knew that soon this would fail too, over-heated to the point of melting. Either that, or he would ran out of ammunition. After that, he would take up his kukri knife and join the other defenders in the battle below, wetting the weapon's blade with the blood of many enemies, rejoicing in their deaths.

It was not to be. Seconds later, hidden artillery guns on the other side of the square opened fire in response to the stream of autocannon fire, quickly zeroing

in on Daksha's position and blowing apart that area of the cathedral battlements. The remains of the weapon and the feralworlder turret gunner and his crew crashed down onto the blood-soaked, cobbled ground below.

The heretic wave swept towards the cathedral, overwhelming the last few die-hard defenders still manning the shattered remnants of the barricade. "Fallback positions!" commanded Semper, firing into the black mass of cultists, dropping several of them with a final burst of his last few precious autopistol shells.

Along with the scattered line of frateris, Semper ran for the cathedral doors. Bullets and las-fire from the pursuing heretics filled the air around them, gunning down many of the retreating defenders. Semper felt something sear into his side. He stumbled, falling to the ground, only to be caught by a powerful grip. Maxim Borusa, that most unlikely of all guardian angels, hauled him back to his feet, almost carrying him through the open doors, sprinting with him down the hallway and depositing him behind the cover of the final barricade that had been thrown across the broad vestibule entrance to the main cathedral hall. "Fallback positions, sir. Can't be leaving you behind now," rumbled the big hiveworlder.

Seconds later, the first of the heretics burst through the doorway behind them, charging en masse down the hallway. Devane, commanding the secondary and last line of frateris defenders, allowed them to get within ten yards of the final barricade before he gave the order to fire to the gunners of the two remaining autocannon weapons salvaged from the shuttle wreck.

The eight spinning barrels fired as one, transforming the hallway into a hell of gunfire and death. The first few ranks of attackers simply disappeared in a red mist, ripped to shreds by the massed volley of autocannon fire. Armour-piercing shells designed to blow apart the armoured hulls of starfighters ripped through soft human tissue, passing through body after body amongst the cultists packed into the close confines of the stone hallway. Stray shells ricocheted off the fresco-covered walls and blew apart statues and scripture-engraved stone plinths and memorials, destroying the work of centuries of Ecclesiarchy craftsmen.

The cultists pressed on, suffering truly horrific casualties, those behind pushing those in front onwards and into the gun-sights of the chattering autocannons. To

Semper and the other defenders, it seemed as if the cultists were banking on winning out in a simple and brutal battle of numbers, gambling that the autocannon would ran out of shells before they ran out of troops. Devane had talked of making the Chaos followers wade through their own blood in order to get down the hallway, and now those words had become far more than bloodthirsty and bravado-filled battle talk.

Suddenly, a figure stepped forward out of the autocannon-ravaged ranks of the cultists. The air around it swarmed with psychic power, a hazy energy shield forming around the figure to deflect away the hail of autocannon shells. It raised its sword, a crackling nimbus of black-glowing energy surrounding the weapon blade. “Look out!” called Devane, too late, as daemon fire streamed out from the weapon, exploding amongst the barricade defenders.

Men screamed as the daemon energy consumed them, transforming them into blackened, withered scarecrows. One of the autocannon weapons exploded as the ghost fire played over it, showering both gun crews and all those around them with deadly shrapnel.

Semper stood up, drawing his sabre, ignoring the pain from the las-burn in his side, ignoring the burned and bleeding bodies around him. Seeing only the renewed charge of the cultists now creeping again towards him. Seeing the figure of the Chaos champion that led them, locking eyes with the heretic leader, and somehow seeing his doom written there in the inhuman creature’s grotesquely shifting features.

So much for being destined not to die here today, thought Semper, as he rallied what remained of the defenders and led them in a counter-charge to meet the final enemy attack.

The sound of gunfire and the clash of weapons echoed loudly through the cathedral’s interior, carrying into the side-chapel at the rear of the main hall. Vittas Sarro whimpered in fear, burrowing his face further into his sister’s shoulder. “What is happening, sister? The navy captain said that rescue was on its way, but all I hear is the sound of battle. When will it all be over?”

The Lady Malissa kissed her brother’s forehead, thinking of what they had been

told. She had always feared the Arbites commander, and the news that he was leading the rescue mission filled her with foreboding. She knew what she had to do now. It was regrettable, but she had always known that it would one day come down to this. No matter what happened now, her weakling of a brother had finally outlived his usefulness.

“Soon,” she whispered, caressing his cheek with the crystal edge of her ring. “I promise you it will all be over soon.”

Khoisan cut a path through the press of bodies, killing his own followers and those of the false Emperor alike. The bloodlust was strong in him and he was eager to kill his enemy and fulfil his pact with the powers of the warp. Cleaving through *the* last of the human obstacles in his path, at last he stood before his prize. The man’s face registered shock and fear—paltry human emotions that the Faceless One would soon leave far behind him after his glorious ascent to daemonhood—but then, with a cry of despairing rage, threw himself at the Chaos champion.

Khoisan turned the attack aside with almost contemptuous ease, the blade of the human’s sabre shattering against the otherworldly, obsidian-like material of his own daemon weapon, the impact of the blow sending the man sprawling. Khoisan raised his sword to deliver the killing strike, but suddenly two more were there to defy him. One of them blocked his blow with a power sword, the energy fields of the two weapons—one warp-born, the other human-made—clashing angrily together. The other human—so large and savage-looking that he might have easily been a follower of the Blood God—thrust a crude pistol weapon forward, pumping bullets into the Chaos leader’s chest. Khoisan felt pain as at least one of the heavy calibre bullets penetrated into his flesh, reminding him that he had not yet left behind such human weaknesses. He lashed out angrily, knocking aside the human with the pistol, cleaving his blade through the arm of the human with the power sword, severing the limb, and continuing the blow on through into the weakling human’s chest, splitting him open.

Roaring in victory, the Faceless One turned back to the human his masters had commanded him to kill. Turning just in time to see the human snatch up the fallen power sword. Seeing this weak, pitiable mortal wield the weapon with

surprising deftness. Seeing him slip the point of the blade past the Faceless One's guard, thrusting it through his armour and deep into his body. Khoisan gasped in shocked disbelief, feeling the stuff of his Chaos-altered body writhe and react as the energy-sheathed point of the blade burned through him.

Khoisan fell back, bubbling black blood spilling out of him from the terrible energy weapon wound. All around him, he heard his followers cry out in despairing disbelief. His soul cringed as he felt the unforgiving powers of the warp withdraw their favour from him. Senses dimming, he heard a screaming sound, faint at first and then growing in intensity. For a moment, he thought that it might be the Gods of Chaos themselves, bellowing forth their rage at his failure, but then, in a last lucid thought, he recognised it for what it truly was and realised then that his failure was now complete.

It was the screaming of shuttle engines coming in to land in the square outside.

The Arbites Eagle craft flew low over the cathedral square, sending missiles streaking into the cultist artillery positions in the buildings around the edge of the square, the turret gunners sweeping clear the landing zone with fire. As they came into land, Arbitrators leapt out even before they had settled, opening fire with their shotguns to pick off any stray targets that had escaped the turret gunners' attentions. Their champion fallen, their numbers decimated, the remaining cultists fled into the ruins of the burning city, there to await in terror the coming doom that was now only minutes away.

With the landing area secured, the shuttle from the *Macharius* came to rest amidst a roar of lifting thrusters. From it emerged Byzantane and Kyogen, the former quickly linking up with the Arbites troops from the *Inviolable Retribution,* the latter taking charge of the armsmen detail that descended from the interior of the troop shuttle. Kyogen looked dispassionately around him at the scene of destruction that was the battle-ravaged cathedral square. "Find the captain," he commanded the armsmen from the *Macharius.* "We do not leave this place until you have."

Inside the cathedral, Semper staggered to his feet. Nearby, Maxim, groggy from the blow he had received from the Chaos warrior, did likewise. Caparan too had

survived the attack, although Ko had not been so fortunate. The tech-priest's fused and blackened remains lay amongst the other human wreckage left in the wake of the heretic commander's daemon fire attack.

"Shuttles, sir. Imperial shuttles!" grinned Maxim, seeing the activity in the square outside. "Volkk forgive me, but I've never been so glad to see the eagle crests of one of those Arbitrator bastards in all my life."

Semper ignored him. Incredibly, Devane was still alive. The captain bent down over the preacher, kneeling in the thick pool of blood that spilled out from his chest and the stump of his severed arm. Retrieving Devane's power sword, Semper pressed it into the dying man's hand. "Better that you keep hold of it," coughed Devane. "I won't be needing it any more, and you'll need something better than one of those fancy, brittle-bladed pigstickers you navy types like to call a sword."

Heavy-booted feet pounded up the hallway towards him, voices called out the captain's name. Semper ignored them, refusing to let go of the dying man's hand. He followed Devane's glance, seeing the huddled mass of humanity sheltering in the gloom of the cathedral hall behind them. Of the thousands of pilgrims who had flocked to the cathedral for sanctuary, only a fraction now remained. Women and children, mostly. The families of the frateris militia who had laid down their lives to defend the Emperor's house from the defiling presence of the heretic horde.

"Save them," implored Devane, his voice a fading whisper. "Don't let all this have been in vain. They are what we fight to preserve. They are the Emperor's children, more important than any number of Adeptus servants or blueblood aristocrats, more valuable than anything carried away in the holds of those transports. They are the best part of this world. They cannot die along with the rest of it."

Semper nodded, clutching Devane's hand, feeling the preacher's grip slacken as the life slipped out of him. Hands tugged at Semper, trying to draw him away. "Captain, we must go. We are almost out of time," implored a petty officer. Only after he was sure that the preacher was dead did Semper let go of Devane's hand. Standing up, he issued a command to the waiting armsmen.

“See to the civilians, petty officer. Women and children first. Have your men carry aboard the shuttles any of the wounded that the Sororitas sisters say still have a chance of surviving.”

The armsman visibly gawped at the orders he had been given. “Sir, we don’t have the space for all these extra passengers. And there’s not enough time—”

“Then make space,” snapped Semper. “Empty the cargo compartments. Jettison whatever you have to, but make no mistake, petty officer, we do not leave this place until every one of these people who still has a chance of life is aboard those shuttles.”

Byzantane looked down at the governor-regent, staring into the corpse’s still open eyes, the look of horrified disbelief there still evident even through the tortured rictus grin expression that his facial muscles had contorted into, a side-effect of the deadly venom that had killed him. The corpse was still fresh, and Byzantane realised that they had probably missed the traitor by only a few minutes.

It had been the Lady Malissa all along, Byzantane now knew. Kale had been her dupe and lover accomplice. Possibly Brod too. She had probably played the two men off against each other, using their jealousy to blind them to the truth of what she was making them do. Maybe at first, they thought they were involved in plotting a relatively bloodless coup, taking advantage of the larger events happening elsewhere in the Gothic sector to overthrow Imperium rule on Belatis. The Lady Malissa would be installed on the throne in place of her brother, and she had probably promised to each of them that they would be made her consort. And each man would have secretly believed that he would be able to rule as consort, ruling through the Lady Malissa just as she had effectively ruled through her brother. Probably she had promised them that a deal could be brokered with the forces of the Despoiler, assuring Belatis’s loyalty to the new masters of the Gothic sector.

It was only later that they must have realised the extent of her treachery and ambition, but by that time, it would have been already too late, and they had both cravenly sought to save their own skins during the evacuation rather than undo any of the damage they had wrought.

Byzantane felt a sense of failure overwhelm him. He would order a search for her amongst the refugees still crowding the cathedral hall, even though she was almost certainly no longer within his reach. The heretics had concentrated their attack on the cathedral's main entrance, but there were other, more secret, ways in and out of the Ecclesiarchy building. Byzantane had no doubt that, if they had time to search long enough, they would find the frateris guards at one such exit lying slain.

Again, the architect of Belatis's destruction had escaped final justice.

Malissa crouched in the ruins, watching as the last of the shuttles took off from the square, carrying away their precious naval commander and that rabble of religious zealots to supposed safety. It had finally stopped raining—the wretched monsoon season was another thing that she would not miss about her backwater homeworld—and the skies had even cleared a little. She could see new stars in the sky, stars which she knew must be the Chaos warships arriving to take up position. One of the stars glowed a dull, ominous red. With a thrill of fear, she realised that it must be the Planet Killer itself. She smiled to herself: there was little to no chance that those fools aboard the shuttles would escape now, not with so many of the Despoiler's warships now filling space around Belatis.

She knew that her own time was short, but there were still many cultists amongst the surrounding ruins. Once she made it clear to them who she was, they would swiftly give her safe conduct to the Faceless One, who would then take her off-world with him before the Planet Killer was unleashed. There were many risks, she knew, but she was still confident that this last-ditch plan would succeed.

In the darkness nearby, something shifted amongst the rubble, hissing angrily at her.

She reached for the bolt pistol that she had lifted from one of the Ecclesiarch adepts guarding the crypt tunnel along which she had made her escape, but her attacker was far swifter. Powerful reptilian jaws clamped round her gun-hand, crushing the bones in her wrist. A slick tentacle wrapped round her throat, choking off her scream. Something that felt like a giant, bristle-haired spider's leg brushed against her face, and a fanged mouth on the end of a probing tendril bit experimentally into the flesh of her cheek.

Khoisan had not died from the wound Semper had inflicted on him, although, had he any sentience left, the Chaos champion might wish he had. His retreating followers had carried him off into the rabble, abandoning him there in terror as the changes—terrifyingly rapid in their onset—began to manifest themselves out of their master's body. Denying him ascent to daemonhood, the powers of the warp had instead condemned Khoisan to the fate reserved for those who failed in their service to the Gods of Chaos. Khoisan's inhuman flesh had rebelled against him, shifting and splitting into terrible new forms, transforming him into a crawling, mewling, blind-eyed horror—a Chaos spawn-thing, a warp-born abomination given mindless physical form.

Locked in screaming, struggling embrace, the Chaos champion and the traitor who had carried out his every bidding were united together at last under the shadow of the Planet Killer, their deaths only minutes away. For both of them, those deaths could not now come soon enough.

TWENTY-SEVEN

Ulanti no longer needed the long-range surveyor screens to monitor the progress of the Planet Killer fleet. Through the enhanced opticon systems incorporated into the command deck's viewing bays, he could actually see the constellations of enemy warships as they took up position near Belatis, hovering in space over the doomed world like carrion birds circling in wait above a dying animal. At their heart was the Planet Killer itself, and Ulanti studied the vessel's exotic shape and configuration in appalled wonder, marvelling as he tried to estimate the details of its construction and capabilities.

It looked like no other kind of vessel he had ever seen before, the massive needle-spindles of its main weapon array thrusting out from a central hub that itself bristled with gun batteries, torpedo tubes and lance turrets; even without its main armament, the Planet Killer still possessed a truly formidable amount of firepower. Crackling bursts of energy leapt between the tips of the so-called armageddon gun's projection barrels or spun blazing off in spectacular displays of energy discharge from giant capacitors and other structural features, the purpose of which Ulanti could only guess at. He noticed too that the surrounding enemy ships kept a wary distance from the vessel they were supposed to be protecting; unfocussed and uncontrolled, any one of these random energy discharges could rip through a capital ship's void shields or completely destroy a smaller escort class vessel.

It was a terrifying craft, its very existence a threat to the order of the Imperium, Ulanti thought. He could well believe the whispered rumours that the details of its construction and estimated power requirements could not be easily explained by any normal technical means; that the powers of the warp themselves must have had a hand in its creation and operation. Even as the flag-lieutenant watched, he knew that Magos Castaboras and a small army of tech-priest fabricators and lexmechanics were also studying the Despoiler's flagship vessel. This was the closest that any Imperial ship had ever come to the Planet Killer, and the data gathered by the *Macharius* would be eagerly dissected by the naval tacticians and senior Adeptus Mechanicus magi at Battlefleet Command.

Assuming we actually survive the next hour or so, thought Ulanti, seeing the

viper-prow shapes of several enemy cruisers descending fast on the *Macharius*, accompanied by a pack of smaller escort vessels. Magnified by the viewing bay opticon, he saw the launch bays of one of the Chaos ships—one of the dreaded Styx class heavy carrier cruisers—yawn open and spit out a stream of attack craft.

“Three cruisers,” confirmed Officer of the Watch Broton Styre. “That big Styx class devil is the *Scylla*. The other two are the*Kali* and the *Virulent*, both standard Slaughter class vessels.”

“The *Virulent*, an old friend from the battle of Helia,” noted Nyder.

“And apparently keen on renewing our acquaintance,” added Ulanti, dryly.

The bridge surveyor screens showed the *Virulent* breaking away from the Chaos line of battle, swinging in close to Belatis, using the planet’s gravitational field to slingshot itself at speed towards the *Macharius*. And, beyond this forward line of cruisers was the main Chaos fleet, containing not least the Planet Killer itself. The *Macharius* and the Arbites ship may have won the earlier skirmish, but they would be annihilated by the forces now closing in on them if they remained here much longer, a fact which everyone on the command deck was all too well aware of.

“Mister Nyder?”

The master of ordnance didn’t have to ask what Ulanti’s query was referring to. “The shuttles are in the air. They’ll be back on aboard within the next twenty minutes.” He broke off, glancing at the nearing target icons of the enemy ships still crowding toward them. “It’s going to be close, though, especially with those carrier ships of theirs out there too.”

“We stay in position until the shuttles are aboard. Launch everything we have,” ordered Ulanti, knowing as well as Nyder that his orders would cost the lives of many of the *Macharius*’s attack craft crews.

Nyder nodded in assent as he gave the necessary orders. In seconds, the first of the *Macharius*’s entire attack craft capability would be launched and space-borne. How many of them would return to the carrier ship afterwards, though,

would be a different matter entirely.

Kaether banked steeply away, charging all available power through to his forward shields as another enemy Swiftdeath fighter blazed through space towards him. He stabbed at the firing triggers just as his Chaos counterpart did the same. Streams of multi-hued laser energy criss-crossed past each other in the void, impacting against defence shields, striking through to shatter plated hull armour. At the last second, Kaether barrel-rolled his fighter aside, barely avoiding a head-on collision with the Swiftdeath, ignoring the flashing warning runes on his instrumentation panel as he brought the Fury round in a tight looping manoeuvre to bring it fast in on his opponent's tail.

The Swiftdeath streaked on ahead towards the bomber formation, its path marked by the energy bleed from its ruptured power systems and the glowing trail of laser-melted armour pieces still fragmenting away from it. Kaether locked in on the enemy fighter, sending a krak missile winging along the same well-marked trail. Moments later, he was rewarded with the sight of the Swiftdeath exploding apart, just seconds before it came within launch range of the Starhawk formation.

Kaether turned away again, feeling the Fury's sluggish response to his control instructions. "Tell me what I don't want to hear, Manetho," he spoke through to the Fury's other crewman occupying the navigator turret gunner position in the cockpit behind him.

"The power packs feeding the starboard wing lascannons have been shot away. We're bleeding energy, but it's not as bad as it looks. I can re-route and draw power from the main engines or the defence shields, although neither of these options does much to increase our long-term chances of ever seeing the *Macharius* again. Also, there's not enough armour plating left in places along our forward fuselage to stop a shot from an underpowered laspistol. Other than that, we're in fine shape."

Kaether smiled. For a servant of the Machine God, Manetho sounded almost human sometimes. He keyed up the tactical display on his auspex screen, studying the information it conveyed. They were through the enemy's forward fighter screen, with combined losses to *Storm* and *Hornet* squadrons of nine

Furies against fourteen confirmed enemy kills, while the jubilant Starhawk turret gunners were reporting another three Swiftdeaths destroyed. The Starhawks were closing on their designated targets—a squadron of enemy destroyers—but there was also the far more threatening prospect of that Slaughter class cruiser now rapidly moving forward towards the *Macharius.*

Several thousand kilometres away, a large group of Swiftdeaths was speeding towards the two Imperial warships. Kaether studied their changing surveyor patterns, suspecting that they were oscillating their energy outputs, attempting to disguise the presence of larger, more powerful Doomfire bombers within their formation. Then, even as he watched, the formation split apart into three separate waves. One group continued on towards the *Macharius* and the Arbites vessel, the tell-tale blips of missile-laden Doomfires now clearly registering amongst them. The second wave—all fighters—moved off to attack *Tornado* squadron, which was escorting the highly vulnerable shuttle formation back to the *Macharius.* The remaining fighter group peeled away on a clear intercept path towards the Starhawk attack that Kaether and his squadron were protecting.

Kaether cursed, opening up a comm-channel to his counterpart in *Hornet* squadron. *"Storm Leader* to *Hornet Leader,"* he began.

"We see them, *Storm,"* came the reply. "You deal with them. We'll accompany our friends here the rest of the way and lead them in on their targets."

"Understood, *Hornet.* Dice you for the mission honours back aboard ship," said Kaether, signing off with the Fury pilot's traditional and well-worn good luck joke, both of them knowing the probable truth of the matter. *Hornet Leader* and his squadron would be leading the attack on the Chaos ships, drawing the murderous hail of anti-ordnance fire onto themselves and away from the more vulnerable bombers.

Not that our survival chances seem any better, thought Kaether, seeing the number of Swiftdeath fighter icons multiply across his target screen as the two fighter formations sped towards each other. There were ten Furies left in his squadron, several of them, his own included, already damaged. Facing them was a enemy fighter wave twice as numerous, their weapons and power systems still fully charged.

Vandire’s teeth, cursed Kaether. Where was that damned maniac Zane when you really needed him?

Zane backed warily up the passageway, clutching his laspistol, trying to get a fix on the angry hissing of the daemon-thing as it searched for him through the steamy gloom of the generarium sub-chamber. It seemed like hours, not, in reality, a few scant minutes, since he had heard that terrible, continuous screaming down the ducts towards him, drowning out the distant rumbling sound of the ship’s gun batteries. Hours, not scant minutes since he had finally exited the maze of pipes and ducts that ran through the guts of the ship, dropping down onto the corpse-strewn deck of the generarium sub-chamber beyond, seeing smashed machinery, the bodies of engineers, servitors and tech-priests gleefully ripped apart.

Hours, not scant minutes, since he that began his battle with the putrescent daemon-thing that had found its way to this place.

Zane did not understand the purpose of this chamber or the strange and unfamiliar machinery that it contained, but he knew that it was somehow vital to the operation of the ship, to the massive plasma reactors rumbling with barely-contained energy just a deck or two above his head. The creature had been busy in the short time since it had arrived, smashing and tearing apart machinery, power conduits and rune panels with the same ease it had rent apart the bodies of the chamber’s tech-crew occupants. Warning chimes sounded in alert at the destruction caused by the creature’s rampage, but they were lost amongst the cacophony of alarms and battle chimes now sounding elsewhere all through the vessel. What difference one more alarm, one more urgently flashing warning rune on an instrumentation panel somewhere on the command deck many levels above? Zane knew that no one else would come to help him, that the task of saving the ship, of preventing the daemon-thing from completing its destructive work fell, to him alone.

He did not know how this monstrous, rancid-fleshed abomination had come aboard the ship, but he knew it for what it was: the Malign, the Daemonic, the Great Foe that he had dedicated his life in service to the Emperor to opposing. Without hesitation, he had raised his laspistol and fired. The las-bolt had seared away most of the creature’s face. It had turned, hissing in rage, flesh swarming

almost instantly across the deformed surface of its skull to cover the wound. Zane had fired several more shots, dangerously depleting the scaled-down weapon's limited charge capacity. He knew that the shots would do little to injure the thing, but he was satisfied that they had achieved their intended purpose.

Distracted and angered, the creature had broken off from its appointed mission of destruction, pursuing Zane into the honeycombed maze of machinery and pipeways that spun off from the central sub-chamber.

Now it was hunting him through the place. Zane could sense it somewhere close nearby, sense the living taint of the thing souring the air around it. He saw a faint, familiar glow of light around the corner of the passageway ahead of him and ran towards it, drawing the creature after him. He blindly fired the laspistol behind him as he ran, drawing more angry hisses from the pursuing daemon-thing. He rounded the corner, seeing the ghostly aftermath of the light fade away, seeing only the bulkhead wall dead end at the end of the short passageway.

It was hot in the passageway, condensation forming from the thick, humid atmosphere, drops of water falling hissing onto the thick power conduit pipes that ran along the passage, disappearing through the bulkhead wall. Whatever damage the creature had done back in the main chamber, it had spread at least this far. The metal of the pipes glowed with heat, burning away the heat-resistant protective material that surrounded them.

Zane turned, seeing the daemon-thing gallop round the corner behind him, mercilessly bearing down on him. He barely had time to set his laspistol to full charge, raising and firing it not at the creature now almost upon him, but into the weak, heat-softened metal of one of the nearby pipeways.

The pipe split open with a screaming gush, filling the passageway with fire, enveloping Zane and the creature in the pure, white light of burning plasma. In that split-second before the blinding brilliance wiped away his sight, Zane beheld the glowing-armoured figure of the warrior angel in amongst the roaring light, her arms held open towards him in welcome. Zane gladly let the light consume him, bringing him into her embrace.

Many decks above, on the bridge of the ship, a low-ranking logistician tech-priest—just one of hundreds connected into the *Macharius*'s ancient and mighty logic engines and monitoring the non-stop passage of information through the ship's arcane machine-mind—detected damage to one of the generarium sub-levels. It was a relatively minor problem affecting the area responsible for regulating the flow of residue energy from the ship's plasma reactors, pipes that carried away the gaseous waste from the generarium and emptied it out into space from bleed-vents along the ship's hull. One of the pipes had fractured, although the fire appeared to have quickly burned itself out, the ship's auto-systems already closing down those pipeways and diverting the waste gas away to another bleed-vent. There had also been signs of potentially far more serious malfunctions in a nearby generarium sub-chamber controlling the flow of power to the void shield generator capacitors, but these too seemed to have somehow been contained.

The logistician routinely catalogued the information, adding it to the growing list of damage reports coming in from all over the ship as it came within range of the advancing Chaos fleets gun batteries and attack craft squadrons.

Neither incident had inflicted any serious, lasting damage on the ship or its operations, and both were deemed non-critical.

Only when the battle was over, and other more urgent repairs had been dealt with, would there be time to investigate and make good the damage in these two areas.

The convoy of shuttles ran the gauntlet up out of the planet's gravity well, gratefully falling into place amongst the lines of Fury Interceptors that formed up to escort it. From the cockpit of his Eagle craft, Byzantane beheld the spectacular sight of the battle now taking place in orbit above Belatis. Fiery shards of light glittered all through space. A myriad of minor explosions and las-blasts, evidence of the dozens of different duels taking place between dog-fighting Imperium and renegade attack craft. Ahead were the reassuring and imposing shapes of the *Macharius* and the *Inviolable Retribution*, their void shields flaring with burst after burst of angry light as they came under intensive fire from the vanguard of the Chaos fleet. The gun batteries of both vessels spoke back in reply, and the Chaos warships, clearly mindful of the fate of

the*Charybdis*, were keeping a wary distance, out of range of the *Retribution*'s bombardment cannons, but it was obvious to Byzantane that neither ship could sustain such punishment for very much longer.

One of the sleek, flat-hulled Chaos cruisers surged forward ahead of the others. Swarms of firefly lights—Starhawk attack craft, Byzantane realised, dwarfed against the gargantuan bulk of their target—flitted around it, pouring light-streams of missile volleys into it. Clouds of burning internal atmosphere gases billowed from a dozen places in the Chaos ship's hull where the bomber attacks had blasted through its armour, but the giant cruiser continued onwards, its defence turrets spitting in irritation at the bomber specks still buzzing round it, its forward lance armaments lashing out at the *Macharius.*

Without warning, one of the shuttles in front of Byzantane's exploded apart, struck by a blast of las-fire from a marauding Swiftdeath that had broken through the line of Fury escorts. Two Furies darted past in pursuit, aptly living up to their name as they vengefully blew the enemy apart in a torrent of las-fire.

"Message from the *Retribution*, marshal," reported the shuttle's Arbitrator co-pilot. "Its landing bays have been struck and are out of action. We are directed to dock with the *Macharius* instead."

Byzantane nodded without word. As a senior lawkeeper of the Adeptus Arbites, he had commanded armies of Arbitrators, had crashed rebellions and uprisings on a planetary scale, but here and now he felt powerless and insignificant in contrast to the scale of the battle going on around him. This was a level of destruction almost unimaginable in its intensity: men and machines pitted against each other in the harsh and unforgiving void of space, where entire vessels—and the lives of their many thousands of crew—could be swept away in seconds, without any mercy or warning.

The Fury escorts suddenly peeled away from the shuttle convoy, leaving it vulnerable and exposed. Byzantane flinched as explosions and las-blasts filled the void around them, assuming at first that they were under attack again from more enemy fighters, realizing a second later that this was their own covering fire, the defence turrets of the *Macharius* throwing out a corridor of covering fire—much of it passing terrifyingly close to the incoming shuttle craft—to protect the shuttles from enemy fighter attack.

The pitted metal escarpment of the *Macharius*'s hull loomed large in front of the cockpit window, growing in immensity every second as they sped towards it. The Eagle pilot fired braking thrusters, but—to Byzantane's eyes, at least—they were still coming in alarmingly fast, heading into the gaping maw of one of the gloomily-lit metal caverns that was actually the open entrance to one of the ship's launch bays. The shuttle shuddered, wildly pitching forward for a second, as it passed through the mouth of the launch bay, ancient suspensor fields reaching out to catch it in their mysterious, invisible grasp, decelerating it and bringing it to an almost graceful stop as its pilot brought it under control and manoeuvred it into one of the many landing bay tunnels. Only when they had safely touched down in the landing bay did Byzantane begin to breathe easily again.

"*Macharius* bids you welcome," said the voice of a flight deck controller over the cockpit's open comm-net, affecting the dry, stiff upper lip and slightly mocking tone characteristic of so many Imperial Navy personnel when dealing with the servants of the other branches of His Divine Majesty's martial forces. "Good to have you aboard again, marshal."

Semper half-ran, half-staggered down the belly ramp of the shuttle, responding in kind to the smartly-executed salute of Officer of the Watch Styre, but little troubled by the lack of elaborate naval ritual that customarily greets a captain when coming aboard his own vessel. Judging by the rocky ride they had had on their way in here and the continuous, booming roar of the ship's guns, Ulanti probably had more pressing matters to attend to than laying on a guard of honour for his captain's arrival, thought Semper, with dour humour.

"What orders, captain?"

"To the bridge," answered Semper, instantly reassuming the mantle of naval command once more. "Convey my orders ahead of us to Mister Ulanti. Tell him to recall all attack craft and disengage from battle without further delay."

Semper looked around him, remembering his promise to a dying man, seeing the stream of pilgrim refugees, many of them wounded and malnourished, now exiting from the other shuttle craft. "The chief petty officer will accompany me to the command deck. Remain here and attend to these people's needs. Make

sure they receive whatever food, accommodation and medical aid they need."

"The chief petty officer?" queried Styre, looking amongst the armsmen and crewmen for anyone of that rank. He stared in frank disbelief as Semper indicated the scarred, tattooed figure of the giant hiveworlder beside him.

"Chief Petty Officer Borusa," snapped Semper. "More men like him, and we might even stand a chance of winning this damn war. My congratulations, chief petty officer. We'll attend to the official rituals of your promotion and possibly some kind of decoration when we can, assuming we're not blown to oblivion in the immediate future."

"If you say so, sir," grinned Maxim. Promotion to junior officer rank and a medal, just as that hive-witch had prophesied. Battlefleet Gothic may not yet be winning this conflict, but Maxim Borusa was having himself a splendid war so far.

Ulanti watched anxiously as the remnants of the *Macharius*'s attack craft squadrons returned to the safety of the launch bays. They had acquitted themselves well, driving off the enemy fighter attacks on the shuttle convoy, intercepting a bomber attack aimed at the *Macharius* and, in return, crippling or forcing into retreat two Idolator escorts and subjecting the still-oncoming *Virulent* to relentless missile bombardment, but all this had only been achieved at great cost to their own numbers, and he knew that Nyder and his staff were keeping a grim tally count of the mounting losses as each squadron returned to the ship. "Paying the butcher's bill" was the famous quip used by Lord Admiral Ravensburg for the task of counting battle losses, but Ulanti, in his first action in full command of a warship, felt none of the morbid elation inherent in the Lord Admiral's flippant words.

"What is the word on Captain Semper?"

"Still en route to the command deck," answered a junior officer, his reply suddenly drowned out by a shout from a surveyor section crewman. "Enemy attack craft squadrons are disengaging… The escorts and capital class warships, too. Emperor's oath! They're all on the retreat!"

Ulanti looked for himself, scarcely able to believe what he saw. Both the *Macharius* and the *Retribution* had been taking a pounding, and he had only expected that pounding to increase in intensity as they began the near-impossible task of trying to successfully disengage from the Chaos attack. Now, instead of pressing on with their attack on vulnerable, retreating targets, the Chaos ships were retreating, turning away and moving at increasing speed away from the planet and the Imperial vessels.

Suddenly, even as the second shout came from the surveyor section area of the bridge, Ulanti realised with a sense of sickening dread what it was that had caused the Chaos ships to break off from battle on the point of victory.

“Power spike! Throne of Earth, the readings are right off the scale… The Planet Killer, it’s opening fire on Belatis!”

In a torrent of energy that overwhelmed ships’ surveyor senses and transformed hundreds of tactical screens into blank-faced displays of howling static, the Planet Killer unleashed its power on the world below. A roaring storm of destruction descended on Belatis, passing through the atmosphere and increasing the temperature there a hundredfold in seconds, partially igniting it in a fiery borealis that swept out across the circumference of the planet.

The energy blast struck the planet’s largest ocean on its eastern hemisphere some two thousand kilometres south-west of Madina, sending up a huge cloud of steam clearly visible from space as millions of tonnes of sea water were instantly vaporised, boiling away into the burning, super-heated atmosphere. The blast struck and cracked open the ocean bed, unleashing a super-tsunami tidal wave over three kilometres in height which would drown the two nearest continents and island chains and compete with the fiery borealis overhead in its race round the globe.

The Planet Killer’s gunnery priests had not chosen this spot on the surface at random. Surveyor scans of the planet’s geologic structure and daemon-voiced augurs had guided their aim. The planetary crust was weak and unstable here and the all-consuming energy beam ripped it asunder, setting off a series of cataclysmic underwater earthquakes, igniting chains of long dormant volcanoes into fiery, explosive life and causing new ones to thrust up through the

splintering, broken crust. The seismic Shockwaves rippled through the core of the planet, setting off disasters on the far side of Belatis long before the tsunami or firestorm would reach the continents there.

And, all the time, the Planet Killer kept firing into an open wound now almost a hundred kilometres across in the planet's crust, the coruscating lance of otherworldly energy burning a hole deep into the planetary core, bursting open the planet's molten heart.

In Madina, crouching there in the ruins, the scattered followers of Khoisan the Faceless looked up in terrified incomprehension as the distant horizon lit up with what looked like the light of a second dawning sun. The light grew in intensity, and the horizon slowly turned into a line of creeping fire. There was a dull rumbling sound from the ground beneath their feet, gradually but surely growing in volume, and then the rains around them started to tumble down on their heads. Many prayed to the dark Gods of Chaos to save them. Others recanted and instead begged the Emperor for forgiveness. If any gods were listening, they gave no answer.

Barely twenty minutes after the Planet Killer first opened fire, Belatis exploded apart. Aboard the triumphant vessel, the gunnery priests held a service of thanksgiving, sacrificing five hundred specially chosen slaves to feed the hungry demands of the daemon spirits bound into the workings of the armageddon gun.

Word came down to them that the Despoiler was pleased with their efforts. To date, the destruction of Belatis was by far the Planet Killer's most successful operation. The gunnery priests sacrificed another hundred slaves in celebration of the Warmaster's approval, reading the future in the dissected entrails of the bound and still-living sacrifices. The auguries were good, they murmured amongst themselves. There would be many more worlds yet that would see the shadow of the Planet Killer fall upon them before the Gothic Sector War was over.

TWENTY-EIGHT

The *Virulent* weathered the storm of the planet's destruction, riding out the violent waves of gravitational flux as Belatis broke apart. Jets of flaming magma splashed against its void shields, hails of burning meteors smashed off its hull, adding further to the damage caused by the armour-piercing missiles of the Starhawk bombers that had attacked the Chaos cruiser.

"Take it away," slurred Bulus Sirl, pointing with a deformed, leprous hand at the broken remains of his second-in-command now staining the deck of his vessel's bridge. Two Plague Marines moved wordlessly forward to drag the corpse away. Sirl glared in contemptuous challenge at his command crew, daring any of them to add to the former second-in-command's querulous objections to Sirl's current course of action.

"The Grandfather is with us," Sirl told them. "He watches over us, bidding us to carry out his holy work while the servants of the other, lesser powers cower in abeyance behind us, fearing the wrath of the Warmaster."

He pointed to the view out the command deck's filth-encrusted viewing bays. While the rest of the Chaos fleet had withdrawn to cringe in the shadow of the Planet Killer, only the *Virulent* had carried on in pursuit of the retreating Imperial ships, its surging course carrying it recklessly through the rain of debris from the exploding planet. By the grace of the Grandfather, they had ridden out the worst of the storm, as burning planetary shards many tens of kilometres across spun past them, as the stress of the planet's collapsing gravitational field threatened to tear the cruiser apart. Now only the clear darkness of open space showed ahead of them. "See? Did I not say that the Plague Lord watches over us. He has carried us safely through the maelstrom, and now at last we will deliver his vengeance on the destroyer of our sister vessel *Contagion*."

Ahead of the *Virulent* were the twin light specks of the two Imperium vessels, both of them damaged, both of them retreating at full speed away from the Planet Killer fleet. The captains of the other Chaos vessels—craven lackeys of the Warmaster, every one of them—showed little inclination to pursue the two escaping enemy vessels; nor, in truth, did Sirl want them to. The destruction of

the *Macharius* was his by rights alone. Damaged as it was, the *Virulent* could still outrun the *Macharius*, the Slaughter class cruiser's superior engine array design pushing it forward at speed and rapidly closing the gap between it and the two limping enemy ships. It was a pity that his plague-child aboard the *Macharius* had been unable to complete its task, but its failure and subsequent death would make no difference to the final outcome now.

"Arm forward lances," he hissed, settling his vast, vile bulk back into the bone-sculpted armature of his command throne. "Commence firing as soon as target is in range."

Semper cursed as the *Macharius* shook under the impact of another damaging strike to its rear.

"Engine Quintus has suffered a disabling strike to its coolant coils. Main drive now operating at sixty-two per cent capacity," reported the infuriatingly calm voice of a servitor, uncaring that it was announcing the *Macharius*'s slow but almost surely certain destruction.

Semper shared a glance with Ulanti, both of them facing the same harsh truths. That damned Slaughter class cruiser had come through hell and high water to pursue them and was still closing, sending blast after blast of weapons fire into the*Macharius*'s engine array. At this rate, the ship's main drive systems would be crippled in a matter of minutes. Both the*Macharius* and the *Inviolable Retribution* were in the same desperate straits. If they continued on, they would be destroyed, unable to outrun the faster Chaos vessel, unable to withstand many more strikes into their vulnerable stern sections. If they turned to face their attacker, they would almost certainly still be destroyed, presenting themselves to the massed fire not only from the *Virulent*'s prow armaments but also from its formidable side-mounted batteries as they manoeuvred round in a ponderous turning circle.

Both Imperium vessels had already taken serious damage in the recently-ended engagement with the Chaos fleet. The*Retribution*'s entire starboard gundecks had been gutted by fire, the *Macharius* had no attack craft capability left to launch as the surviving remnants of its Starhawk and Fury squadrons. No, Semper realised, there would be little chance of surviving another battle at

present.

“Captain?” prompted Ulanti, knowing that a command decision was called for.

“Prepare to come about, Mister Ulanti. According to the damage reports, we’ve still got a few gundecks operating on the starboard side, so we’ll favour our enemy with that side as we turn. Signal the *Retribution.* Thank her for her companionship and tell her to keep on making for the system’s edge. No sense in us both going down here, and we’ll buy her time to make her safe escape. That Slaughter class seems to be solely gunning for us, anyway.”

Ulanti nodded wordlessly and turned away to give the necessary orders, only to be interrupted by a shout from the surveyor section.

“New surveyor contact appearing ahead of us. A warship. It’s powering up weapons and drive systems!”

“Identify!” barked Semper, angry that he had fallen into a Chaos trap. Somehow, another enemy vessel had outflanked them, cutting off their retreat. Now even the Arbites ship would be unable to escape to the system’s edge.

“Welcome back, *Macharius.* Good to have you amongst us again,” rasped the voice of Erwin Ramas over an open, ship-to-ship comm-channel.

Its systems powered down so as to render it invisible to surveyor senses, the *Drachenfels* had lain patiently in wait for its prey. Now, at last, its patience had finally paid off. Powering up, it surged forward towards its target, closing on it with near reckless abandon.

“Lock on,” reported the Gothic class cruiser’s master of ordnance.

“Launch torpedoes. Close spread,” came the reply from the occupant of the armoured strategium sanctum.

The torpedoes blazed towards their target, passing between the *Macharius* and the *Retribution* in a bravura show of marksmanship. Aboard the *Virulent,* Sirl was still trying to absorb the surprise of the Imperial cruiser’s sudden appearance when the command deck alarms screamed in warning as the torpedoes’ lock-on

signals bounced off the hull of their target. Knowing that the *Macharius* could not launch any more bomber squadrons and needing to urgently replace crew losses elsewhere, Sirl had drawn heavily on the crews of his ship's defence turrets. Now, all over the *Virulent*, caught by surprise by the torpedo attack, men and other, lesser, things scrambled to crew the undermanned turret defences.

Whatever defensive fire they could throw up around the ship would be too little, too late.

The *Virulent*'s prow exploded apart. One of the torpedoes struck the command tower, blowing away the top of it. The ship's engines stuttered and died as power feeds ruptured open, sweeping the main hull's internal compartments with a burning flood of energy, immolating the greater part of the ship's crew.

Dying and powerless, the *Virulent* blindly tumbled away through space, falling into the gravitational pull of the remains of Belatis. There, it would be either mercifully smashed apart in collision with any of the massive, continent-sized planetoid fragments or would drift forever amongst the rest of the detritus of the planet's destruction.

Trapped amongst the smashed wreckage of the bridge, his plague-swollen body gruesomely burst open by the effects of explosive decompression as the torpedo detonation ripped apart the Virulent's command tower, Bulus Sirl remained hideously alive by virtue of his Chaos-altered form. He could survive for months, he knew, his body feeding off the plagues that would hatch out amongst his ruined flesh. Bile bubbled from his lips as he soundlessly mouthed words into the cold vacuum, praying to Grandfather Nurgle to bring him swift and merciful deliverance. If the Plague Lord was listening, he gave no answer.

Hours later, aboard the *Macharius*, damage control teams attended to the aftermath of battle, conducting whatever makeshift repairs were necessary, giving what aid they could to the wounded and clearing up the dead. Stacked in heaps in airlock holds, the best the dead could hope for was a hurried prayer from a ship's preacher before they were flushed out into space along with all the other unusable wreckage of battle.

Now a work crew of naval ratings methodically sifted through the crematorium

scene inside one of the generarium sub-levels. The rest of this part of the ship had been untouched by the battle, but it was not the task of men such as these to wonder why this chamber alone had been swept clean by fire.

“Over here!” shouted one of the ratings, bending over one of the fire-blackened corpses that filled the floor of the chamber. “There’s one of them still alive!”

His companion looked down in disbelief at the figure huddled on the ground. The man’s face and hair were gone, and he wore the charred remains of what looked surprisingly like a flight suit which had been horribly heat-fused to his skin over much of his body. Like the man’s face, any name and rank insignia on the suit had been burned away by the fire. Nearby was the twisted, fire-consumed remains of something else. Something organic—several bodies fused together, surely, for it was too large to be the remains of just one man. Unconsciously, instinctively, both men gave the blackened mass a wide berth.

Looking at the burned man’s injuries, the second rating reached for the blade he kept tucked into his boot. “Best to put him out of his misery now. He won’t want to live, not looking like that, and those apothecary bastards don’t care what happens to the ones that are messed up too bad to fix. They’ll sling him into the airlock while he’s still alive and flush him out along with all the other stiffs.”

“Leave him be,” commanded the other rating, gently taking the burned figure’s raw-fleshed hand, bending down to speak gently into his ear. The rating had been raised a loyal, Emperor-fearing servant of the Imperium, and there was something about the dying man that struck a distant chord in him. “It’s alright, friend,” he reassured the faceless stranger. “We’ll get you to a surgeon. Emperor alone knows what you’re doing down here, but we’ll get you back to where you belong.”

The stranger groaned, trying to form words from a mouth reduced to a lipless hole. The rating leant in close, straining to listen to the burned man’s mumbled words, then looked up in puzzlement at his companion.

“What did he say?” asked the other rating.

“Nonsense, mostly. Reckon he must be from the flight deck after all, maybe ground crew on one of the fighter squadrons. All he could say was something

about avenging furies…”

Moving in formation with the *Retribution* and the *Drachenfels,* the *Macharius* moved toward the jump point on the system’s edge, homing in on the comm-net chatter of the convoy ahead. Before them was the darkness of interstellar space. Behind them was a fading red glow that marked where the world of Belatis had recently been. In time, the drifting remains of the planet would spread out to form an asteroid belt halo around the system’s sun, and future generations of Imperial statisticians and map-makers would mark the planet as *Mundus Perdita,* a world now lost to the Imperium.

At the rear of the command deck, Semper, Ulanti and Byzantane stood together in silence, watching the residue of fading, burning light that had once been a world inhabited by several hundred million of the Emperor’s subjects. Semper wore a fresh duty uniform in place of the filthy and bloodstained items that he had worn during his sojourn on the planet’s surface. At his side, in place of the customary navy sabre, hung the heavy, scabbard-sheathed blade of an Imperial Guard power sword.

“A gift bequeathed to me by a brave and loyal servant of the Emperor,” he said in response to the querying look from Ulanti. “I wear it in remembrance of him, and of the promise I made to him.”

Byzantane looked at the weapon, recognising it, and remembering the man whose hand he had last seen it in. “What promise?” he asked, suspecting he already knew the answer, suspecting that he made a similar promise to the same man not so long ago.

Semper gazed out at the vista beyond, taking one last look at the funeral pyre glow of the ruins of Belatis as he signalled for the command deck blast shields to be lowered in preparation for their ascent into the warp.

“That we stop running away. That we stop giving up ground and innocent lives. That we finally turn and fight. From now on,” he grimly vowed, unconsciously laying one hand on the pommel of the sheathed sword, “we take this war back the enemy.”

Byzantane and Ulanti nodded in silent agreement. Behind them, the blast shields grated down into place, removing from view the last traces of all that had been the world of Belatis.

EPILOGUE

In his hologram chamber sanctum buried deep within the body of the Planet Killer, Abaddon the Despoiler watched in satisfaction as the projected image showed the last few burning asteroid embers of the now-vanished world of Belatis as they tumbled through space. The Despoiler was pleased, but the shimmering image displayed by the chamber was like a finely-carved gemstone that, under close inspection, revealed itself to be minutely flawed in some minor but ultimately displeasing way.

The Despoiler turned his head, his attention drawn by something on the fringes of the star system. One of his lieutenants gestured in curt command, and the arcane device's tech-priest operators hurried to change the settings in search of whatever the Warmaster was looking for. The holo-image shifted and changed, tracking through the star system, eventually zeroing in on a group of vessel shapes now making their way towards a nearby jump point. Abaddon frowned in disquiet, his gaze passing over the Imperial convoy line. It displeased him that some of the servants of the false Emperor had defied him and managed to escape the ordained destruction of their world, but there was something more here.

His eyes passed once over the line of ships, stopping on one warship—an ungainly, battle-scarred carrier ship—near the rear of the formation. Again, the Despoiler felt a prescient disquiet, a whispering doubt that he had overlooked something potentially significant, but he angrily dispelled the notion. There was more—far more—at stake here than the fate of one miserable, straggling convoy, or even the destruction of an entire world.

"Show me," commanded the Warmaster, and the image changed again, showing once more the glittering panoply of stars and planetary systems that was the rich prize of the Gothic sector. And, hidden within this grand vista, were the six true prizes that the Warmaster sought to capture. His eye picked them out one by one, his mind reciting their names to itself.

Fularis.

Anvil 206.

Fier.

Rebo.

Schindlegeist.

Brigia.

The six Blackstone systems, each home to one of the ancient and almost limitlessly powerful artefacts that the false Emperor's servants had, like a colony of insects or vermin building their nest inside the workings of a Titan war machine, turned into bases for their space fleets, little realising the true capabilities of the objects that they foolishly believed to be theirs by right.

Abaddon turned, sensing the approach of one of his lieutenants, the minion abasing himself in a pleasingly obsequious manner before the Despoiler. "Warmaster, the fleet is regrouped and ready to be underway. We await your orders."

Abaddon considered. This Planet Killer vessel had now achieved its intended purpose. Fear and confusion were rife amongst the ranks of the enemy. They waited in terror to see what world would next fall under the vessel's shadow, and, as they waited, they did not see or understand the greater purpose of it all. It was time now, the Warmaster realised, to reveal that purpose. It was time to take this war to a level of calamity and destruction as yet undreamt of by an enemy that did not realize what was truly at stake in this conflict. They fought to repel what they assumed was an invasion of the Gothic sector. He fought to seize the six prizes that would in turn deliver the entire Imperium of Mankind to the forces of Chaos.

"Rebo V," he ordered. "We make for the Blackstone Fortress at Rebo V."

Let the galaxy burn, the Warmaster Horus had commanded. Soon, thought the Despoiler, so very soon.

SHADOWPOINT

PROLOGUE

The burning god sat immobile upon his smouldering throne, feeling the pulse and flow of the life energy of the place ebb through him. He had sat there for an eternity as mere mortal beings reckon such things, dreaming dreams of battles past and battles still to come, and thinking thoughts which not even the longest-lived of his race's savants could ever truly fathom.

There were others of his kind out there in the universe beyond, other fractured splinters of the same original being, dreaming their own dreams and feeling the life-flow of their own home-worlds pulse through them. So few of them left, the burning god lamented. Once there had been worlds upon worlds of them, and in his dreams he could still see them as they once were. He saw a race at the height of its glory, revelling in its own power and majesty, capable of reforming entire worlds to suit its own purpose, able to reach out to probe the deepest mysteries of time and space. All gone now, it lamented. Now there were only these few poor remnants left, seeds drifting in the gulfs of space, a scattered diaspora struggling to hold back the tide of darkness which would one day still rise to engulf all that had once been.

But not yet, the warrior god knew. Not yet. Not while it and those like it still existed to protect all that remained of their race and hold back the darkness for just a little longer.

Slowly, though, in a period reckoned over decades, the warrior god had been stirring in its sleep. There was war being waged amongst the stars, it knew. There was always war—the lesser, younger races seemed to be have born both for and from war—but it knew that, somehow, this war was different. It heard the distant wraithbone voices singing of war between the mon-keigh corpse-worshippers and the human servants of the Great Abomination, and the songs interrupted its dreams in a way in which they never had before.

The burning god looked into its dreams of the future for answers, and saw that, for the first time in millennia, it would soon be called upon again. Its dreams were troubled. It saw a convergence of many intersecting fate-lines ahead of it,

and, after that, its dream-images of the future were too vague and indistinct to be properly discerned. Something lay just over the horizon of its perception, a shadow point where many possible futures lay in wait, which not even its near omniscient dream-vision could bring properly into focus.

For the first time in long, long millennia, the burning god knew something approximating fear, and its fear communicated itself through ancient wraithbone pathways to the living mind of its drifting homeworld. The wraithbone amplified the dreaming god's concerns and communicated them to the other drifting islands out in the darkness, the faint but growing alarm call spreading through the far-flung diaspora like ripples across the surface of a pond.

Slowly but surely, the first stirrings of a call to arms began amongst the closest neighbouring islands, and the burning god's dreams of bloody and fiery carnage to come began to seep into the minds of its warrior acolytes.

Within the god itself, the ancient furnace of its heart began to beat with greater strength as it pumped torrid streams of living fire though the god's immobile limbs, shaking off the languor of too many millennia of inactivity. The burning god was beginning to stir to life, and, when fully awakened, its wrath would be terrible to behold.

PART ONE

CONSPIRACIES

ONE

They had been torturing the warp spawn creature for six days now. Endless torture without relief or remission, using methods known only to the Inquisition's finest interrogator-adepts. For six days now, they had been working in shifts to visit miseries and abominations on living flesh that could not easily be imagined by most ordinary subjects of the Imperium; and, no matter what they did, no matter what manner of gruesome cruelties they inflicted, they had so far been neither able to kill it nor to induce it to give up whatever warp-born secrets it had to tell.

It was contained within a null-field in an adamantium-walled chamber buried three hundred metres below the surface. There was no way that the sound of its screams and babbling, blasphemous shrieks could even be heard outside the examination cell, and yet, somehow, some aspect of its agonies seemed to transmit themselves up through the layers of armourplas and adamantium shielding which entombed this deepest and most secret sub-level of the Inquisition fortress. Its screams echoed silently in the minds of everyone within the place, penetrating through whatever psychic wards and screens existed to protect the citadel and its occupants from daemonic intrusion. Only a precious, oath-sworn few even knew of the thing's existence, and, yet, somehow all sensed its presence. There had been a wave of suicides and murderous fights amongst the prisoners held in the ordinary detention levels above, Horst knew, no doubt prompted by the invisible currents of psychic horror emanating up from the thing imprisoned down here. Even the hand-picked and veteran members of the senior inquisitor's retinue seemed shaken and unnerved by such close proximity to the entity.

Remarkably, however, the creature's presence amongst them had had a most unexpected effect on the soul of at least one unwilling guest of the Inquisition. Two days ago, guards had come running in answer to the cacophony of screams and babbling pleas coming from the cell of Gorgio Nepheris, the so-called "bodygatherer fiend of Bergamo", and captive of the Ordo Hereticus.

For two months now, the renegade surgeon had held his silence, revelling in his

own planet-wide infamy and answering with a mocking smile his interrogators' demands to recant his sins and reveal the whereabouts of the remains of his many missing victims.

Now, however, the terror of the back-alleys of Bergamo, the third largest city here on the Gothic sector world of Lethe, had brushed minds with the thing held in the crypts below and had understood something of what true evil really was. He was currently to be found in a confession chamber, begging forgiveness from a stern-faced Ecclesiarchy confessor as he kept a small team of scribes busy with a nonstop, babbling litany of the details of his multitude of crimes.

The size of this list, and the enormous and previously unsuspected numbers of his victims over the course of his century-long murder spree amongst the poor and destitute of Bergamo had stunned even his interrogators.

Horst had little doubt that this catalogue of atrocity, when finally completed and codified, would be enough to allow the local Arbites force to clear out several record rooms of files on hitherto unsolved cases, and hopefully bring some kind of comfort into the minds of the families of Gorgio's many victims, a figure which had so far stood at some twelve thousand dead, though the number was reckoned to possibly double by the time the repenting heretic had completed his confession.

It was a pitifully small solace, Horst knew. The confession and, eventually, the execution of one lone heresy-ridden maniac. Significant only in local or perhaps even planetary terms, but completely infinitesimal in scale compared to the tumultuous events happening throughout the Gothic sector. This was why he was here on this world when so many possibly greater and more urgent matters called for his attention elsewhere within this war-torn sector of Imperial space. This was part of the mission he had embarked upon when the High Masters of the Inquisition had first despatched him to the Gothic sector eleven years ago, when they had first suspected the stirring to life of forces within the Eye of Terror, when they had dimly perceived the first awful warp-whispers of the Despoiler's intent to unleash a new and deadly Black Crusade upon the worlds of the Imperium of Mankind.

As he exited the elevator and walked down the corridor towards the single adamantium-reinforced and rune-inscribed door at the end of the passage, Horst

recalled other passages from that mission, and other stages on the journey which had led to this moment.

Purgatory, nine years ago. Smoke, ugly and black, filled the skies above the world, casting a gloomy shroud over the devastation below. Horst had seen such scenes before, on a score of worlds across the Gothic sector, but with a growing feeling of dread, he already knew that this one was different from and far more ominous than the other Chaos raids that had plagued the sector in recent years.

With a feeling of apprehensive dread that grew stronger with every step he took, he climbed up the jagged and fused sides of the still-smoking giant impact crater where the other members of the Inquisition survey team were already gathered. There was a small fleet of Imperial battle and rescue craft in orbit above the world, all from various arms of Imperial service, but the inspection of this devastated area of the planet's surface had been claimed by the Inquisition alone, and Horst had imposed a five hundred kilometre exclusion zone around the site. What lay here—or at least the evidence of what perhaps had lain here, Horst reminded himself, feeling that sense of dread grow ever tighter within him—was for the eyes of the Emperor's most trusted servants only.

Standing with the others, he stared into the deep, still-smouldering wound which had been gouged into the earth. A glance at the map display on his data-slate confirmed the almost unbelievable. According to the information, this twelve kilometre-wide gaping abyss of burning gases and smouldering, still semi-molten rock had, until just a few short days ago, been the location of a heavily-defended Imperium planetary base, home to thousands of Imperial Guard troopers, Adeptus Mechanicus adepts and servants of the myriad of other branches of Imperial government.

All across the planet's surface, other settlements and Imperial outposts had been struck and obliterated during the lightning-fast raid, but this, Horst knew, was the main object and target of the attack. Here the fell touch of Abaddon the Despoiler could truly be seen on the surface of Purgatory, scarring the face of the planet forever.

Horst looked down, and, through the haze of burning, sulphurous gases, saw the marks on the sheer sides of the crater, where, from high above in space, an

orbiting warship had directed a coruscating beam of lance energy down onto the planet's surface, blasting away the topsoil and all of the fortress built upon that topsoil, and probing deep into the underlying bedrock of the planet.

How many lance-armed warships would it take to accomplish such a task, the inquisitor asked himself? He both marvelled and feared the thought of the massive outpouring of firepower that must have been required to carve such a wound through the planet's dense, rocky crust. And then a second, more troubling, thought suddenly struck him. What if it wasn't a fleet of warships? What if all this were the work of something else, some terrible new addition to the Despoiler's armoury which they had yet to encounter?

He shook his head, trying to dispel his gloomy mood. The potential ramifications of all that had happened here were bad enough, without adding to them with increasingly troublesome thoughts about some fictitious, planet-blasting super-weapon now possibly in the hands of the Imperium of Mankind's most hated and implacable enemy.

He looked again into the depths of the crater, rechecking the stream of info-runes now scrolling across the face of his data-slate. Despite the enormous energy stream that had been unleashed on the surface here, it was plain to see that it had somehow been expertly contained and targeted to an almost uncanny degree of precision. The overlaying surface material had been simply blasted away, yes, but, after that, the energy stream had been tightly focussed as it drilled down into the planet's crust, obliterating dense rock and mineral deposits in micro-seconds as it pushed deeper down into the planet's core, almost as if it were probing in search of something.

But probing in search of what, Horst wondered, already sickly suspecting the answer to his own unspoken question.

"Drones and servo-skull scouts have been despatched into the fissure. We estimate it to be at least eighteen thousand metres deep," reported Monomachus, taking up his customary position alongside his inquisitor master, "so it may take them some time to make a full survey. Residual energy from the massive weapon discharge which created the fissure, along with local interference from some of the mineral and ore deposits in the surrounding bedrock, may also affect surveyor readings and delay a fully accurate understanding of what is, or may

once have been, down there."

"But?" queried Horst, silently fulminating against the habit apparently ingrained in all of the Machine God's servants of taking seemingly forever to get to the point.

Monomachus tapped rune-keys on the brass facade of his antique data-slate, pausing also to silently commune with the interconnected machine-minds of his brother tech-priests and their mechanical server-devices, not only here on the planet's surface but also those aboard the Inquisition lightship in orbit overhead.

"But already we are detecting strong traces of psychometric radiation of a probable xeno-origin emanating upwards from the fissure bottom. The traces are strong, but are already starting to decay."

"Hypothesis," demanded Horst, knowing that the tech-priests were slaves to statistics, facts, figures, and long-established analytical models, and hated any kind of open, unsupported conjecture. It was Monomachus's ability to break free of such dogmatic behaviour and make intuitive leaps of informed opinion which made him such a valued member of the inquisitor's entourage.

"As I said, it may be some time before a fully accurate survey can be made, lord inquisitor, but it is my considered opinion that the spot we are now standing upon was indeed, until very recently, the hidden resting place of the xeno-artefact known as the Hand of Darkness."

Horst's booted feet noisily crunched over the brittle, ossified material that carpeted the ground for hundreds of kilometres in all directions, the noise sounding like the sharp crack of las-fire in the still, silent air of Ornsworld. Reluctantly, he looked down at the bone-chaff beneath his feet, picking out the details of tiny human-like bones over which he walked. They might easily have been mistaken for the remains of children, but Horst knew otherwise.

He lifted his gaze and looked around him, seeing the endless bone-litter, the piles of skull cairns dotted all across the horizon and the smoke plumes from the cremation pits which still rose up into the skies now over a week since the last of Abaddon's extermination legions had left this world.

He heard the crunch of more booted feet behind him, and turned to see the figure of Monomachus behind him, the tech-priest distastefully gathering up his gold-silicate robes in an effort to keep the long hems clear of the corpse-material littering the ground.

“How many?” asked Horst.

There was a characteristic pause of several seconds before Monomachus answered. In that time, the inquisitor heard the faint whirring of the cogitator machinery within his Adeptus Mechanicus advisor’s rebuilt metal cranium. Other than that, the only sound to be heard in this tainted place was the whistling insect drone of servo-skulls as they drifted lazily over the scene, recording all evidence of the atrocity for the Inquisition’s closed library archives, although some of the footage, suitably edited for mass consumption, would no doubt turn up in Imperial propaganda vidpict-casts.

“Three or four million, at this site alone,” intoned Monomachus, his typically blank-toned delivery giving scant homage to the enormity of the scale of the atrocity contained in that number. “Preliminary orbital-drone scans show another twelve sites across the planet’s surface of at least a similar magnitude, as well as possibly up to sixty other lesser massacre sites.”

Horst’s only reply was a weary grunt. He personally had little fondness for the stunted abhuman breed known as ratlings, but they were part of the Imperium of Mankind and part of the Emperor’s divine plan, and he regretted the deaths of so many of them, as he would that of any of the Emperor’s loyal servants.

Ornsworld was the main home of the ratling sub-race and the recovery from this attack on the world would be long and painful, if indeed the planet and its population ever fully recovered at all from the decimation which had been visited upon them. For the next few generations at least, Horst coldly calculated, the Imperial Guard would have to make alternative arrangements for the recruitment of its quartermasters and sniper specialists.

He was standing in what had once been the central square of the ratling settlement known as Samstown, but the anonymous, burnt-out ruins around him showed little discernible evidence of what had once been the settlement’s main focal point. Horst had never been on Ornsworld before, but he was familiar with

its numberless similar counterparts scattered across the length and breadth of the Imperium, and, without too much effort, he could well imagine the look and feel of the place.

Over there would have been the local Administratum building, the centre of the Imperial bureaucracy on Ornsworld, and facing it almost in rivalry from the other side of the square would have been an Ecclesiarchy temple dedicated to whatever form of the Divine Emperor the ratlings had been given to worship. No doubt around the fringes of the square would also have been clustered the headquarter buildings of many local provincial trade guilds and merchant houses, since ratlings were nothing if not enterprising and industrious in the acquisition of wealth and material comforts.

All of it was gone now, swept away in mere hours as the gaze of the Despoiler fell upon this tranquil and unremarkably ordinary backwater Imperial world, located well away from the front-line planetary systems and main attack routes leading out from the Eye of Terror.

When his vox crackled into life, Horst easily recognised the brief series of staccato identity code blips hidden within the seemingly random-sounding burst of radio static.

“Horst here. Where are you, and what have you found, old friend?” he answered.

The voice which answered him was typically gruff and irreverent. Half a century of dispensing the Emperor’s harsh and often brutal justice to the subjects of the Imperium had done little to improve the Senior Arbitrator Haller Stavka’s notoriously blunt manner.

“In the hills, inquisitor, about sixty kilometres north-west of your position. It took a bit of doing, but we finally got one of these little bastard runts to act as guide and lead us to the site. No wonder the Hereticus could never find the place. The woodlands are so dense up here, and there’s so many deep ravines and dead-end canyons that you could spend a lifetime crawling through these bloody hills and never find anything. It wasn’t so hard to find the way as we got closer, though. After a while, we just followed all the damn buzzards in the sky above us, and they led us straight to it.”

“And?” Horst fought to quash the tight, underlying tone of apprehension in his question.

“I’ll say that for these little half-pint bastards, they must have put up a hell of a fight defending the place, not that it did them any good in the end, of course. We found them all over the place, but the ones who were still alive at the end made their last stand in the inner temple part of the cave system.”

“The xeno-artefact?” Again, Horst struggled to control the anxiety in his voice. There was a pause before Stavka replied, although Horst already knew what the answer would be.

“Gone, inquisitor. Just like on Purgatory.”

The door at the far end of the corridor opened, and Horst saw the stolid figure of Stavka emerge from the interrogation cell beyond. Even though he was out of uniform and wore only leather breeches with a simple, rough-spun tunic and a belt with holstered bolt pistol sidearm, there was little mistaking him for anything other than the capable and veteran servant of the Emperor’s law which he had been for all but the last two decades of his life.

From the Imperial eagle emblem branded into his shoulder to the grim, impassive fix of his jaw to the rippling muscles beneath the surface of his scar-crossed arms, this was clearly a man well used to the often violent imposition of the Emperor’s justice, a loyal and capable servant of the Imperium who would not flinch in the face of whatever task was required of him.

Even so, Horst could see the anxiety written across the arbitrator’s uncharacteristically pale features. Stavka had been supervising the interrogation of the warp-spawn thing for over thirty-six hours now, and the strain on the man’s face was clearly evident. Once again, Horst silently asked himself for perhaps the thousandth time if he was truly justified in taking such an extreme course of action. The creature’s very presence here was an abomination, he knew. It was an unnatural, tainted thing, and the corruption it carried could potentially spread further—much further indeed—than this time and place.

Stavka nodded in salute to Horst as he met the inquisitor at the entrance to the

interrogation chamber.

“It’s been asking for you, inquisitor,” he said simply. “By name.”

“Horssssst,” hissed the daemon-thing in undisguised pleasure, one of the torture-inflicted wounds in its throat splitting open wider and warping to form a crude mouth. “Why haven’t you come down to see me earlier? I’ve been bored waiting for you. You should be more careful with your choice of minions. These ones here make for such dull company.”

A queer, bubbling laugh emerged from the ruin of its face, and it writhed in pleasure, straining against the bindings which held it down onto the pitted, filth-stained surface of the interrogation slab. Its skin was criss-crossed with scars and open wounds, some of the wounds horribly opening and closing in synch with the creature’s mouth as it talked. Something that wasn’t blood bubbled hotly out of the torture-openings in its body. Its skin was blackened and charred in those portions where the mystic binding wards and glyphs had been carved or tattooed into its flesh. Beneath the tight, stretched drum of its skin, the musculature of its unnatural body seethed and broiled in urgent agitation.

Other than the sick laughter of the warp spawn, the only other sound in the chamber was the droning chanting of the chorus of three Inquisition-approved Ecclesiarchy confessors as they endlessly recited prayers of protection and the sacred words of the litanies of binding. One of them swung an incense burner filled with potent and blessed unguents in a vain attempt to dispel the vile, hot reek of the thing which filled the air in the close confines of the underground chamber, and Horst silently gave quick thanks for the rebreather implants inside his throat and nostrils as he leant forward to confront the daemon-creature.

“You know me, warp-spawn?”

It laughed again, a hideous, high-pitched, almost childlike giggle. “Perhaps, perhaps not, noble Inquisitor Horst. Perhaps we met during your famous scouring of Cato, or perhaps it was earlier than that? During that incident in the tunnels beneath Pazzazu?”

Horst visibly flinched at the mention of the so-called “hive of damnation”. Not

even his brethren in the innermost circles of the Inquisition knew the full facts of what he had seen and endured in that hellish network of underhive passages and crypts, and he doubted that anyone born in the last century or so even knew the name of that once most infamous of hive cities, so rigorous had been his ruthless subjugation of the full facts of his investigation there, and the forces it had stirred up. The daemon-thing cackled in delight, and Horst angrily cursed at himself, realising that, in falling for a trick that even a novice interrogator apprentice might have avoided, he had allowed the creature to open up a possible weakness in his mental defences.

“Warp spawn, is that all you have to offer me?” he said, deliberately putting a heavy sneering tone into his voice. “Half-truths and lies? Vague hints of ancient events of no interest to anyone in these last hundred years? You disappoint me. I thought even a minor warp-born such as you could have done better than that.”

Again, the creature cackled, clearly relishing the encounter. “Ah, but Gideon, isn’t that why you had me summoned? To hear the whispers carried on the currents of the warp? To know the shape of the future? To learn what plans the Despoiler has been weaving all this time?”

Horst’s expression was stony and impenetrable, betraying no hint of the thoughts which lay behind it, but, whatever the daemon was searching for as it carefully studied his reaction, somehow it found it. It laughed in satisfaction, forming new mouths to further express its hellish delight.

“Ah yes, the Despoiler, who stood with Horus as the walls of your precious corpse-emperor’s palace came tumbling down before them. Abaddon of old, who still desires above all else the prize which was denied to him and his master those ten thousand years ago. He’s come again, Gideon, out of the Eye of Terror, out of a place which you cannot and should not dare try to imagine, and all I see for you and the other servants of the corpse-emperor is a darkness of fear and futile sacrifice. Enjoy what time you have left, Gideon,” it laughed, “for the Despoiler’s plots are nearly done, and soon these worlds you cling to so tenaciously will all be gone!”

Horst was turning angrily away even before the last echoes of the creature’s mocking, multi-voiced laughter had died away. “Have the chamber sealed and leave this thing here to rot,” he instructed Stavka. “Let us see if it’s still laughing

in a thousand years' time, cut off from the warp, bound inside this body and encased within a hundred tonnes of reinforced rockcrete."

He took four steps—perhaps two more than he had expected—when the daemon-creature's voice shrilly rang out from behind him.

"The sleepers will be awakened! The Talismans of Vaul, that is what the Despoiler truly seeks here. And, oh yes, Gideon, just wait and see the light that will shine forth from those pretty baubles! Your day will come! The six will become one, and then all shall fall together!"

It screamed to itself in mad laughter and then started to babble in a confused chorus of voices. The printer mechanism of the cogitator device set up in a corner of the room clattered noisily as its auto-transcription abilities strove to keep up with the wild stream of gibberish and prophecies fed to it from the audio receptors of the servo-skull monitors hovering above the interrogation slab.

Later on, Horst and Monomachus would spend long hours going over these transcripts and the accompanying vidpict records of the creature's interrogation, but Horst knew that such second-hand evidence was no substitute for actually being here and facing the thing, listening to the fear and hate in its chorus of voices.

He leant closer, wary of some warp-born trick from the thing imprisoned on the slab, but keen to pick up more of the pattern he was beginning to discern amongst the torrent of nonsense words the daemon was now screaming in various different-toned voices. A second's concentration, a clearing away of all the extraneous gibberish using a mental trick which Monomachus had taught him, and, suddenly he heard the strain of prophecy amongst the stream of daemonic gibberish.

"Fularis, Anvil and Fier," trilled the daemon in a grotesque and child-like song-song voice, repeating the couplets over and over to itself. "Rebo, Schindelgeist and Brigia. The day will come. Six become one! All shall come together!"

Stavka too had heard the daemon's words and instantly grasped something of their meaning. "Fularis, Anvil and the others," he started, "they're all Imperium worlds where—"

A sharp look from Horst cut him off. At the inquisitor's silent, urgent gesture, he quickly joined Horst in the passageway outside.

"Let it babble on until it's finished, but I think we've already heard the best of what it had to tell us."

The one-time Arbites officer nodded grimly in agreement. "And after that?" he asked, looking questioningly at Horst.

"As we agreed beforehand," said Horst, looking his subordinate straight in the eye. "Maximum containment. Nothing said or done in that room leaves this place."

Stavka nodded in understanding, his hand unconsciously shifting towards his bolstered bolt pistol. He saluted briefly and turned and re-entered the room.

Horst's thoughts were deep and troubled as he made the journey back to the elevator platform which would take him back up to the main levels of the citadel and forever away from this tainted place. The summoning of the daemon would surely damn him in the eyes of many of his fellow inquisitors, the so-called "puritan" faction who zealously followed the ancient maxims of Imperial dogma to the very letter. It was, he admitted, a dangerous and desperate thing to do, an act which was, at best, an admission of his failure to divine the plans and purposes of the enemy by any other means. What he was about to do next would, he judged, leave him equally damned in the eyes of others within the Inquisition.

"Talismans of Vaul," he murmured to himself, repeating one of the things the daemon had said. He did not fully understand the true import of everything the daemon had spoken of, but already his worst suspicions were deepening, and he recognised at least part of that phrase.

Vaul.

When the High Lords of Terra had despatched him here to the Gothic sector to investigate what had only then been a series of bewildering if seemingly random attacks by Chaos raiders across the fringes of the sector, he had little imagined the strange and terrible places the course of that investigation would lead him to. Now, as the forces of the Despoiler broke out of the Eye of Terror and plunged

all of the Gothic sector into ferocious, full-scale war of a level not seen since the time of the Great Heresy, his investigation into the enemy's true purpose was nearing an end, and this last stage of that journey would take him in a new direction and possibly towards the strangest and most dangerous encounter of all.

Vaul. An eldar word. One of their damned alien heathen deities, he knew. Well, when this is all over then, if the fanatics of the Ordo Malleus don't get me, he thought to himself, their brethren in the Ordo Xenos most assuredly will.

The moment of humour was short-lived. As he entered the elevator and activated the command rune for the surface levels, he could already hear the first bolt pistol shots ringing out from the place he had just left.

Days later, Horst and his entourage pushed their way through the bronze doors, entering the Lord Admiral's strategium chamber beyond in a dash of heavily booted feet and weapons on armour. Navy armsmen guards raised the blunt-nosed barrels of their deadly shotcannon weapons in sudden alarm, but were quickly quelled into submission by the sight of the Inquisition emblem upon Horst's carapace-armoured chest-plate, as well as by a warning growl from Stavka and the rest of Horst's bodyguard retinue: veteran warriors gathered from half a dozen different branches of the Imperium armed services.

Horst took the scene in with a glance. A group of Imperial Navy officers, the proof of their various exalted ranks indicated by the colourful plumage of gold braiding and glittering medals decorating their dark blue uniforms, stood around the spinning strategium globe at the centre of the room. Around them were waiting phalanxes of adjutant officers, scribe adepts, Munitorium officials, tech-priests and even, standing to one side in the wide chamber, the distinctive crimson and gold robes of a cardinal-prince of the Ecclesiarchy, attended by his own smaller courtly entourage of followers.

All eyes were upon Horst and his group, many navy officers openly gawping in surprise at this unforgivable breach of protocol. Only one figure amongst the cluster of senior navy personnel gathered around the hologram display failed to react or show any sign of alarm at this unwarranted invasion of the very centre of Battlefleet Gothic Command. The man, a tall and elegantly thin naval officer

wearing the resplendent uniform of an admiral of the Segmentum Obscuras fleet continued to lean forward in inspection of the strategium display, staring in close concentration at the complex ballet of planet and battle-squadron runes projected across the three-dimensional map of the Gothic sector. He seemed to be caught up in deep contemplation of some remote and complex long-range strategy equation, the workings of which only he could truly fathom. The flickering light from the display played across his face, reflecting off the trademark cyber-device implanted in place of his missing right eye and throwing his distinctive hawk-like features into stark relief. It was a face now familiar to the inhabitants of every civilised Imperial world within the Gothic sector from the endless propaganda vidpict-casts which had become a feature of daily life since the start of the war.

Not even the lowliest rating or indentured slave-worker aboard any of the hundreds of Imperial Navy warships under his command would be in any doubt about the figure's identity, even without the magnificent diamond-inlaid and gold-woven rank sash he wore across his tunic breast.

"My dear Horst," said Lord Admiral Cornelius Ravensburg, in the tell-tale clipped accent of the hereditary navy aristocrat class of Cypra Mundi, "always a pleasure to welcome a member of the Imperial Inquisition aboard my flagship, even if the visit is both unannounced and unexpected. I take it then that you are not here to check anything as mundane as mere naval strategy?"

The voice of the commander of Battlefleet Gothic concealed a dry, slightly mocking tone. It had been five centuries since the Inquisition had conducted a merciless purge of suspected and widespread seditious elements amongst the senior officer cadre of Segmentum Obscuras, but such events lingered long in the memories of the institutions of the Imperium of Mankind, and there had traditionally been a great deal of hostile resentment to the agents of the Inquisition amongst the upper echelons of Battlefleet Obscuras.

Horst sensed Stavka bristling in anger at the Lord Admiral's tone, but Horst himself knew that this was not the time to dwell on any of the petty resentments and rivalries that existed between so many branches of Imperium authority. He bowed slightly in a modest deference to Ravensburg's rank, and, when he spoke, his tone was polite and conciliatory.

“Forgive the intrusion, Lord Ravensburg, but I must speak to you most urgently. What I have to tell you is too precious to be trusted to any courier vessel or astropath communication, and involves vital information concerning the enemy’s underlying motives in launching their assault upon the Gothic sector.”

“Motives? We already know all about their motives, lord inquisitor,” said one of the other navy officers, looking disdainfully at Horst and his entourage. It was Ravensburg’s chief adjutant, Commodore Admiral Kirponos. Horst had heard that the commodore had been a brave and fearless ship’s captain, and now he had the proof, for even here at the very heart of Gothic Sector Naval Command, it took a brave if perhaps rash man to stand up against the authority of a Lord Inquisitor emissary of the High Council of Terra. The navy commander stared Horst in the face as he continued.

“We face another Black Crusade, this much we know. Both the Inquisition and the High Lords of Terra have confirmed this, and the crusade’s motives are no different from the previous ones which have assaulted the Imperium for the last ten thousand years: wanton destruction of Imperial worlds, the defeat of the Emperor’s armed forces, the overthrow of Imperial order and the subjugation of the Emperor’s subjects. These are the only motives which count in the minds of our enemies. Twelve times before, the Imperium has faced and withstood such assaults. This time, with the Emperor’s grace and with the forces under the command of the Lord Admiral, shall be no different, no matter how many ‘Planet Killer’ weapons the enemy may possess. The Despoiler and his heretic lackeys will be defeated and sent back into their Eye of Terror bolt-hole to lick their wounds for another thousand years.”

Yes, a brave man; the Imperium needs more like this one, thought Horst, realizing that this was neither the time nor the place to impose the full crushing weight of his authority upon Kirponos, and the other loyal servants of the Emperor assembled here. He would need the co-operation and trust of men such as this in the days to come, he knew, and he needed to make allies of them, not enemies.

“So I pray, lord commodore,” said Horst, bowing in the man’s direction, “and, like you, I too assumed that we were facing a Black Crusade, and not a mere series of raids as we first assumed. However,” he continued, directing his gaze towards Ravensburg and deliberately bringing a more authoritative tone into his

voice, “I now have good reason to believe that what we are witnessing is something else, part of a larger and hidden stratagem which could herald something far greater and more terrible than any Black Crusade.”

He paused to allow his words to take effect, hearing the muted gasps and quickly-stilled utterances from amongst the throng of navy officers. When he continued, his next words were aimed solely at Ravensburg.

“The Despoiler moves in shadows and lies, my lord, hiding his secrets within other secrets, and his plans are already far further advanced than we could almost fear possible. We must act soon to counter him, or else we risk losing far more in this war than the entire Gothic sector.”

Horst locked eyes with Ravensburg, holding the Lord Admiral’s gaze for a moment in a long look which communicated much about the inquisitor’s mood of deadly earnestness. Ravensburg paused for a moment, holding the other man’s gaze, and then spoke.

“Tell me what you require, lord inquisitor, and I will do everything in my power to make it so,”

“What I have to tell you is for your ears only, lord admiral.”

Ravensburg nodded, and made a curt gesture of dismissal to his staff. “Gentlemen, leave us, if you please.”

Both men waited as their entourages and attendants, together totalling over two hundred in number, left the strategium chamber. Stavka was the last to exit, and would stand guard at the doors, permitting no one to enter until he had received the correct vox code signal from Horst. Ravensburg waited until the doors had been swung shut before turning to look expectantly at Horst.

Horst began to talk. When he had finished, some three hours later, the nature of the things he had told Ravensburg and the conclusions the two men had come to would change not only the course of the Gothic Sector War, but also even possibly alter the fate of the Imperium itself.

TWO

With a rumble like the voices of angry gods, the two metre-thick blast doors ground open before Siaphas, permitting him entry into the Warmaster's throne room.

The squat, hulking shapes of the two daemon-possessed dreadnoughts on either side of the entranceway turned towards him, emitting low electronic snarls of warning. Blood-slicked servo-motors hummed and deadly heavy bolter weapon arms were aimed in readiness at him. Flickering pencils of red light played over Siaphas as the dreadnoughts' targeter senses zeroed in on him, and the Chaos sorcerer felt cold, inquiring tendrils of daemon-thought probing at the surface of his consciousness.

His fanged lips formed and spoke a word of power, and, with an angry mechanical growl of what sounded almost like disappointment, the daemon guardians of the entrance to the Warmaster's throne chamber retreated back to their guard-posts on either side of the doorway.

"Enter, Siaphas of Eidolon," intoned the cold, mocking voice of Abaddon the Despoiler, "and be welcome amongst us."

Siaphas shuffled forward, the thick, flesh-fused mass of his left leg dragging heavily behind him. He was a champion of Tzeentch, and he was here at the Warmaster's summons as a one-time commander of one of his master's legion armies, but, somehow, he sensed that something was strangely amiss on this occasion. Fear flickered through his mind and the dark, twisting thing within him, that part of him which he had long ago offered up to the Lord of Change, lapped eagerly at such thoughts, relishing the taste of his terror.

He moved towards the Warmaster's throne dais, aware of the many eyes upon him. This was the first time for more than four years that he had been permitted into the Warmaster's presence, and he was keenly aware of the suspicious glances and whispered sniggering from amongst the groups of courtiers flanking the procession-way leading towards the Despoiler's throne. There were many old enemies of his here, Siaphas knew, long-time rivals and also more than a few

former allies whom he had been happy to use and then ruthlessly discard during what had been a swift and deeply satisfying ascent up through the ranks of the Despoiler's warlord cadre.

And then, four years ago now, had come the invasion of Helia IV. It had been Siaphas who had first suggested the strategy of unleashing terror fleets on the Imperial worlds within the Gothic sector. It had been Siaphas who had cast the warp-runes and declared the omens favourable for the attack on the world of Helia IV, and it had been Siaphas who became the object of the Despoiler's wrath when the invasion fleet and three entire Chaos Legions of troops had been all but annihilated by the Imperium fleet which had unexpectedly arrived to defend the world from the Warmaster's attack. It had all been the fault of that fool Varro, of course. It had been he who had led his fleet straight into the jaws of the Imperial trap, but Varro was gone, vaporised along with his flagship the Lord Seth during the battle, and the fury of Abaddon's displeasure had fallen solely on Siaphas alone.

The sorcerer knew that he had been fortunate to survive the experience. The Warmaster did not tolerate failure, and the normal penalty for those who disappointed him was to be consigned to an eternity of suffering as flesh-fodder, doomed to serve as the physical vessel for a warp daemon. There were many such daemon-possessed creatures serving throughout the ranks of the Despoiler's forces: as commanders of his Chaos hordes; as navigators aboard his warships, using their mystic daemon-sight to guide his fleets through the warp; as familiars for his sorcerers and as advisors within his own throne room, offering the Warmaster whispered counsels that came direct from the great Powers of the Warp themselves.

There was one such creature present here now, hunched at the foot of the steps of the Warmaster's dais, drooling black slime from between its bloody lips as it strained against the heavy rune-marked iron chain around its neck, growling in discontent at its imprisonment, chained as it was to the stone slabs of the dais steps and trapped inside a too-weak physical shell and cut off from the limitless freedoms of the warp. In a sudden flash of unwelcome prescience, through his own warp-given mystic powers, Siaphas for a moment saw his own face reflected in the creature's shifting features, reminding him that there was still an agonised vestige of the body's original human occupant trapped in there with the daemon-thing spirit, and reminding him again of just how fortunate he had been

to escape a similar fate.

As he approached the Warmaster's dais, he looked around, quickly spotting the figure of his benefactor standing in the shadows behind the throne. Zaraphiston was Abaddon's chief lieutenant and personal Chaos sorcerer; he had also been Siaphas's mentor. It had only been through Zaraphiston's personal intervention that Siaphas had been allowed to escape the awful fate that would otherwise have been his due punishment for failing the Warmaster.

Siaphas searched the face of his one-time mentor and patron for any flicker of acknowledgement or due as to why he had been summoned back to Abaddon's court after four years in exile amongst some of the most obscure and far-flung reaches of the Warmaster's domain, but all that met him in reply was the carefully-guarded blank gaze of the elder sorcerer's hooded eyes. After millennia in the service of the Despoiler, the Chaos sorcerer was a master in keeping any sign of his true feelings or motivations well buried.

Siaphas secretly knew that Zaraphiston bore little love for the Despoiler, and suspected that his former master's ambitions went far higher than merely being content to serve as Abaddon's pet sorcerer.

Zaraphiston was not alone in this regard: many before him had plotted in secret against the Warmaster and the husks of their daemon-devoured remains were there for all to see, hanging around the walls of the vast chamber alongside all the other captured war banners and heraldries of thousands of Imperial Guard regiments and more than a hundred Space Marine Chapters, mute evidence of the Warmaster's victories over his enemies.

No, Siaphas knew, as he painfully threw himself to his knees and bowed in supplication before the figure seated on the throne, Abaddon the Despoiler, Warmaster of Chaos, Commander of the Black Crusades and Heir to the Glories of Horus, was not an opponent to be underestimated. That was why this shameful display of abeyance was necessary; it was the only way to find the path back into Abaddon's favour and into the ranks of his warlord commanders. There were many others here who harboured the same secret ambitions as Siaphas and his master Zaraphiston, who were not content to accept the rank positions within the Legions of Chaos which Abaddon had already deemed was the highest position that any of them would ever attain within the service of the

Powers of Chaos. There were many here who were not content to merely serve, but wished to rule instead, and Siaphas was one of them.

He would not waste this opportunity, he promised himself. He would carry out whatever trifling and unworthy task the Despoiler required of him, and then he would be free to reclaim his place amongst his peers. Free to plot and scheme amongst those with similar ambitions to his own. There were many within the Legions of Chaos who considered this assault on the Gothic sector to be a foolhardy and dangerous venture. They whispered that the Warmaster had been led astray by false prophecy voices within the warp; that, after ten thousand years, the heir of Horus was finally losing his grip on power; that this war should have been won by now and that, with another and more able Chaos Legion commander seated on the throne of the Warmaster, it still might not be too late to salvage the damage done by Abaddon's endless schemes within schemes and private vendettas.

Sometimes, such whispers reached the ears of the Warmaster himself, and he was able to trace them back to their source. The remains of such unfortunates were still here for all to see on the walls around the throne room, so Siaphas was careful to mask his thoughts from Abaddon's all-seeing gaze, and show the Warmaster only the same fawning, unquestioningly obedient facade as that presented by all the rest of the Despoiler's witless and craven lackeys.

So, mindful of what was expected of him, Siaphas prostrated himself before the Warmaster's throne. "It is my pleasure only to serve you and the Powers of the Warp, Warmaster," he dutifully intoned, not daring to raise his head until Abaddon had spoken.

"Indeed," came the reply, in a disdainful voice containing less warmth than the chill depths between the furthest stars. "Rise, loyal Siaphas, and hear why we have at last sent for you again."

Siaphas rose to his feet, and looked up at the figure on the throne. The eyes of Abaddon the Despoiler, as dark and fathomless as the outer gulfs, stared back at him, catching him in their cold gaze and seeming to strip him bare of all defences. For a moment, Siaphas wanted to confess his many disloyalties and those of others to the Warmaster, but then his mystic training took hold once more and he managed to break the spell, looking quickly away under the clumsy

pretence of bowing his head in supplication. The possessed thing crouching at the foot of the throne dais snickered in cruel humour at the sorcerer's discomfort, and its mocking laugh found subtle echoes amongst the watching crowd of courtiers.

Siaphas's mind seethed with hatred and humiliation, but he choked the feeling back down within himself. "My life and soul for Chaos, Warmaster," he managed to stammer out. "Tell me what you require me to do, and I will move the stars to fulfil your command."

"The war goes well," intoned Abaddon in his cold, dead voice, "but our enemies grow ever more desperate as the tide of battle continues to turn against them. In their desperation, they reach out in search of allies. They must not be allowed to succeed. This is the task we require of you, sorcerer."

Hope and relief surged through Siaphas. This was more than he had ever dreamed of, and already that aspect within him which belonged to the Changer of the Ways was spinning the first plots and schemes using visions of the forces and resources which would no doubt be put at his disposal. "You honour me, Warmaster," he said, careful to keep out of his voice any hint of what was going on in his mind. "What forces will I be given to command in your name? What size of warfleet? How many legions of troops?"

"Warfleets? Legions?" answered the Despoiler, with a mocking edge to his voice. "You misunderstand, little sorcerer. The enemies of the false emperor seek allies, but we have found allies of our own. Contact has already been made, and now you and one other will join them as my ambassadors to ensure that their part of the bargain is carried out as I have commanded. Do this thing, and the favour of the Great Powers will be upon you. Fail, and we will not be so merciful as we have in the past."

Siaphas's thoughts were a turmoil of confused emotions. To be the Warmaster's personal envoy was an honour granted to few, but why had he, who had been out of favour for such a dangerously long time, been chosen for this task? Who were these mysterious allies, and what prize could have tempted them to strike a bargain with one as notorious as Abaddon the Despoiler?

Siaphas risked a quick glance at the figure of his patron standing to the side of

the throne. Zaraphiston stood silent and immobile, his face hidden within the shadows of his hood, but Siaphas had to suppress a smile as he saw his former master's hand brush casually and haphazardly on the rune-inscribed hem of his robes. To anyone watching, it might have looked like an unconscious gesture, but to a student of the master Chaos sorcerer, it was a clear signal, communicating much in the placement of the fingers and the gold-threaded rune signs which they briefly touched upon.

The thought flashed through Siaphas's mind. A warning! There is a trap lying in wait here, but also a great reward for the one who can safely bypass it and prove their worth to the Warmaster. Siaphas casually inclined his head, letting Zaraphiston know that his warning had been received and understood, before replying to the Despoiler.

"Who is to be the other envoy on this mission, Warmaster?"

Abaddon smiled thinly and gestured towards the crowd of courtiers. At his command, the crowd instantly parted, and a tall, muscular figure in brass and steel armour strode forward, blood and other fluids dripping from the jangling, hooked chains embedded into its flesh. It grinned a lipless grin, for much of the original flesh of its face was missing, replaced by a patchwork of dead skin taken from its battle victims, and growled in savage pleasure, raising its inactivated chainaxe in salute to the figure on the throne.

"Hannibar of Barca," the Warmaster said. "He will accompany you on this mission. It is my unalterable command that you both fulfil the separate roles I have intended for you."

"Warmaster," said Siaphas, bowing again as he pondered this new and most unwelcome twist to events. That there was a double meaning in what the Despoiler had said was obvious, but why, of all candidates, would Abaddon have selected the Beast of Barca for this mission? Hannibar was notorious, a mindless animal in human form, and one of the followers of that arch-maniac, Kharn the Betrayer.

Like Siaphas, the Khornate berserker champion had seriously fallen from the Warmaster's favour. He and his legions had been ordered to attack and seize the Imperium mining world of Achilia, with the aim of enslaving its population and

turning the outpost into a supply and refit point for the Despoiler's warfleets. Instead, the berserker fool had allowed his troops to not only butcher the entire population but was further unable or unwilling to control them when, their bloodlust unfulfilled, they then fell upon and massacred those contingents of other Chaos troops which had supported them in the initial invasion.

The Warmaster was not slow to show his displeasure. The mines and workshops of Achilia were still manned with an army of slave workers, but it had been Hannibar's own troops who had taken the place of the exterminated civilian population, while Hannibar himself had been banished to the remote fringes of the war where he might learn to tame the worst excesses of his Khornate bloodlust.

So, thought Siaphas, two pariahs, both now summoned back to the heart of the Warmaster's power. It was surely no coincidence or show of unlikely clemency on the part of Abaddon that both of them had been selected for this mission, and Siaphas remembered Zaraphiston's warning of a hidden trap. He warily eyed the glowering figure of Hannibar, who, if his mind wasn't empty of all but the usual tedious Khornate blood-frenzy, was no doubt making similar calculations of his own. Which one of them was the trap for? One, or both? What was the Warmaster's hidden purpose in putting the two of them together like this? Siaphas decided that more information was urgently needed.

"These allies you speak of, Warmaster, who are they, and how will we make ourselves known to them?"

Again, the figure on the throne smiled in secret amusement and gestured towards his Chaos sorcerer. "You must be weary after such a long journey from whatever remote part of our domain you have travelled from. Rest and recover some of your strength. Afterwards, when you are ready, I have no doubt that our good and loyal Zaraphiston will tell you everything you need to know."

It was some three weeks after the departure of the two envoys from the Warmaster's court that a scout raider craft dropped out of the warp on the edge of a desolate and forgotten star system on the edge of the Cyclops Cluster. It made its way quickly in-system to take orbit around the system's third innermost planet, a barren rock so insignificant that only the most dedicated of the

Imperium’s cartographer-adepts could have located its details in the vast and still incomplete index of mapped star systems which lay within the Imperium’s sprawling and ever-changing borders.

A shuttle, black and sinister, dropped from the orbiting ship towards the planet’s surface, landing at the point of the precise co-ordinates given to them days ago and depositing three elite squads of Black Legion Chaos Marines on the dead and dusty plain. Two of the squads instantly fanned out to secure the perimeter of the landing zone while the other began a careful search of the area. It took less than a minute before a voxed shout alerted the squad commander that they had found what they came for.

It sat in the middle of a dust-filled crater. A squat, featureless obsidian canister roughly half a metre high and with no visible seams or means of opening. The planet was barren and airless. No wind or breeze existed to stir the dead dust of the place, and so it was with a feeling of unsettling disquiet that the squad commander noted that the desert surface of the sand remained undisturbed for hundreds of metres all around the canister. Whatever had placed the object there had left no evidence of its passing.

With an angry curse, he commanded a Marine to run forward and snatch up the canister before he and his squad retreated back toward their waiting shuttle, nervously training their weapons on a landscape which had not seen the tread of another living thing in millennia. Less than three minutes after touching down, the shuttle was in the air again, abandoning the world to whatever forgotten ghosts walked upon its dead surface.

Six days later, the canister lay on a black marble plinth within the private chambers of Abaddon. The Despoiler stood in contemplation of it, secretly marvelling at the chilling alien blankness of the thing. The scabbarded daemon blade hanging by his side stirred in disquiet, giving forth a faint psychic rustle of distrust, and Abaddon turned to see Zaraphiston entering the chamber.

“You sent for me, Warmaster?” he purred with his usual unctuous, too-quick-to-please tone. “I assume we have received an answer from our potential new allies?”

Abaddon gestured at the canister. “Open it.” The Chaos sorcerer bowed at the command and stood over the plinth, contemplating the object upon it for a few seconds. Then, with his scaled hands, he made passes over the canister, running his fingers above its featureless surface while whispering words of power. In the dim light of the room, a faint glowing nimbus of energy became apparent around the object. A few seconds later, a sequence of strange and elaborate rune-marks became fleetingly visible there too. Zaraphiston’s long, nimble fingers moved quickly, following the runes and lightly touching them in a complex sequence only he could follow.

With a quiet, rasping hiss, the top of the canister dilated open like the iris of an eye, although there was no visible mechanism involved in the process. An acrid vapour spilled out, tainting the air with a bitter-sweet chemical taste, and, beneath that, the faint smell of something rotting and organic.

“Well? What answer have they sent us?” asked Abaddon, as Zaraphiston reached into the canister and removed its contents.

The severed and perfectly preserved head of Hannibar of Barca dangled there, the circumstances of his death written there in the frozen expression of agony etched into his cryogenically preserved features. However the Khorne berserker had died, it had neither been quick nor easy, that much was plain to see.

Abaddon smiled at the sight of the gruesome missive-object. “Excellent. Then their answer is ‘yes’.”

THREE

Lileathon watched impassively as the last doomed human vessel continued valiantly, if futilely, to fight on. It had been stripped of its shields, its main drive had been crippled by a torpedo hit and it could neither move nor manoeuvre. Its hull was punctured in more than a dozen places and its internal atmosphere was bleeding out into space, and yet the human barbarians within refused to yield to the inevitable.

The slender dart shapes of her life-mate Kornous's Eagle formation glided in for another and surely final bombing strike on the vessel, and, even as Lileathon watched the images projected on the delicate wraithbone membrane of the pict-skin, she saw the remaining working turret defences on the enemy vessel's hull open fire at the oncoming bomber craft. She smiled in appreciation as she watched the Eagles dance through the hail of fire, leaving the confounded human gunners pointlessly chasing the ghostly after-images thrown out by their targets' holofield generator defences.

"Your orders, craftmistress?" echoed Kornous's mind-voice over the wraithbone device-amplified communication link. "Do you require any of the mon-keigh animals as captives?"

Even over the wraithbone-comm link, which often missed subtle inflections of meaning and cadence, the knowing humour in his mind-voice tone was clear.

"Mael dannan," replied Lileathon, using the shared warrior-cant dialect of their now-vanquished craftworld. Dannan, the word for death, but used only in terms of the culling of animals and other lesser creatures.

Mael dannan. Total and merciless extermination.

The Eagle bombers bore mercilessly on, skipping effortlessly past a storm of las-beam fire, spinning a dizzying path through a wall of crude mon-keigh explosive projectile munitions. They bore relentlessly down on the target. In times past, Lileathon had taken on the aspect warrior path of Amon Harakht, of Eagle pilot. That part of her which would always be of that aspect could well remember the

surge of exultant pleasure which must now be filling the minds of the bomber pilots as they heard the over-excited, screaming crescendo of their craft's infinity circuits and saw the bulky shape of their doomed target looming ever larger through the crystal-glass canopies of their cockpits. She watched the last few moments on the pict-skin screen, marvelling at the skill and artistry of the bomber pilots. She had seen this final killing stroke performed a thousand times, had performed it herself a thousand times more, but still the pleasure never left her.

The Eagles bore on, until the pitted and battle-scarred hull of their target must have filled their entire universe, and then, at the last possible moment and with only scant metres to spare, they broke formation and peeled away, their navigator-companions simultaneously giving the mind-thought order to their crafts' infinity circuit systems. A brood of missile-slivers launched away from each craft, piercing the target vessel's hull in a space of time immeasurable by the crude animal-minds of the vessel's occupants. Another infinitesimal moment later, and the missiles' sonic charge warheads detonated deep within the target, unleashing a carefully orchestrated symphony of destruction. The human vessel did not so much explode as shatter, transformed in an instant into a rapidly expanding sphere of twisted metal and fragmented ruin.

The eldar vessel's pack of killers raced ahead of the wreckage wave, the squadron's infinity circuit comm-channels filled with a hot, excited mish-mash of victory shout-thoughts and bravado chatter.

"Swift victory, sure death," thought-talked Lileathon in the proper rite of celebration, using her Eclipse-class cruiser's superior infinity circuits to reach into the minds of the overexcited aspect warrior pilots and install a necessary sense of calm and authority. "Return home to receive your craft-world's blessings."

One by one, the pilots swiftly responded to the order, but she maintained her vigil at the pict-skin screen until she was certain that all the bomber craft were returning to their launch-bays. As a one-time aspect warrior pilot, she well knew the dangerous ferment which often seized the minds of those who chose the aspect warrior path.

We are slaves to our emotions, she thought. This weakness—this inability to

control our animal-selves—almost destroyed us once. We must not succumb to this mon-keigh aspect within ourselves again. We must keep in check our baser nature if we are ever to survive.

A flickering glance across the other pict-skins confirmed that, elsewhere, the battle was likewise going in their favour. Four mon-keigh transports lay crippled and helpless, offering themselves up as easy victims to any of the other Eagle formations still at loose across the battle zone. Three more transports and one escort craft had been reduced to burned-out hulks, while what remained of the human convoy was making a desperate, limping run for the warp jump point on the fringes of the system, still impossibly far-distant, given their present speed and predicament.

Fast-attack eldar vessels, Hemlock and Nightshade destroyers, harried them all the way, and Lileathon saw the last surviving human escorts turn, outmanoeuvred and outgunned, to face their pursuers in a desperate and doubtlessly ill-fated attempt to buy time for the rest of the convoy to reach the safety of the warp jump point. The eldar ships accelerated at speed towards the enemy warships, their commanders no doubt revelling in the promise of such easy kills.

“They fight bravely, the humans,” offered Ailill, second-in-command of the Vual’en Sho, watching the denouement of the battle as it was projected real-time upon the augur chamber’s pict-skin screens. “We must give them that much, if nothing else.”

“We give them nothing,” replied Lileathon, making no attempt to disguise the contempt in her voice, shading the meaning of her words with the inflection reserved for an enemy considered beneath contempt.

“They are enemies. It is dangerous not to accord your enemies at least some measure of respect,” ventured Ailill.

“They are animals. They have no souls, and so they are incapable of possessing the virtues of bravery or nobility of spirit,” she replied.

“And yet they continue to fight when there is no hope of victory, as they do now. Even the lowliest animal knows when to flee or, if cornered, when to offer its

throat in surrender to its conqueror.”

Lileathon was not to be distracted by her second-in-command’s philosophical musings. “They fight, because they know no other way, because their animal natures compel them to do so. If they have any courage, then it is merely the courage of a savage beast, that manner of mindless savagery which may drive an animal to gnaw at its own trap-imprisoned limbs.”

We have more important matters to attend to, she added in mind-speech. Let the issue be at an end.

“Wisdom commands,” genuflected Ailill, the unmistakeable body language of his stance and carefully subservient gesture making clear his unspoken opposition to his craftmistress’s opinion.

He disagrees, but our ways permit him to do so, thought Lileathon. That is why our ways are superior to the ways of the mon-keigh and their mindless subjugation to the will of their corpse-god. Lann Caihe. Water bringer. That is what his role means in our language. He is older and more cautious than I. His task is to bring water to quench the fires of my fury when they threaten to become too uncontrollable. He brings balance to my command, just as our race’s task is to bring balance to the universe. That is why all that we are and all that we have been cannot be allowed to be extinguished without a struggle.

Light flared on one of the pict-skin screens as another ship exploded, calling her attention back to the here and now. She saw one of the human vessels—so ugly, she thought to herself, so bulky and graceless, so unlike the graceful, slender-lined shapes of our ships—slowly breaking up as it was rent apart by a series of internal explosions, one entire side of its hull stripped away by the deadly, nimble touch of a pulsar lance. The eldar on the command bridge of the Vual’en Sho paused for a few seconds in their tasks to watch the last few moments of the human ship’s death-throes.

“One of their troop transports,” judged Ailill. “A bad loss for them, several thousand warriors less to battle the servants of the Abomination.”

“Or several thousand warriors less to attack and exterminate us,” countered Lileathon. “Count yourself fortunate, Ailill. You still have a craftworld home,

while I saw mine destroyed by the mon-keigh savages, and heard the mind-screams of our world's Dreaming Ones as their spirit stones were ripped out of the living wraithbone."

Ailill said nothing. All across the command deck, the eyes of many other eldar were upon her, and even the gentle, calming mind-speak whisper of the wraithbone all around them seemed to falter and quiet. To those of her race, a craft-world was a sacred, living thing, the sanctuary which nurtured and protected them in the cold gulfs between the stars, and to speak of the death of one of these ancient and impossibly precious refuges was to bring fear and horror in the minds of every eldar listening.

"The mon-keigh and their corpse-god oppose the Great Abomination, as do we," she continued, studying the patterns of the field of battle on the tactical pict-skin screen, "but they are also the Abomination's greatest source of power. They are weak and stupid, and their god is old and failing. Their empire is doomed, but in its death-throes, it lashes out blindly at all around them, including us. They understand so little, and all which they do not understand, they condemn and seek to destroy. That is why we cannot depend on them to hold the line against the Abomination, and that is why we must prevent them from building their strength to strike at us."

Ailill said nothing, but made the sixth variation of the ninth gesture of contrition. Sorrow expressed at the touching upon of another's grief. Lileathon made the corresponding gesture of forgiveness. Her story was well known amongst the eldar of Ailill's craftworld. Her own craftworld destroyed, she and the other survivors of the unwarranted attack on Bel-Shammon fled into the labyrinth of the webway, taking refuge amongst the craftworlds of their brethren eldar. A refugee even amongst a race of refugees, the fires of vengeance burned hot and fierce within the proud young warship captain, as the ships of this human transport convoy had just found out to their cost.

The humans' war had spread out all across the Gothic sector, even into those regions which they had normally left well alone in centuries past. Regions marked as uncharted or uninhabited wilderness space on their crude star charts, but which every vessel's captain knew all too well to be inhabited by races other than theirs. The humans had lost many ships over the millennia in attempts to probe into these regions and for many years now there had existed an unspoken

concordat within the humans' naval forces that such areas would be left well alone, and the races within them allowed to remain unchallenged.

Now, though, the urgent requirements of war brought the humans into these dark regions. They came in search of convoy routes which would allow them to evade the enemy's prowling wolf pack fleets, or seeking new resource planets to provide the raw materials for the manufacture of their crude but often highly effective armaments. This system was part of one such region. In itself, it was insignificant and unremarkable, a dying dwarf star circled by four dead planets, but drifting far distant through the outer fringes of the system was the craftworld of An-Iolsus, birthplace of Ailill and the other eldar aboard the Vual'en Sho, and the adopted home of Lileathon herself. The system and the barren reaches of interstellar space around it were sacrosanct while the craftworld was even remotely nearby, and it would be over a century and a half yet before An-Iolsus's slow, millennia-long course would carry it beyond the furthest borders of the system, and so the eldar of An-Iolsus had reacted with brutal and immediate force to the humans' incursions into the region.

This was the third such convoy which Lileathon's reaver fleet had ravaged, and that aspect of her which she had surrendered to the warrior calling exulted in the carnage she and the vessels under her command had wreaked amongst the human trespassers. She had stood on this deck and watched in satisfaction as star-bright beams of pulsar lance energy effortlessly laid open the thickly-armoured hulls of the human vessels; as flights of eldar torpedoes, mind-fast and almost impossible to detect, ruthlessly and effectively hunted down and destroyed the slow and ponderous enemy ships; as squadrons of Darkstar fighters and Eagle bombers danced their deadly ballet around their targets, filling the darkness of space with the light of exploding enemy craft. She had seen all this, and yet it was not enough. Still, the humans came.

They do not yet understand that this region of space is forbidden to them, she thought, feeling the old, familiar fury of the warrior aspect well up within her, and so the more vessels they attempt to send into these reaches, the more we will enforce that understanding upon them.

With difficulty, she tamed such wild thoughts, knowing that the command deck of a flagship cruiser was no place to allow full vent to the most extreme emotions of her aspect warrior mind. She looked again at the scenes on the

tactical pict-skins, speaking aloud orders to the crew members around her.

“Mainsail thirty degrees to sunward. Increase speed by two urs and set in a pursuit course following the main body of enemy vessels. Escort vessels Medhbh’s Shield and Lament of Elshor will accompany us. The remaining vessels will seek out and destroy the enemy stragglers which have already been abandoned in the enemy’s escape towards their precious jump point.”

Delicate eldar fingers flickered in complex patterns over crystal and wraithbone control settings. There came the quiet whispering of Thought Talker communications officers as her orders were disseminated to the rest of the reaver force. There was a palpable surge of energy within the wraithbone structure of the Vual’en Sho, and all within the vessel felt something of the surge in their own minds: a rising tide of bloody-edged excitement at the prospect of the slaughter to come.

Lileathon felt it, and welcomed it, but at the same time her superior aspect warrior senses detected a note of faint discord within the mood of the moment. She mind-reached out in search of the puzzle, and found it. A vague forbidding dissonance emanating from far away, but growing nearer and stronger even as she observed it. The ship’s wraithbone spirit sensed it too, and picked up on it, broadcasting it to the mind of every eldar aboard the cruiser. The ship’s spirit-song changed as systems powered down, apparently of their own volition, and, scant seconds later, the other ships in the reaver fleet did likewise as their own vessel-minds responded to the silent call of the command ship.

Eldar eyes looked at Lileathon in question, everyone on the command deck radiating the same range of confused emotions: puzzlement and surprise, mixed with a vague and angry accusation as they suddenly found themselves denied the prize that had been promised to them.

She looked at the ritual place where the Thought Talkers stood, angrily gesturing at them in curt command. Explain. Now.

“A summons from An-Iolsus, craftmistress,” said Nemhain, the oldest and most experienced of the quartet. “We are to break off and return immediately to the craftworld.”

“Now?” asked Lileathon, looking towards the pict-skin showing the image of the remaining escaping mon-keigh vessels.

“An-Iolsus has spoken,” bowed the Thought Talker. “Its summons carries the word and name of Lord Farseer Kariadryl himself.”

Lileathon and Ailill exchanged glances and mind-thoughts, the same reaction passing between them. Kariadryl, a farseer so old and venerable that he had seen many farseer brethren pass along the journey from birth to spirit stone while he still walked the witch path. What could have happened to have roused him from his reveries inside the dome of crystal seers?

“Wisdom commands,” said Lileathon, giving the required obedient reply and indicating to her crew that they were to comply immediately with the summons-order from the craftworld. A few seconds later and the Vual’en Sho was swinging about to sunward, abandoning the chase and setting its prow towards the system’s hidden webway portal, located at a point in space between the orbits of the third and fourth planets.

“Ceiba-ny-shak,” she cursed to herself in the coarsest possible dialect of Bel-Shammon battle-cant, taking a last look at the rearward-view pict-skins and the image projected there of the human vessels as they escaped to undeserved safety. The mon-keigh aboard them had eluded her, she knew, but the next of their species to cross her path would not. In the name of the murdered kin of Bel-Shammon, the next time she would kill five, ten, a hundred times the number of humans who had escaped her wrath today.

As always, Kariadryl’s dreaming mind took pleasure in the smallest of things. At the moment, his universe centred on the tiny jewel-carapaced insect-drones which drifted lazily through the humid, misty air of the dome chamber, looking like small drifting starpoints of light in the dim ambience of the place.

The tiny mechanoid creatures were a marvel of technological achievement, nano-devices the secrets of which had taken the eldar thousands of years to attain, and far in advance of anything the galaxy’s younger and less refined races could yet manufacture. Their purpose was to tend and clean the crystalline wraithbone material of the spirit trees which filled the dome all around the

resting farseer. Kariadryl could—and, on at least one occasion actually had spend days studying the patterns of the creatures as they drifted through the chamber in their never-ending work, seeing in their behaviour an endless and silently joyful symphony of movement and purpose.

How many of them are there, he wondered. Tens of thousands? Hundreds of thousands, even? And, yet, each year there seemed to be a few less, a fact which he doubted anyone else even noticed or cared about.

We are a dying race, he reminded himself, without even the ability to repair or replace these precious little things. Study the patterns and facts of the smallest of things, for that is where the greatest truths are to be found.

He sighed, and began to stir himself, seeing the patterns of several possible near-futures shift and coalesce into one clear moment-soon-to-come. Someone was coming, and soon his rest would be necessarily disturbed. He had lived a long life, even by the standards of his long-lived kind. A long and arduous life. Limbs and joints once supple and strong ached in the humid heat of the dome chamber. Eyes which were once a deep golden hue had faded to a milky amber, while hair that was once raven black was now shocked with bright silver. The intricately-worked wraithbone staff was now more than just an affectation of rank, and he leaned on it heavily as he began to climb awkwardly to his feet.

He remembered days more than one and a half millennia ago, when, as a fleet-limbed young warrior amongst the ranks of his craftworld's guardian militia, he had fought and triumphed in the great dithyandli competitions of martial strength, besting the champion guardians of three other craftworlds, the mighty Ulthwe amongst them. He had considered then setting his life's course along the path of the warrior, but the fatelines had led him to his true calling along the witch path.

He sighed again, casting his gaze across the thousands of wraithbone trees which filled the wide expanse of this place, the crystal dome of seers. One day, not too distant now, his spirit would take its place here amongst his brethren, and his journey along that long and often shadow-shrouded path would finally be at an end. It was not a thought which daunted or alarmed him, and he had already left instructions as to where he wished his spirit stone to be planted in the rich psycho-plastic loam, so that it might take root and form the seed of another

crystal tree, releasing his spirit to join those of the others in the craftworld's infinity circuit mind. He looked at the spot he had long ago picked out, between the spirit trees of Agilthya, his first soul-mate, killed twelve hundred years ago defending an Exodite world from an ork attack, and that of his old mentor Dodona, who had travelled this same path nearly a thousand years previously. He often communed with their soul-spirits here inside the dome, and those of other friends, rivals and lovers, but it would be good to finally be at one with them all.

But not yet, he reminded himself. Not while there was still one last vital task to perform.

He heard the silent psychic murmur pass through the spirit-mind of the crystalline forest, and turned to see the three figures which his farseer prescient-sense had told him minutes ago would soon be here.

They stood silent and reverent in a clearing amongst the trees, awaiting his attention. Darodayos, Craftworld An-Iolsus's master warrior and keeper of the shrine of Kaela Mensha Khaine, and two of his aspect warrior lieutenants, Chiron of the Dark Reaper aspect, and Freyra of the Striking Scorpion aspect. Freyra shared kinship with Kariadryl, being the grand-daughter of a brother dead these last eight hundred years, and so there was an extra gesture of familial respect in the bow she offered to the farseer.

Kariadryl returned the warriors' greetings, noting how oddly ill-at-ease Darodayos seemed here in the craftworld's most precious and sacred place, then realising that it was because the aspect lord was without his warrior's mask and weaponry, removing them as a mark of necessary respect before entering the dome, the one place in the craftworld where weapons of any kind were forbidden. Without his fierce aspect warrior's mask to hide them from view, Darodayos's features were sharp and keenly intelligent, although his discomfort at his surroundings was betrayed by eyes which constantly searched for threats which could not exist in this of all places, and by hands which protectively sought out the empty places on his belt-harness where sword and shuriken pistol would normally have hung.

He is far upon the warrior path, Kariadryl thought. Perhaps too far to turn back now. Soon, in only a few decades, perhaps, he will turn his back on all else

which he could have been and take on the title of exarch. It had been many centuries since An-Iolsus had witnessed the nomination of one of its own to the rank of exarch, an eldar who had become trapped in one aspect role, dedicating their existence solely to the pursuit of war, although Kariadryl could remember when there had always been at least one such terrifying and awe-inspiring figure aboard the craftworld.

We are a dying race, he told himself again. We only have to open our eyes to see the evidence all around us.

“The summons has been received and acknowledged?” the farseer asked, already knowing what the answer must be.

“She is coming,” replied the aspect lord. “The Vual’en Sho and the other craft under her command are returning to An-Iolsus.”

“You do not approve of the choice of Lileathon for this task?” The inflection Kariadryl used made his words less of a question and more of the statement. The aspect lord considered the matter for a brief moment before giving his answer.

“Her soul is not in harmony. She is too full of anger and a thirst for vengeance to be trusted with the task you have commanded.”

“Anger? A thirst for vengeance? Strange to hear one of the warrior path condemn such traits in another. Are these not aspects of one’s own soul-self which all who walk the path you have chosen must find and embrace within themselves?”

“We use them as tools,” replied Darodayos. “Emotions to be mastered and used to give us greater strength of purpose. The eshairr Lileathon does not use them in such a way. She allows them to use her as their tool instead. She has allowed her hatred of the humans and her grief at the destruction of her craftworld to blind her to all else around her.”

Eshairr, noted Kariadryl. The fourth of the five words for outcast, only one meaning above the level of true outcast, the murderous eldar pirate raiders who roamed space killing at will, and who were without both honour and craftworld. Had Darodayos used that term in Lileathon’s presence, the life-blood of one or

the other of them would surely have been spilled.

“There is truth in much of what you say,” conceded Kariadryl.

“And still you insist on using her in this matter, despite all I and others have said.” The aspect lord shifted stance, assuming the correct posture to signify his official opposition to the farseer’s command.

“So noted,” nodded Kariadryl, making the gesture of conciliation. “Nevertheless, Lileathon will accompany me on my mission, as will you, Darodayos. An-Iolsus commands it,” he added, gesturing around them at the crystal forest of the craftworld’s collective spirit-minds, “and I shall need your strength and counsel close by my side.”

The aspect lord’s voice and expression were sharp with displeasured surprise. “Accompany you? It was our understanding that we were to lead this expedition. There is much danger in what lies ahead, Lord Kariadryl, we do not need the witch-gift of farsight to know that much, and An-Iolsus has much need yet of your wisdom and seer-vision. You should not take such a risk.”

“I can, and I must,” answered the farseer. “There are matters of prescience which are yet far from assured.” He broke off for a moment, looking at Darodayos and whispering to him in mind-speech.

“Chiron and Freyra, how far can they to be depended on?”

The answer came back almost instantaneously. “I trust them with my life, lord farseer. And with yours.”

Kariadryl nodded in acknowledgement. Then I must tell you that in this matter, there are shadows across the path of the future. Even to one with the gift of farsight, the outcome of events we are about to set in motion, and those which have already been set in motion, is unknown. Too many fatelines intersect together at some point in the kilithikadya, in the near-future-to-come, obscuring the way ahead.”

“You speak of a fhaisorr’ko, a shadow point,” said Darodayos, noting the farseer’s surprised reaction to his use of the term. “A convergence of many possible futures which not even the farsight of our race’s greatest seers can

discern. “Yes, the ways of the witch path are not unknown to even an aspect initiate such as this one,” Darodayos added with the hint of a knowing smile. “If that is the case, Lord Kariadryl, then my concerns about your involvement in this expedition are multiplied many times over. If you cannot see the future ahead, then the danger to you becomes more than can be safely imagined.”

“An-Iolsus shares your concerns, friend Darodayos,” said the aged farseer, indicating the crystalline forest around them with a sweep of his withered hand, “but, if we do face a shadow point, then my presence becomes even more vital. It is only by being there, standing at the centre of the moment of convergence, that I will be able to see and choose the one truth path ahead amongst the many other false futures.”

The aspect lord paused in thought for a moment, considering the farseer’s words, and then, with an air of reluctant obligation, bowed respectfully to Kariadryl.

“Wisdom commands, lord farseer. I go now to make the necessary arrangements for the expedition, ahead of the arrival of the eshairr outcast Lileathon and her vessels.”

He bowed again and departed, accompanied by his two lieutenants.

Kariadryl watched them go, wondering if they had detected any hint of the half-truths he had told them. Yes, his farsight had detected the mystic shadow point ahead, but his gift of prescient-vision was far in advance of that possessed by many of his brother farseers, and it had shown him tantalising hints of the form of things to come. These were not mere ferishimm visions, fragment pieces of false futures or possible futures still waiting to be born into realtime, for his farsight was powerful enough to tell the difference between such phantom visions. No, they were images from the t’hao-ny, the true future-yet-to-be, and they showed mind-pictures of things that would and must come to pass if the course of the true future were to be safely found amidst the entrapping maze of the shadow point ahead.

He closed his eyes and focussed his farsight again, seeing the same images which he had already committed to memory a thousand times before.

A laughing mon-keigh giant, his brutal, scarred face splashed with blood, his

bare, thickly-muscled arms covered in the crude, tribal tattoo-markings typical of his barbaric race. He had weapons in his hands, crude and noisy mon-keigh weapons, and he laughed as they spat forth metal death into the bodies of his unseen enemies. Was this terrifying vision that of friend or foe, Kariadryl wondered, knowing that only the events which awaited him within the darkness of the shadow point would reveal the truth.

He concentrated further, and the torrent of mind-images continued.

The eshairr outcast Lileathon upon the command deck of her vessel. The features of her face were twisted in violent anger. She was shouting orders, and the void around her ship was filled with a flurry of destructive energy. Gunfire. A space battle. There was another vessel there too, alongside Lileathon's ship. The other vessel's hull-lines were vulgar and ugly in comparison to the sleek, almost organic shape of the eldar craft. A human warship. A mon-keigh craft, the fury of its firepower unleashed in the same direction as that of the eldar ship beside it.

Now do you see, Darodayos, Kariadryl asked himself? Now do you see why the eshairr outcast must go with us? She is there already at the shadow point, waiting for us in a future which, for better or worse, I know will come to pass. Already the shape of the hidden future commands that she be there with us.

He looked further. More visions swam up into focus.

The webway. Its shifting psycho-structure was as familiar to Kariadryl as the walls of his own living chambers, although it had been over a century since he had left the craftworld to walk the webway's strange and near-limitless paths. There was something there in the webway, something vast and terrible, travelling even now towards the shadow point and carrying with it portents of futures the shapes of which even the veteran farseer hesitated to look at. He saw the presence's name written in the burning trail it left in the wake of its journey through the webway, and his mind recoiled in fear at the promise of the bloody-handed slaughter the burning lord carried with it.

He saw the shadow point itself. A giant, glittering black gem blocking the route ahead to the future. It was slowly spinning, presenting first one facet to his gaze, then a different one. Even as he watched, images flickered and cascaded across

its clouded surface, tantalising hints of futures yet to be, some of them perhaps also never to be.

Himself, lying dead on the barren surface of some bleak and sterile world.

A human, stern and hawk-faced, dressed in the strange uniform of one of the corpse-god's bewildering number of warrior tribes. He is aboard a starship, shouting orders in vain as his vessel turns to fire around him.

A great battle among the stars, greater than any Kariadryl had ever seen before, greater perhaps than any he had heard tell of except in the dimmest and oldest of legends. Mon-keigh and eldar ships together, fighting not against one another but combining against a mutual enemy.

A star exploding, its ancient nuclear heart as old as the galaxy itself and now ripped asunder by a force more destructive and deadly than a thousand of the mon-keighs' proudest battlefleets. The other stars witnessed the death of one of their own, and the galaxy mourned its passing and feared the awakening of weapons the secrets of which it had long hoped had been lost forever.

The faces of Darodayos, Lileathon and other elder known to him. They were imprisoned somewhere terrible, a no-place at once both strangely familiar and grotesquely alien. They were screaming, all of them, their broken bodies pinioned down upon machines constructed of gleaming bone and metal, while twisted, barb-fleshed things stood over them and opened them up with fingers transformed into thin, cruel scalpel edges.

All this he was able to see, but nothing else. The shadow point spun faster, throwing a shroud of darkness around itself, the darkness reaching out towards the bright goal of the farseer's mind. With a wrench, he tore himself free of its grasp, returning his mind and soul to the here and now.

He stood still for a moment, taking comfort in the psychic refuge of the dome, dwelling on what he had just seen. Only some of these visions would come to pass, but which ones? And there was something else too, something still hidden within the obscuring deadness of the shadow point. Something abominable, and yet also perversely familiar. A thought, or something less than a thought, a vague and nameless dread which he dare not even give proper form to, worked itself

loose from the place where he kept his deepest and most secret fears.

“Shea nudh Asuryanish ereintha Asuryanat,” he intoned to himself. May the blessings of Asuryan protect the children of Asuryan from abomination.

His invocation of the most potent and dire of all the prayers to the greatest and oldest of the eldar gods sent a rustling shiver of psychic alarm through the spirit-minds of the dome. Kariadryl laid a hand on the crystalline bark of one of the nearby trees, recognising as his flesh touched it the psychic resonance of the bonesinger Cathrhal, who had once been a rival of Kariadryl’s for the love of his eventual first soulmate Agilthya, and who had saved his life a century later, fending off a human chainsword blow which would have otherwise decapitated the injured Kariadryl.

“Rest easy, brother,” he whispered. “Forgive me. I did not mean to disturb your dreams with my thoughtless words.”

A motionless current stirred through the dreaming minds of the spirits of the dome. Kariadryl felt it, and felt the craft-world’s concern, concern for him and for the future of them all. He mind-spoke thoughts of reassuring calm, and felt the mood of the infinity circuit ease in return. He made his way to the exit, turned and bowed respectfully one last time to the forest of glittering, diamantine trees.

“Farewell, old friends. An-Iolsus commands, but I look forward to resting here a while with you again when I return.”

As he left, he heard the disquiet in the spirit-minds’ voiceless murmurings, and the faint, sad whispers of final farewell from those who in life had been closest to him. He sighed to himself. Perhaps a century or two ago, he could still have easily guarded his thoughts from the spirits within the craft-world’s infinity circuit, but this gift seemed now to have deserted him. They had seen what he had seen, and they saw and understood the lie in the words he had just spoken.

FOUR

Half the galaxy away, another craftworld drifted serenely in the dark, uncharted places between the stars. Its name was unknown to the librarian-scribes of the Inquisition's Ordo Xenos, whose task it was to compile secret lists of such things. Its history was untouched by contact with the Imperium, for it lay far beyond the Imperium's borders, and its inhabitants neither knew nor cared about the squabbling affairs of such a vulgar, upstart race. It lay almost at the very limits of the webway, and there were few of those ancient routes which still connected to it.

And so, by choice or circumstance—none within the craft-world could remember, so long ago was it—they existed in almost complete isolation. Detached and unruffled, there they existed at the hour of the sunset passing of their race in a state more akin to that of the long and blissful days enjoyed by their ancestors in the time before the great, self-inflicted cataclysm.

Aloof. Idyllic. Untroubled.

So it was that the young aspect initiate drew disapproving glances and reproachful mind-thought queries from his elders as he hurried along the tranquil, pearl-floored passages of the craftworld's outermost western spiral. The turbulent emotion which filled his as yet untutored mind communicated itself into the minds of those around him, and, after a moment's thought, many of them would have identified it as something similar to panic, or the closest equivalent to it that an eldar mind could produce.

This note of discordant and unfamiliar emotion transmitted itself through the craftworld, jumping from one eldar mind to another, and so, by the time the young initiate reached his destination, the one he had been searching for had anticipated his arrival.

She stood waiting for him in a gallery lined with wraith-bone sculptures. The delicate psi-material of the figurine shapes was sensitive to the mood of nearby minds, and they writhed and contorted into unfamiliar and anxiety-ridden shapes as the initiate approached. A display of crystalbone chimes shook in sympathetic

distress at the sculptures' plight, but were hushed into calmed silence by a mind-command from the gallery's sole occupant.

In his panic, the initiate forgot the normal courtesies due to his craftworld's most high-born.

"My lady, there has been an incident at the Shrine of Kaela Mensha Khaine. The shrine has been opened!"

"The Shrine of the Bloody-Handed God?" It took the eldar noblewoman a moment to remember where the shrine was located within the vast labyrinth of the craftworld. She had never visited the place herself. Few of the tens of thousands aboard the craftworld ever had. They maintained a full force of guardians raised from amongst the population, and every eldar here was fully prepared to sacrifice their lives in defence of their craftworld, but the ways of war were not their ways, and there were few amongst her people who chose to dedicate themselves to the worship of the eldar's dark and enigmatic god of war.

"How can this be? Who would dare intrude on that place without risking the anger of the god?"

When the initiate answered, it was in a voice barely more than a terror-struck whisper. "My lady, you do not understand. There has been no intrusion. The shrine has been opened from the inside, and the chamber beyond is empty. The avatar is gone."

The gallery chamber was filled with the sound of the crystalbone sculptures, all of them chiming urgently and without harmony. They would chime for many days, untamed by the sternest of thought-commands, sending out an unheard warning to the cosmos.

Let the enemies of the children of Asuryan beware. The Bloody-Handed God is on his way.

FIVE

“Spook? Hesh? Obscura? Morpho? Kalma? Spur? Whatever you’re looking for, we’ve got it. Big battle coming. If we’re all gonna die, might as well get high!”

Maxim Borusa had to admit that his new front-man was good. Good at handling the customers, good at handling the merchandise, good at spotting troublemakers. And not too greedy either. He’d only once caught the little creep stealing more of the takings that he should have, and a few minutes with Galba and Corba and a couple of broken fingers—nothing too severe, Maxim didn’t want to damage a potentially very valuable new employee—had been enough to sort out that little misunderstanding.

Yeah, Maxim thought, as he sat at the back of the abandoned, lower-deck gallery that he and his crew had claimed for their own, the guy was good. In fact, life was good generally. He sat back on a crate throne from where he could keep a careful eye on the proceedings. His tunic, emblazoned with the gold-fringed red rank sash of a senior chief petty officer, lay nearby, as did his chainsword belt and scabbard and twin bolt pistol holster, all of them within easy reach should he have any urgent need for them. A ship-whore, her eyes filled with the tell-tale glaze of tajii root intoxication, sat on his lap, giggling and squirming playfully in response to the idle movements of one of his big, paw-like hands beneath her sequined blouse.

Girls like this one weren’t allowed aboard naval ships, Maxim knew, but, of course, neither were many other things that people needed and wanted, like all those little illicit luxuries which helped make life aboard one of His Divine Majesty’s warships slightly less hellish, and so there were always openings for a smart operator to do well for himself.

Yeah, life was good, Maxim thought. When he first came aboard the *Macharius* he had been just another prison world conscript, kept in chains and with a life expectancy that could probably have been measured in months. Now, six years later, he was one of the most senior non-commissioned officers amongst a crew of almost thirteen thousand, a familiar face on the command deck, a figure of

fear and respect throughout the vessel, and, here below decks, the biggest fixer and criminal operator aboard the ship. He had a crew of almost fifty answering directly to him, all of them hand-picked by him. Hard, brutal sons of bitches, every one of them, and, if need be, he could probably call up a full force of three or four times that number. His own private army, loyal only to him.

Not that he usually had need of such a show of strength, of course. There were plenty on the bridge who knew what he got up to here below-decks, but as long as you played it cool, didn't get too greedy and didn't leave too many bodies lying around the place as a result of one too many disagreements with your business rivals, then they were generally happy to turn a blind eye to what was going on.

Yeah, old Captain Semper wasn't a bad sort, Maxim thought. A bit of a cold fish, maybe, your typical Cypra Mundian officer nob really, but he knew what the score was. He knew that, to keep order aboard ship, even the harsh, unforgiving type of Imperial Navy order, you had to leave a few outlets for the ordinary crew to blow off some steam.

Steam control, that's what Maxim liked to think he provided. He remembered the steam tunnels below the hives of Stranivar, filled with the excess bleed from the torrents of thermal energy that was pumped up from the bubbling, magma-heated, sunless seas deep below the planet's surface, energy which provided much-needed heat and power to the giant, ancient hive structures. Good places to hide from the Arbites bastards, those tunnels, and good places to take shelter during the triannual Big Chill season, when the hiveworld's eccentric orbit took it away from its sun and out towards the heatless depths of the planetary system.

That was when the deadly cold of the planet's atmosphere cut through the hive's ancient, battle-scarred adamantium walls in a way which no lance beam ever could, penetrating down into the deepest levels of the hive. You had to fight for the safest places in the steam tunnels, fight over displaced gangers and the ghulaki scavenger things which made their permanent homes in the tunnels. If you were unlucky, you and your entire gang might be suddenly scalded to death in an explosive rushing of super-heated steam which often blasted at random through some of the runnels, but it was still better than freezing your bolters off in the dismal under-hive regions above.

There were other things down there in the steam tunnels, servitor mechanoids which went about their endless tasks completely oblivious to the gangers around them, even to the extent of carrying out their work in the middle of pitched inter-gang gunfights. The gangers knew well enough to leave these things alone, for they maintained the ancient steam pressure systems throughout the tunnel network, and any attempt to interfere or damage these systems or their custodians could lead to catastrophe.

Steam control, that's how Maxim saw his role aboard the *Macharius*. Just like those servitors, operating the systems that keep the steam pressure within safe limits. And if he made a little on the side for himself? Well, that was only fair, wasn't it, considering the risks and effort involved in what he did?

Everyone understood that. Everyone except that silver skull bastard, Kyogen. The *Macharius*'s senior fleet commissar was gunning for him, Maxim knew. He had his people all throughout the ship, on every deck and in every crew team: spies and informers, reporting everything they heard back to the big, scar-faced commissar. Maxim had already found three of them within the ranks of his own organisation, and had taken appropriate action. Even when not in battle, there were at least a dozen deaths a week on the *Macharius*, an unremarkable statistic which passed as the normal hazards of duty aboard a navy vessel. Crewmen crushed by heavy machinery in the torpedo room or flight bays, crewmen vaporised by energy surges while working amongst the innards of the ship's power systems, or even, for those wretches unfortunate enough to be consigned to the lowest decks where the ship's atmosphere processing systems were at their least dependable, suffocated, poisoned, frozen or killed by sudden air pressure changes.

Lots of ways to die, smiled Maxim, and lots of ways to conveniently and blamelessly dispose of Kyogen's little spies.

Like this one, he thought, running another scarred hand over the soft flesh beneath the girl's top. Yes, it had been remarkably convenient how she had turned up at just the right time, arriving, so she claimed, as smuggled cargo aboard a lighter craft during their last re-crewing stopover at Luxor III. She was a looker, he had to admit. Just his type—also convenient, he noted—and athletic too, but she liked to ask questions, and she liked to be with him whenever he wasn't on duty on the command deck. She especially liked to be with him at

times like this, when he had business to conduct.

A honey-trap, he thought to himself. Why, Commissar Kyogen, you sly old goat. And I thought you were too much of an Emperor-loving puritan to stoop to such tricks!

Still, he knew he would have to do something about this one. He sighed to himself. It really was a pity, since he actually quite liked having her around. No doubt the coming battle would provide a few convenient opportunities to settle the problem.

As if on cue, a series of deep, sonorous chimes rang out, broadcast through the ship by the inter-deck vox-callers. Three chimes. Battle imminent.

Speaking for himself, Maxim liked battles. Not just personally, but professionally, too. Good for business, a great big battle. Half the crew aboard any warship liked to get hopped up on narc-stimms just before a battle. Narc-stimms took the edge off the fear of knowing that, at almost any second, you and the other thousands of poor bastards around you stood every chance of being obliterated from existence without a moment's warning. Others wanted something that would help them tune into the madness of battle, figuring their best chances of survival lay in adding to the insanity rather than trying to isolate themselves from it. Maxim didn't care.

Whatever his customers' preferences, he had the product to match their needs. Raima and obscura for the ones who needed to pretend it was all happening to someone else; heavy-duty hallucinogenics like morph, zziz and halo for the ones who needed to pretend it was happening in a completely different universe to the personal universe-for-one they were inhabiting. "Slaught, spur and havoc for the ones, mostly armsmen and the members of boarding assault parties, who wanted a little something extra in their bloodstreams and nervous systems to give them that added boost for when they met the enemy face to face.

The warning caused a stir amongst the line of customers, and they pushed forward, eager to get what they had come for and return to their stations before the next warning sounded.

Not being at your battle stations by the time the two-chime warning sounded was

a capital offence, one ruthlessly enforced by Commissar Kyogen with his usual efficient, favourless zeal.

“Back! Get back!” warned Galba, waving a snub-nosed autopistol at the line. “Plenty for everyone, and plenty of time to get it. Kolba, his twin/cousin/lover/ganger-brother—Maxim was never sure of the exact nature of the relationship between the two of them, and didn’t much care—stood nearby, backing up Galba’s actions with a meaningful sweep of the long barrel of his shotcannon. The crowd backed off respectfully, knowing from experience of too many close-combat boarding actions exactly the kind of slaughter the weapon could achieve in a confined, target-filled space like the one they were in now.

“Next!” called the front-man, beckoning forward the man at the head of the line. “What you looking for, friend?”

“Slaught, as much as you got. The red vial mix only, none of that kalma-cut stuff you tried to sell me last time.”

The front-man looked at the customer, coolly appraising him. “Man knows his “slaught. Red Dragon mix it is. I know how much you boys in the enginarium like to ride the dragon.”

Maxim looked over, the exchange catching his interest. The customer was squat and heavy-set, his dark-coloured skin oddly taut and withered in the manner typical of those who worked in the ship’s engineering sections, where the heat and radiation from the ship’s fiery plasma reactor hearts could penetrate the thickest plasarmoured work suits to braise and burn flesh.

The enginarium sections weren’t part of Maxim’s turf. They belonged to a senior Engineering rating called Sejarra, a limping, squint-eyed little runt who was Maxim’s main rival in the steam control business. Maxim had given Sejarra that limp. Next time, the big hive worlder promised himself, his aim would be better.

Kolba shot a querying glance at his boss. Maxim nodded the okay. Sejarra controlled the narc-stimm supply business in the enginarium, but if this guy wanted to buy from Maxim, or, as the quantities he was buying here seemed to suggest, set himself up freelance in the same business, then that was his lookout. Independent operators trying to set up on their own in Sejarra’s turf had a nasty

habit of falling into plasma furnaces.

The front-man caught the exchange between the crew-boss and his pet killer. “Okay, friend,” he said to the customer. “So what you got to offer us in exchange? No navy scrip, and none of that stuff they call currency on half the mudballs in this arse end of a sub-sector. Like for like, that’s what we like to see.”

The engineer moved forward, laying a cloth-wrapped bundle on the makeshift table-crate before the front-man. Maxim’s man unwrapped it, revealing an oddly-wrought bolt pistol. He held it up, showing it to Maxim. With its brass markings and ornamentation, gargoyle-mouthed muzzle end and strange hand-grip that didn’t seem quite made to fit a normal human hand, it was clearly a Chaos weapon. Maxim knew there was a high demand for these things, and that he could probably trade it for a small fortune at the next port world they visited. There were always plenty of mincing, rear echelon Munitorium adepts or reservist Imperial Guard officers keen to acquire such trophies, no doubt so they could display them to swooning, weak-kneed aristocratic ladies and tell them heroic tales of how they took it from the dead hand of some Chaos warlord they had just slain in single combat.

“Not bad,” judged Maxim grudgingly, careful not to give away too much of his interest in the offer. “Got any shells for it? They’re worth more if you have a full mag of shells.”

“Funny you should mention that…” grinned the customer, reaching casually into his heavy, kevlar-quilted engineer’s jacket.

As he did so, there was the beginnings of a minor commotion at the back of the queue. Kolba, distracted by the customer, missed it. Galba caught it, but a split-second too late. Maxim, who had survived dozens of ambushes in the tunnels and caverns of his brutal hiveworld home, and who had planned dozens more, saw it coming a split-second before it happened.

He roared in anger, hurling the girl off his lap directly into the line of fire. Shots rang out, and a volley of bullets and las-blasts intended for him struck her instead, tearing her apart. The front-man still sat there, his numbed mind racing to catch up with what was happening. It was a race he would never win. He

keeled over, dead before he hit the ground, as the engineer customer levelled the autopistol secreted inside his jacket and fired two closely grouped bursts of shots into his face and chest.

Maxim was moving now, reaching for his own holstered weapons while keeping one eye on the progress of the mayhem around him. There was more gunfire from the back of the disintegrating queue, more quilt-jacketed engineers emerging out of hiding to join the fray.

Sejarra's crew, Maxim knew. Looks like the sneaky little runt was trying to expand his business ventures beyond the limits of the enginarium sections, using the cover of the imminent battle as an opportunity to make his move.

He saw Kolba spin and fall, shots punching into the carapace-armoured vest he wore on such occasions. He saw Galba shout in fury and return fire on his twin/cousin/lover/ganger-brother's attackers, stray shots from his stuttering autopistol slamming into the bodies of the panicked customers.

Maxim saw one of the shots lift off the top of the skull of a junior tech-priest, and uttered a typically harsh Stranivar curse to himself. The tech-priest was a valued and regular customer, and a useful source of all kinds of valuable little tech-devices which he used to pay for his secret obscura habit. That was one source of supply which would be closed to Maxim now.

The fall-guy for the ambush was coming at him now, kicking aside the body of the front-man and charging straight at Maxim, keeping up a continuous stream of fire with his autopistol. Maxim rolled, reaching out for and missing the holster belt hanging nearby, as autopistol shells chewed apart the crates around him.

Instead, his scrabbling fingers found the hilt of his chainsword. He drew the weapon in one smooth motion, searching for and activating the power switch. The weapon roared into hungry life. The assassin was almost on top of him now, and Maxim felt an autopistol shot take away some of the meat from the top of his left shoulder. From the ground, Maxim swung the chainsword in a low horizontal arc.

A second later, the assassin fell to the ground, landing beside him, the stupefied expression on his face showing that he was still trying to wonder what had

happened to his legs from the knees down. Maxim didn't give him a chance to work out the answer, and shot him in the forehead with his autopistol.

He stood up, emptying the remainder of the clip into the chest and stomach of the next stupid bastard to fancy their chances against Maxim Borusa, then did a quick head-count as he discarded the spent weapon and successfully retrieved his bolt pistol.

Bodies littered the floor, most of them customers caught in the crossfire. Maxim recognised the forms of three of his own men amongst them, and, even as he watched, he saw that useless Balaamite yokel Gorgakor hit the far wall of the chamber, his body dancing idiotically under the impact of the bullets pummelling into it. No big loss to his organisation, Maxim judged. The lazy agri-worlder had been a dead weight for a while, and there would be any number of potential replacements for him coming aboard the next time the re-supply shuttles arrived with their press-ganged cargo at their next port of call. Still, his death meant one gun less against Sejarra's crew, so Maxim figured that he needed to do something to even up the odds.

He tracked targets, his aim hesitating as the running forms of non-combatants passed through his field of fire. Not that he cared much about causing a few friendly fire casualties amongst non-combatants, but it was bad business to gun down your customers without good cause. Finally, his aim settled on a clear target. A group of Sejarra's gunmen, clustered together and metres from the nearest cover.

Amateurs, he thought. They wouldn't have lasted five minutes on Stranivar, never mind the hiveworld's notorious Lubiyanka prison moon. Really, he was doing the Emperor a favour, he told himself as he pulled the triggers on his bolt pistols. Halfwit fools like them didn't deserve a place in His Divine Majesty's glorious Imperial Navy.

The gunmen blew apart in a scattering of shattered limbs and viscera under the impact of the bolter shells. Maxim checked his remaining shell-count and scanned for further targets.

Kolba was back on his feet now, blood flowing through at least one of the bullet holes punched through his chest-plate as he scattered shotcannon rounds into the

ranks of Sejarra's men, showing far less discretion in his choice of targets than Maxim had. Galba was with him, partially supporting him as his twin/cousin/lover/ganger-brother's legs threatened to give out from under him, and their combined fire was enough to drive the enginarium gangers back into cover.

Maxim was moving forward now, firing his twin bolt pistols, keeping up a steady litany of shots, adding his firepower to that of Kolba and Galba, boxing in their targets with streams of fire from two simultaneous directions at once, keeping them confused and off-balance. Maxim grinned. Sejarra's crew had lost the initiative now. With every moment that passed, he could feel the direction of the battle swinging in his favour.

A shape rose up from behind an equipment stack. Maxim swivelled towards it, raising one bolt pistol in readiness, but before he could fire, the figure tumbled to the ground, a knife hilt buried in its throat. Maxim looked round, and saw a man —no, more of a boy, really, barely old enough to know the feel of a shaving blade on his face—crouching nearby. Maxim nodded his unspoken thanks at the lad—a powder-monkey from one of the starboard-side gun bays, he hazily recalled, who liked his kalma cut with a little cloudy obscura resin—and made a mental note of the boy's quickness and ability for future consideration. Maxim had no doubt that he would have dealt with the threat in time, if the boy's knife hadn't got there first, but that kind of resourcefulness and skill with a knife could surely be put to use somewhere within his little business operation.

Besides, he thought, stepping over the dying, groaning body of another of his men, there seemed to be a few unexpected openings in the organisation at the moment.

Sejarra's boys had had enough. The gunfight should have been over by now, and the lookout pickets Maxim had posted to guard the approaches to the gallery would be pulling back now, threatening to cut off their escape, while others would be summoning reinforcements from nearby.

They tried to make a break for it, the less experienced of them going first. The first three were cut down in the crossfire from Kolba, Galba and the others, unintentionally creating a distraction which allowed the rest of them to run for the exit passage. Maxim had been waiting for them. Two went down hard, bolter

shells exploding into their retreating backs.

Maxim smiled as he drew a bead on the next one, a short figure with a familiar limp. He fired, his pistol clicking on empty. He brought his other pistol up to bear, but it was too late, and his target had already disappeared round the corner. Maxim wasn't stupid enough to follow, not when the chances were that Sejarra would have left a man there waiting to plug a few rounds into the first warm body to come round that corner. That would be what Maxim would have done under the same circumstances, and he rarely made a mistake of crediting an enemy as having any less intelligence than himself.

So that was twice he'd had Sejarra in his sights, and the little runt was still alive. Maxim swore. His enemy wouldn't get that lucky a third time, that much he was sure of.

From the passageway beyond came the sound of the vox-callers.

Two chimes. All crew to battle stations. Galba shot a nervous glance at his gang leader.

"Battle time, boss. What we going to do about all this?" he asked, gesturing at the carnage around them.

"Relax, if I know old Semper, then he'll be taking the Mach right into the thick of things." He grinned. "So, if we're all still alive at the end of this, no one's gonna notice a dozen or so extra bodies in amongst all the others the clean-up crews sling through the airlocks."

He did a quick headcount, coming up with himself, Galba, Kolba and four others, plus the knife kid, who still hadn't run off along with the other non-combatants. "Okay, round up about ten others. I want Horke and Vannan especially, if you can find them. Any officers try to give you a hard time, tell "em they're seconded to inspection tour duties with Chief Petty Officer Borusa, by order of Lieutenant Ulanti. That'll shut "em up quick. And tell everyone to bring weapons."

"Inspection tour?" There was confused doubt in Galba's voice.

"As chief petty officer, I've got rights of access to just about every area of the

ship. I take my responsibilities seriously, Rating Second Class Galba. I need to know that everyone's carrying out their Emperor-ordained duties faithfully and efficiently, especially when we're in battle."

Galba smiled. So did Kolba, despite the pain of his wound. Their smiles were like the hungry snarls of a predator. Eager understanding shone in their eyes. "Rights of access, boss… you mean like the enginarium?"

"That's exactly what I mean," grinned Maxim. "So come on, let's go find our old pal Sejarra and spring a little surprise inspection duty on him."

They moved out, leaving their dead behind him, Kolba first making sure that the scattered merchandise was safely gathered up and returned to a secure hiding place. Maxim turned round just before they left the gallery, seeing the knife kid still standing there, looking expectantly at him. Maxim hesitated a moment, and then nodded. The kid happily ran to join them, scooping a gun out of the hand of a dead man.

They moved swiftly and purposefully along the gangway beyond, as the ship trembled under the impact of the first incoming enemy fire glancing off its void shields. Seconds later, the final warning chime sounded over the vox-callers.

One chime. Battle commencing.

Maxim grinned again. He loved a good battle. So useful for covering up so many different things, with no one the wiser afterwards about what you'd really been up to.

SIX

“Full ahead, battle speed. Helm—engage port-side manoeuvring thrusters and bring us around one point to starboard, on my mark. Maintain formation position and keep us within three unit distances of our wing vessels. Stand by, all stations. Mister Nyder, be ready to fire torpedoes at my command.”

Leoten Semper stood in his customary position on the bridge, mindful of the newly-gleaming commodore rank bars on the epaulettes of his tunic; mindful too that, in the unspoken opinion of some under his command, including, most probably, some here on his own command deck, he had yet to prove his right to wear the new rank insignia. His promotion to the brevet rank of commodore-captain had been a battlefield necessity, made during the third Battle of the Moons of Pergamum several weeks earlier, when a lucky lance strike had struck the bridge of the battlecruiser Lord Huascar, killing its captain. Commodore Haruna had been the commander of the battle-squadron, and Semper, named in the mortally-injured man’s dying words, had assumed command of the Imperial forces and driven the opportunistic Chaos raid back out towards the system’s outer fringes. Battlefleet Command had allowed the temporary promotion to stand, but Semper was all too aware that his sudden elevation had been at the expense of several other ship’s captains within the battle-squadron, all of whom had greater seniority than him in terms of years of service.

If any of this troubled him, he never allowed it to show externally. He stood there, the calm and steady centre of the vortex of activity which filled the command deck of His Divine Majesty’s Ship, the Lord Solar *Macharius*. Brightly-robed tech-priests communed together, whispering secret Machine God words to the machine-mind spirit within the ship’s mighty logic engines, assuring it of its survival in the battle just about to begin. Choirs of servitors droned in chaotic unison, relaying the streams of information flooding in from all sections of the ship, and from the other vessels in the battle group. Gunnery officers bustled amongst themselves, checking and rechecking likely target patterns and firing solutions. Ensigns and junior officers received reports from duty stations on every deck of the ship, and relayed them to senior officers who, in turn, reported in to Lieutenant Hito Ulanti.

The ship’s second-in-command digested the information and communicated its summary to his captain with a single nod, and a few brief words.

“All stations standing by and ready to commence battle.”

Semper nodded in acknowledgement, and looked out through the command deck’s front viewing bay. Through the metre-thick armoured glasteel, and still thousands of kilometres distant, but magnified by the viewing bay’s inbuilt augur systems, he saw the wide scattering of targets ahead.

At a casual glance, it looked like a field of large asteroids, but a closer inspection of the magnified augur screen images and the telemetry data being gathered by the ship’s surveyor showed that several of the asteroids were firing huge and crude thruster rockets in an attempt to manoeuvre into position, while the upwards-fluctuating energy signals surrounding many others showed them preparing to do likewise.

Ork roks. Asteroids taken over and colonised by the green-skin creatures and turned into crude but highly effective mobile fortresses. Twenty-eight of them counted so far in this cluster, with Emperor knows how many others scattered throughout this, the Mather system, creating a deadly obstacle to any Imperial convoys attempting to traverse this area of space. Two years ago, the last time a small Imperial force had been despatched to Mather to scour the system of any greenskin presence, just four of the asteroid fortresses had been detected and destroyed. Now, as was so typical of the creatures, they had seemingly emerged from nowhere to multiply and fester in even greater numbers than before.

“Weeds,” he murmured to himself, not realising at first that he was speaking aloud.

Ulanti, standing nearby, caught the word but not its meaning. “Captain?”

“Weeds,” Semper repeated, gesturing at the constellation of asteroid-vessels before them. “My grandfather was an admiral in Battlefleet Tamahl, and I remember a childhood visit to his estate on Cypra Mundi after he had been granted permission to retire. If the crew think this particular Captain Semper is a stern taskmaster, Mister Ulanti, then he didn’t know my grandfather. He was a holy terror amongst both the Emperor’s enemies and his own men, and my

cousins and I were terrified of the old devil." A hint of a smile crossed Semper's face as his mind recalled the events of the past. "I remember one time, though, when he seemed almost human to me. He took me out to the fields of his estate —after a lifetime of warfare amongst the stars, he relished the quiet tranquillity of the countryside—to help him supervise the planting of next season's crops."

Ulanti feigned polite interest, wondering where all this was going, especially with battle imminent. Also, as a hive-worlder, even a highborn aristocratic one, he had lived most of his life in a world where the open elements promised nothing but danger and toxic death, and so Semper's talk of idyllic pastoral scenes meant almost nothing to him.

Semper sensed his second-in-command's slightly baffled impatience, and allowed himself another brief smile. "That season, my grandfather had been having some trouble with weeds amongst his beloved rakki-fruit crops. They'd had to replant the crop three times already, and I can remember seeing him getting down on his hands and knees amongst the servitor-workers and pulling the weeds out of the earth with his own hands. 'Damned greenskins!' he called them, hurling them away as far as he could. 'Always watch out for them, Leoten', he told me. "Just when you think you've dug them all up, there's always more of them popping up as soon as your back's turned'."

Semper glanced at Ulanti, still seeing puzzlement in the younger man's face. "My grandfather knew all about orks, Hito. He won his admiral's spurs against the greenskins during the Caudium Campaign, and he took part in the scouring of the Achilla Reaches. I didn't know what he meant then, but I've fought those savages since, and now I know exactly what he was talking about all those years ago."

He pointed at the asteroid cluster dead ahead of them, the details and numbers of the ork rok-fortresses there becoming more apparent the closer they drew to them. "Weeds, Mister Ulanti. No sooner do we wipe them out, than they grow back again."

Flashes of light from the pattern of roks signalled the commencement of hostilities. Ork munitions—massive, unwieldy and potentially devastating—flew through the void to detonate harmlessly in space well ahead of the advancing Imperial battle-line.

“Typical greenskins, no real command ability to speak of,” grunted Werner Maeler, the *Macharius*’s efficient Gunnery Master. “We’re well out of range, and they still can’t wait to open fire. Still, at least the energy release from their weapons fire gives our gunnery surveyors an easier target to lock onto.”

Semper signalled to a communications officer. A comm-net channel opened up, linking him to the bridge of every other ship in the Imperial Navy formation.

“Semper to battle-group. To arms, gentlemen. Let us tend to the Emperor’s garden,” he ordered, knowing that he was about to prove once and for all his right to wear those new rank epaulettes on his shoulders.

The *Macharius* powered forward, its gargantuan plasma engines spilling out a fire cloud trail in its wake. To its starboard lay the Gothic-class cruiser Drachenfels, an old and dependable comrade vessel, and the Dauntless-class light cruiser Triton. Triton’s sister ship Mannan and the Lunar-class cruiser Graf Orlok, an old but less dependable comrade vessel, were arrayed to the *Macharius*’s port side, while the Dominator-class cruiser Fearsome flew within the arrow-head formation formed by the other cruisers. It was the clenched fist inside the armoured gauntlet, its deadly prow-mounted nova cannon weapon aimed at the heart of the ork forces. Accompanying it were the escort carriers Vengeance of Belatis and Memory of Briniga, merchantmen transports converted to military use and named after just two of those many Imperial worlds which had been destroyed during the war.

Swarms of close-range attack craft, wide-winged Marauders and vicious little snub-nosed Thunderbolt fighters, surged forth from makeshift launch bays in the carriers’ hulls, forming up into attack formations of their own. Dual squadrons of Cobra destroyers swept out wide along the battle-group’s front, guarding its flanks and extending its firepower all across the enemy’s front.

A significant force, by any measure, but one which Semper wished with all his heart he did not now have to lead into battle here. Battlefleet Gothic’s resources were stretched to breaking point to meet the threat posed by the forces of Abaddon the Despoiler, and each one of these ships gathered here today to deal with the orks meant a ship less elsewhere within the Imperial line of battle, where it was needed most. Semper and his fellow captains would rather be

fighting the Despoiler's warfleets than these greenskin savages, and again he damned the orks to the Eye of Terror and back, and vowed to make the creatures pay for the deadly but very much secondary threat they posed to the Emperor's forces within the Gothic sector, forcing Lord Ravensburg to deploy much-needed warships away from the war's main battle fronts.

"All ships forward. Mister Nyder—range to closest target?"

"Torpedo range is good, captain, but they've put up a fighter screen in front of them. I wouldn't trade ten of those greenskin death-trap contraptions they call fighters for one of our Furies, especially with one of my pilots in the cockpit, but they've got a hell of a lot of the damnable things. Estimate they'd manage to intercept at least half our fish before they reached their targets, and that's even before the green-skins bring their defence turrets into play."

Semper nodded. "Very well. Bring our own fighter wave forward. We'll dangle some bait in front of their noses, and see what they do then."

"Storm leader to squadron. Full thrust forward on my lead. Let's show these animals what proper flying looks like."

Amic Kaether opened up the power-feed on his Fury's engine drives, sending the interceptor fighter hurtling towards the ork line. Around him, the other craft of Storm squadron did likewise, forming up around their commander in a perfect and deceptively simple-looking formation. Around and behind Storm, cruising in matching formation patterns, came the craft of Hornet and Hurricane squadrons, while Arrow, the fourth of *Macharius*'s Fury squadrons, remained on a tight anti-ordnance defensive orbit around the advancing cruisers, ready to intercept any enemy torpedo or bomber craft attacks on the capital ships.

Kaether grinned. Aube Terraco, his counterpart in Arrow, was neither a patient nor an understanding man, and would doubtlessly be chafing in angry frustration at the role assigned to his squadron for this coming battle.

Kaether had more than a hundred enemy kills to his credit, the highest kill count of any of the *Macharius*'s fighter squadron commanders, but, in a drunken boast one night in the pilots' mess, Terraco, with just over eighty kills to his tally, had

promised to surpass Kaether's score before the ship put into port for its next scheduled refit. Today, Terraco seemed likely to find little other than some rusty and easily-destroyed greenskin torpedo passing through his Fury's weapon sights, while Kaether was flying straight into the teeth of the enemy force, and, if he survived, would doubtlessly return to the *Macharius* with his kill tally further strengthened and his title unchallenged.

Yes, he reminded himself, looking towards the wing formation on his starboard side. Highest-scoring squadron commander, but not the highest-scoring ace aboard the *Macharius*. No, that honour definitely belonged to another. Almost two hundred confirmed enemy fighter or bomber kills, and Emperor knew how many other lesser targets such as assault craft, torpedoes, mine-bombs, landing pods, orbital lighters or even life rafts.

A glance confirmed that the *Macharius*'s top fighter ace was there in position on the far starboard side of the formation. It may have been Kaether's imagination, but it seemed to him that the last Fury in line was slightly further away from his nearest wingman than was customary. If so, it was typical of the attitude of the occupant of the fighter's cockpit. He never mixed with his fellow pilots. He never visited the pilots' mess. He never took part in the tight-knit and often raucous camaraderie common amongst the other Fury interceptor pilots, whose life expectancy in front line action during the Gothic War could often be measured in months, and so were granted a grudging amnesty from the generally harsh discipline requirements aboard an Imperial warship. He didn't even share quarters with the other pilots, his veteran ace status and the unspoken disquiet he caused amongst his squadron comrades allowing him private quarters of his own, away from the others.

Kaether looked again, seeing that his formation's far starboard linchpin was proceeding as ordered, flying fast and true, predictably taking no part in the nervous and excited pre-battle banter between pilots, which filled the squadron comm-net channel.

Reth Zane. "Zealot" Zane, as they called him. Now, four years after the horrific injuries the pilot has suffered in the aftermath of the events surrounding the evacuation and subsequent destruction of the Imperial world of Belatis, he seemed even more remote and less human than ever.

“Form up,” Kaether commanded over the comm-net. “Be ready to wheel when you hear the word.” Acknowledgment runes flashed across the instrument screen in front of him, one for each of the thirteen pilots under his command.

“Zane?” he added, trying to keep the note of distaste out of his voice. “You’re on the far starboard point, so we’re depending on you to get this right.”

“Ready when you give the word, commander,” came the electronically-modulated voice over the comm-net. Little evidence of humanity remained in Zane’s voice after the tech-priests and ship’s surgeons had done what they could with the charred and ruin-fleshed horror that had been brought to them more dead than alive those four years ago.

The end of Zane’s comm-net reply was obliterated in a heavy spray of static, overlaid with bursts of barking grunts and thick, incomprehensibly guttural voices making words and sounds which no human throat could ever produce.

Ork-talk. The voices of the enemy, broadcast on crude but powerful ship-carried transmitters and now cutting randomly into the Imperial forces’ own separate comm-net channels. In the cockpit space behind him, Kaether knew his tech-adept navigator Manetho would now be altering the squadron’s comm-net frequencies, setting up blocker walls to filter out the enemy interference.

That meant they were close now, Kaether realised. Close enough to have entered the enemy’s own comm-net bubble. Close enough to be beginning to take incoming gunfire as the nearest rok-fortresses’ defence turrets opened up at them with the first bursts of wild-aimed speculative fire.

Kaether’s eyes flickered between the view through his cockpit, as the distant shapes of the ork vessels loomed ever larger before him, and the information scrolling across his instrumentation panel’s surveyor screens as the closing distance to the enemy counted down in kilometres and seconds. They were even closer now, close enough to start picking out details on the thick, rocky hides of the asteroid fortresses, close enough to begin to see the bewildering array of thruster engines, weapon emplacements, airlock entrances, attack craft launch bays, observation blisters, torpedo silos and defence turrets which studded their surfaces at seemingly random points. Close enough to see the swarms of fighter-bomber craft which buzzed excitedly in the orbits of the closest roks. As he

watched, he saw more and more of them peel away from the main body of ork vessels, unable to resist the challenge of the oncoming Fury squadrons.

Typical greenskins, thought Kaether, confident now that the strategy was indeed going to work. Offer them the chance of a good scrap, and they'll trample each other into the dust to take you up on your offer.

Kaether counted the passing of several more long and drawn-out seconds, leaving the final moment until as late as he dared, balancing how many more greenskin fighters he could draw off against the likely effective range of the increasing numbers of defence turrets now being aimed in his direction.

"Storm Leader to squadron. Wheel!" ordered Kaether finally, almost shouting into his helmet comm-link. "Zane, show us the road out of here."

As one, with Zane out on the far starboard wing leading the way, the entire fighter formation pivoted in a wide-arcing 90 degree turn to port, taking them right across the front of the enemy line. They were met by a hail of fire from the nearest rok-fortresses. Explosions filled the void around them, radioactive and more conventional fallout debris buffeting violently against the Furies' armour. Kaether's craft rocked violently, caught in the electronic squall from a nearby ork dirty-bomb explosion, and he saw amber warning runes light up across his instrumentation panel. In the rear of the cockpit, Manetho re-calibrated power-feed systems and whispered prayer-words to the fighter's guiding machine-spirit. A second later, the flashing runes on Kaether's panel returned to a solid and reassuring green. More runes lit up as the other craft in the formation reported in. Thirteen runes. All of Storm squadron had survived the potentially disastrous manoeuvre intact.

"How's the view behind us, Manetho?" he asked over the cockpit's internal comm-channel.

"Busy commander," came the simple, understated reply.

A glance at the rearward surveyor screen confirmed the tech-priest's succinct choice of words. Enemy fighter icons crowded across the screen, massing in chaotic and haphazard pursuit of the apparently retreating Imperial fighter wave. Kaether smiled; Manetho had successfully managed to block out the ork comm-

net interference, but he could almost imagine the ork warlord commander's screams of frustrated rage as his protective fighter screen disintegrated before his very eyes, his pilots falling for Captain Semper's ploy and chasing off in disordered pursuit of the Imperial feint attack.

He activated his comm-link to the carrier vessel's command deck. "Storm Leader to *Macharius*. The bait has been taken. The field is yours."

On the bridge of the Mochdrius, communications officers confirmed the incoming signals from their sister ships.

"Drachenfels ready."

"Graf Orlok ready."

"Vanguard squadron ready."

"Praetorian squadron ready."

"*Macharius* ready."

The last confirmation came from Remus Nyder, the *Macharius*'s master of ordnance. Semper gestured in acknowledgement and raised his voice, knowing his words would be carried over the comm-net to his brother captains on the bridges of their own vessels.

"Very good, gentlemen. Fire on my mark… Fire!"

Seconds later, a deep shudder ran through the hull of the *Macharius*, signalling the launch of multiple torpedo missiles and the commencement of the battle in earnest.

"Torpedoes running true," announced an ordnance officer. "Four gone, two still in the tubes."

"Understood. Commence ordnance reloading on tubes one to four," ordered Semper.

The torpedoes rocketed away from the ship, the four fiery contrails of plasma gas from their full-burn engines matched on either side by an equal number of torpedo launches from the two other cruisers in the formation. Twelve torpedoes, with the Cobra destroyer squadrons on the flanks also launching six torpedoes apiece.

A total of twenty-four torpedoes, all converging on the same two targets at the centre front of the rok-cluster.

Ork fighters from what was left of the orks' defensive fighter screen scrambled to intercept the deadly missile wave.

What the orks lacked in co-ordination and intelligence, they more than compensated for in terms of firepower and sheer bestial determination. Semper watched the bridge surveyor screen calmly as three of the torpedo icons winked out of existence one after the other, blown apart by the formidable weaponry of the ork craft. Moments later the surviving twenty-one torpedoes were through the fighter screen, running the gauntlet of defensive fire from the target roks' anti-ordnance batteries.

The ork gunners, no doubt urged on by the angry roars of their brutal overseers, threw up a curtain of fire in the torpedo wave's path, destroying not only torpedoes but also more than a dozen of their own fighters which were still pursuing the missiles.

Semper watched as two more active torpedo icons disappeared from the screen, and then two more. There was a sharp intake of breath from one of the other officers on the deck as yet another icon disappeared off the screen.

Sixteen torpedoes left. Would that be enough to accomplish the desired task?

One of the torpedo icons suddenly flashed red. Then another. And still another. In seconds, the screen filled with red-coloured icons. Red for impact detonation. Fourteen red icons; fourteen hits on target. Two of the icons remained unlit. Two of the torpedoes, malfunctioning or possibly with their machine-mind guidance systems damaged by enemy fire, failed to find their slow-moving, lumbering targets and continued their journey, heading into the heart of the rok cluster where it was entirely possible they still might acquire and damage other enemy

targets.

The torpedo wave's target had been the two largest rok-fortresses in the enemy front line. The roks were massive, one of them easily over eight kilometres from tip to tip, and possibly as many as four kilometres across. Eight torpedoes struck it, the remaining six finding the other one. Normally, it might have taken several dozen torpedo strikes to destroy targets this large. Not today, however. Today, the Imperium warships were using new ordnance: so-called "rock-buster torpedoes", specially designed for the task in hand.

The torpedoes struck the pitted and cratered surface of the roks, their armoured nose-cones spinning like giant drill-bits and boring into the porous rock. The missiles burrowed deep into the bodies of the asteroids, drilling through hundreds of metres of rock in seconds. When the high-speed drill motor burned itself out at the end of its short lifespan, it triggered the warhead payload. The torpedoes exploded. Their payload was not the conventional plasma-fusion warheads used in normal ship-to-ship actions, designed to melt and destroy ship's hulls and set their internal compartments ablaze. Instead, the "rock-busters" warheads were packed with high explosive seismic charges, designed to shatter and pulverise rock, setting off a chain reaction of aftershocks within the structure of their asteroid targets far in excess of the pay-load's explosive yield.

To those watching on the command decks of the Imperial ships, it seemed as if the two massive rok-fortresses simply burst apart from within.

The smaller one went first, the majority of it vaporised in a huge secondary explosion as something inside it—some deep-buried power source or magazine cavern full of unstable high explosive ordnance—detonated under the effects of the torpedo strike. The larger one shook and rumbled, and then, slowly, jagged fiery lines appeared all across its surface. The lines split apart, growing ever wider and revealing huge fires consuming the interior of the thing. Chunks of it broke away and were sent spinning off into space, a prelude to what was about to happen. A second later, the entire rok came apart, disintegrating in a ravenous and fiery explosion. Fragments of it, huge and deadly, hurled out with explosive force, raining meteor destruction amongst the roks nearest to it. From the safety of the bridge, Semper saw one jagged shard larger than a frigate strike another rok, piercing it like a dagger and sending it tumbling askew out of the ork formation.

“Two, or maybe even three, down, at least twenty-six more to go,” noted the laconic voice of one of the *Macharius*’s senior gunnery officers.

Semper grunted in grim humour at the comment. It would indeed be a remarkable achievement if his force managed to destroy all the roks, even assuming they had enough rock-buster torpedoes to accomplish such a task. Which, as everyone on the command deck knew, was certainly not the case. The new experimental ordnance devices were rare and expensive and so far in short supply. Semper had little doubt that, assuming they actually survived the engagement, he and his fellow captains would be recommending that the rock-busters become part of the standard specialist range of torpedoes available to the forces of Battlefleet Gothic, after their first and highly successful testing here today under battlefield conditions.

“Ordnance report, Mister Nyder?” he asked. “How many seismic torpedoes do we have left?”

“The rock-busters? Four, captain. Those shiftless Munitorium heretics were probably too busy chasing young adepts or polishing all that gold braid they give themselves to organise the supply of more than eight per ship to those of us who actually do the fighting in this man’s war.”

“No sense letting them go to waste, then, I imagine. We have a new target laid in?”

Nyder gestured towards the magnified image of one of the roks on the auspex screen before him. “The big one here, the one with what looks like the profile of old Lord Admiral Dardania, Emperor rest his devilish old soul, staring out at us from amongst those rock formations on its starboard flank. We’re doubling up our fire with Drachenfels. They’re reloaded and waiting for the word.”

Semper looked at the auspex-magnified image. Curiously, the jagged rock formation in question truly did resemble the unmistakable and craggy countenance of the former Lord Admiral, one of Battlefleet Gothic’s greatest and most legendary commanders.

“I wonder, Mister Nyder, would it be a court martial offence to aim our torpedoes at the face of the good lord admiral?” asked Semper, with a half-smile.

Nyder returned the joke. “If I recall correctly, sir, from what I can remember of the history classes at the academies on Cypra Mundi, the lord admiral was supposed to be a fearsome old ork-hater. I think he’d probably thank us for taking his face off the side of that thing.”

“I concur,” smiled Semper. “Fire when ready, Mister Nyder. We’ll dedicate this kill to the lord admiral’s memory.”

Flame wreathed the prows of the Imperial ships once more as they launched another torpedo wave at the target roks. They were close now, close enough to be within range of the ork batteries, and energy bursts erupted around the *Macharius* and its sister ships as the first ork fire impacted against their void shields. The ork fire was still sporadic and uncoordinated, but would soon grow in strength.

The Imperial strategy had been to hit the orks hard and fast, stunning them into a state of helpless panic with a sudden and ferocious assault. The swift destruction of the two large rok-fortresses and the chaos and confusion it had caused amongst the greenskin line had done much to achieve this end, but now the human battle force had to ensure that they maintained the pressure of the attack and that the initiative remained on their side of the engagement.

The second and final wave of rock-busters struck home. Two more roks, considerably smaller than the first two targets, explosively fragmented apart. A third remained mostly intact, but the weapons fire from its batteries slowed to an ineffectual trickle, and it began to drift out of position, its engines and steering systems apparently knocked out of action. Minutes later, its erratic and rudderless course would bring it blundering helplessly into the field of fire of several other roks. A combined salvo of mass-reactive howitzer fire—each shell the size of a Fury interceptor fighter—and traktor beam-launched plasma meteors smashed apart the crippled rok, finishing the task begun by the Imperium torpedoes.

Three more down, twenty-three more to go.

Semper felt a strong impact shudder run through his ship as enemy fire landed its first direct hit on the *Macharius*, stripping the cruiser of one of its void shields.

The deck beneath his feet lurched under the shock, and he fought the urge to lean onto his lectern for support, knowing that many eyes would be casting nervous glances at him right now. In many ways, he was a captain of the old school, and firmly believed the old naval collegium maxim: a vessel's strength lies not in its armour or its weapons, but in its captain, and the will of its captain must be stronger than the densest adamantium armour.

"A minor hit on our forward starboard side," reported Ulanti, consulting the information scrolling across his screen. "Void shield generators are fully operational, and shield integrity is already regenerating itself."

"I hope the greenskins can do better than that," noted Semper. "We came a long way for this fight, so they'd better not let us down now."

There was the expected ripple of polite laughter from his officers, but Semper felt the atmosphere on the bridge around him relax a little, his crew reassured by their captain's modest attempt at humour. He looked out at the scene ahead of them, as the cluster of roks loomed ever closer, the tactician in him noting their clumsy attempts at formation change and the likely weaknesses in their incoming gunnery fire patterns, while the warrior in him secretly exulted at the thought of the battle to come.

Their battle plan had worked so far, he reminded himself, and the orks had obligingly taken the bait offered to them earlier on. Would they now fall for the same trick again? The bait was here right in front of them, the *Macharius* and its sister cruisers, so would it be enough to draw out the true prize the Imperial battle-force had come here to engage and destroy?

SEVEN

Like the orks themselves, the battle which followed was savage and relentless, chaotic and unpredictable.

Two more roks, smaller than any of the previous targets, fell victim to massed salvoes of torpedoes. After that, the Imperium vessels were in amongst the enemy, able to bring their side-mounted weapons batteries to bear and using torpedoes for target of opportunity fire on any ork rok foolish enough to drift across their bows.

The orks, in their own way, fought back furiously and without respite.

An ork torpedo struck the Mannan midship. The light cruiser staggered under the impact, but limped on, trailing debris and burning gases in its wake, making it that much easier a target for the ork gunners.

The *Macharius* took a heavy cannon battery hit in its thickly-armoured prow, temporarily knocking out two of its torpedo tubes. The impact of the hit set off alarm klaxons throughout the ship. On the command deck, tech-priests redoubled their prayers in praise and reassurance of the ship's troubled machine-mind spirit.

Launching from multiple roks, the orks finally managed to form something resembling an organised attack craft wave. The huge, sprawling wave of ork fighter-bombers targeted the *Macharius* and were immediately intercepted by the carrier cruiser's own protective fighter screen. Too late, Semper remembered that orks, for all their mindless barbarity, were not without intelligence, and were easily capable of a surprising level of natural cunning. The attempted attack on the *Macharius* had been a feint, albeit a highly costly one from the orks' point of view, drawing off the greater part of the Imperial formation's fighter cover and leaving unprotected the two escort carriers at the formation's centre.

A large splinter group of the main ork attack wave peeled away from the main dogfight and fell upon these two targets with gleeful abandon. Swarms of the small but heavily-armed ork fighter-bomber craft made daredevil attack runs on

the two carrier vessels, neither of which had any of the armour, shield protection or anti-ordnance defences of a larger and true carrier vessel like the *Macharius*. In minutes, the Memory of Briniga was crippled and aflame, while the Vengeance of Belatis was desperately launching what was left of its own attack craft squadrons in a race against its own likely and imminent destruction.

Amongst the Imperial cruisers, the Graf Orlok was drawn into an unequal duel against the combined batteries of three different roks. Its captain, the notorious Titus von Blucher, owed his position mostly to a shared distant kinship with Lord Admiral Ravensburg, but Semper was surprised and pleased to note that von Blucher seemed to have developed something actually resembling a backbone over the last few years. The Graf Orlok mounted an effective fighting retreat, its own batteries of laser cannons and fusion beamers silencing the guns of one of its enemies. Still, the Lunar-class cruiser was in mounting trouble, its void shields stripped away and the explosive bloom of successful enemy hits erupting along the length of its hull.

Vanguard squadron came to its rescue, the group of three Cobra destroyers mounting a fast attack torpedo run on one of the roks. The rok shook under the impact of two successful torpedo detonations, but was able to attack in return. A powerful tractor beam was brought into use as a huge and primitive catapult weapon, seizing and ripping away parts of the role's own asteroid body and hurling them into space at the Imperium ships. The weapon was typically orkish, barbaric and makeshift, and typically highly effective. One of the Cobras, turning too late out of its torpedo run, was smashed in half by the impact of an asteroid missile fully two hundred metres across. Graf Orlok and the remaining two surviving Cobras beat a hasty retreat, rejoining the comparative safety of the main Imperial line of battle.

The Imperium line wavered but did not break under the mounting toll of damage. Its vessels kept up their own withering rain of fire upon the enemy roks, and slowly, the pattern of the battle began to show in their favour.

Squadrons of Marauder bombers targeted one of the roks, seeking vengeance for the damage done to their escort carrier motherships. The Marauders—smaller, less well-armed and less well-suited for deep space combat—still excelled under the conditions of this battle, their atmosphere-capable configuration allowing them to manoeuvre at ease amongst the asteroid field, skimming and gliding

across the surface of the roks. They laid waste to one of the roks, making low-level bombing runs across its cratered skin, targeting and expertly picking off gun emplacements, torpedo silos, shield generators and engine thrusters with crippling precision strikes from their plasma bomb and armour-piercing missile pay-loads, and leaving the rok drifting helpless and defenceless, ready for the heavy batteries of an Imperial cruiser to later deliver the final coup de grace.

From its position in amongst the main cruiser formation, the Fearsome fulfilled its supporting role to devastating effect. Its massive, jutting, prow-mounted nova cannon wreaked havoc amongst the ork roks, firing explosive projectiles into their midst at near light speed. The Fearsome's captain and gunnery officers were veterans in the effective use of the powerful but unpredictable weapon. The slow-moving and clumsy roks made for easy targets, and Fury fighters adapted to specialist reconnaissance duties were in close amongst the enemy target cluster, feeding back accurate and instantaneous telemetry data to the Fearsome's gunners. So far, four shots had reduced two roks to just so much drifting and shattered asteroid debris, the last shot striking its target dead-centre and breaking it apart like a giant sledgehammer blow.

The orks retaliated, mounting another feint attack on the *Macharius*, one part of the assault wave splitting off towards its real intended target of the Fearsome. As they had already illustrated earlier in the battle, the orks were neither wholly without intelligence or a certain cunning, but ultimately their mindless animal nature triumphed in their assumption that the same trick would work twice in the same battle against the same opponent. Easily able to anticipate the repeat tactic, several squadrons of Furies and Thunderbolts intercepted the attack aimed at the Fearsome, and the ork attack wing was annihilated en masse.

A multitude of attack craft dogfights erupted around the *Macharius* as what was left of the desperate forces in the feint assault pressed forward their attack on the carrier for real this time. The cruiser was surrounded by a halo of tiny, flickering lights, the flashes of fighter-mounted laser cannons and the detonations of exploded fighter craft, as the attack craft battle raged around it. A determined thrust by the orks opened up a breach in the fighter screen, two Furies from Hornet squadron falling victim to a combined hail of ork rockets and cannon fire. From his commanding position on the bridge of the *Macharius*, Semper had a clear view of the incident as a flight of four ork fighter-bombers broke through and sped directly towards him, blazing a trail right up the dorsal spine of the

ship’s main hull and bearing down fast on the ship’s command tower. The ork craft were ugly, threatening-looking things, garishly coloured and decorated with outlandish and primitive ork rune-markings, bristling with combined fighter and bomber armaments and powered by crude and outrageously large chemical-reaction engines mounted on their wings and tail.

One of them was clipped by a strafing line of las-fire from a pursuing Fury, and was instantly transformed into an exploding fireball. The other three opened up with their afterburners, and threw off their pursuer, flying with almost suicidal recklessness amongst the thrusting peaks and spires of the ship’s upper superstructure.

Semper studied their progress with detached calm, despite the fact that the command deck where he was now standing was almost certainly their intended target. Crude but no doubt all too effective bomb-missiles hung beneath their wings, their warhead nose-cones painted with savage and grinning orkoid faces. Anti-ordnance fire reached up from the defence turrets studded along the *Macharius*’s dorsal spine, but the angle of fire was poor, and the ork craft hugged the sheltering cover of the superstructure.

They were in the last stages of their attack run now, forced to finally leave the cover of the hull and arc upwards towards the command tower. Their trajectory brought them within reach of the anti-ordnance defences mounted on the command tower, and up into the arc of fire of the hull defences. They were suitably punished for their reckless final manoeuvre. Lascannon fire and exploding flechette-missile detonations hammered into them from two different directions. The starboard side attacker blew apart, followed seconds later by his portside wingman. The centre fighter, one engine ablaze and one shredded wing trailing fire, continued on towards it target.

Semper stared down the attacker, locking eyes with the grinning, bestial image painted across the fighter’s blunted nose: the face, no doubt, of some typically savage and unknowable ork war god. The ork fighter was two hundred metres away, a second later and it was one hundred and fifty metres away. The time to lower the thickly-armoured blast shields over the command deck’s vulnerable viewing bay windows was minutes gone.

The fighter opened fire, heavy cannon shells striking the reinforced glasteel of

the window and forming cracks in it centimetres deep. Semper wondered why the pilot had not yet launched his primary missile armaments, and could only guess that the damage his craft had sustained had somehow disabled his payload launch mechanisms.

A suicide run then, he thought, wondering if a bomb-laden ork attack craft crashing through the viewing bay and exploding into the interior of his command deck would indeed be enough to cripple his entire ship.

Less than a hundred metres now. Semper could see the pilot inside the cockpit. The atmosphere inside it was on fire, the ork pilot wreathed in flame. He was shouting, his tusk-filled mouth forming sounds which Semper could only guess at. Some bestial ork battle-chant or prayer-words of dedication to yet another ork war god. The expression on his face matched the one of savage, animal joy painted on the nose of his craft.

Fifty metres. Semper resisted the urge to turn or look away. His grandfather may have survived to earn a peaceful and easy death on the family estates, but Semper's father and two of his uncles had all died in the Emperor's service, on the command deck of an Imperial warship. Semper had always imagined that their fate would one day be his too, and he was determined to meet that fate with the same stoicism which they too had faced it.

Thirty metres. A final, desperate burst of fire from one of the command tower's defence turrets blew away the tail of the fighter. The ork craft corkscrewed down out of sight, crashing seconds later several decks down into the armoured front of the tower. Semper felt the impact of the crash as a tremor through the deck beneath his feet.

He turned, catching the look of mutual relief on the face of Ulanti, not realising until this moment that his second-in-command had been standing by him the entire time, facing the prospect of instant obliteration with the same stoic resoluteness.

"Make a note, Mister Ulanti," remarked Semper, with as much arch reserve as he could still muster. "Extra target drill needed for the defence turret gunnery crews. And find out who the crew were on that last burst of fire, and send them a case of the finest and strongest grog we have in the ship's stores, with the

captain’s compliments.”

Elsewhere, the battle continued to rage. The Drachenfels’s lance batteries gored into the sides of another rok, blasting away or vaporising hundreds of tonnes of soft, porous rock. The asteroid material of the rok’s body was streaked through with deposits of a glittering metallic ore substance. Whatever the substance was, it was apparently highly fissionable. It ignited instantly when the star-hot power of the lance beams touched it, setting off an instantaneous chain reaction through the interior of the rock. The entire rok disappeared in a nuclear flash, lighting up the void like a second, short-lived miniature sun.

The sudden and massive energy burst overwhelmed the Drachenfels’s shields and temporarily blinded its scanner systems. Amongst the surrounding roks, the effects were much worse. One of them, the closest, was reduced to a burnt-out cinder by the flash, while two others were caught on the periphery of the blast and took varying degrees of damage. Two suffered more damage still, accidentally colliding into each other as their crews, panicked by the evidence of what they assumed to be some new and super-powerful human weapon, fired up crude and unpredictable emergency manoeuvring rockets.

In his armoured strategium shell deep with his ship, Erwin Ramas, captain of the Drachenfels and a Battlefleet Gothic legend in his own right, allowed a rasping chuckle to escape from his lipless mouth.

Who else, he laughed to himself, but the greenskins would build a fortress base upon an asteroid streaked through with deposits of enriched plutonium?

Reth Zane registered the nuclear detonation as a flash of buzzing interference cutting through the flow of information being fed into him through the mind-impulse link with his Fury’s onboard systems. The servitor navigator seated in the rear cockpit space behind him emitted a brief question in the form of a transmitted query-equation. Zane ignored the query, and the event which had prompted it. Whatever that distant explosion had been, it had no bearing on his divine work.

They were in amongst the main cluster of roks now, weaving in and out of the

asteroids; a vast and chaotic dogfight melee, with Imperium Furies and Thunderbolts and a bewildering array of ork fighter-bombers finding and then losing each other amongst the deadly maze of drifting space debris.

He was flying lone wolf, without any supporting wing-men, without even a living human navigator, and that suited his purposes perfectly. Back aboard the ship, his fellow pilots shunned his company, and that suited his purposes too. He held no malice nor ill-will towards them. They were, as far as he could tell, good and conscientious servants of the Emperor, but they did not understand his divine purpose.

He was an Avenging Fury. He killed the Emperor's enemies, and he did so under the Emperor's direct guidance and protection.

He had been busy with his divinely-ordained business this day. Six more kills, six more enemies of the Emperor destroyed, six more blessings to be added to the holy shrine he maintained in his personal quarters.

His comrades feared him, he knew, and mocked him. "Zealot Zane" they used to call him behind his back. "Machine Zane" they more often called him now. More servitor than man, they whispered snidely amongst themselves. Zane forgave them. They did not understand the transformation which had happened to him in the events during the evacuation of Belatis. He had faced and vanquished an enemy of the Emperor, a daemon of the warp, no less. Protected by the holy aura of the Golden Throne he had survived the encounter, even if much of his body had been destroyed. The recovery had been long and painful, the mastering of a new body which was more machine than flesh even more so, but, throughout it all, Zane knew he would prevail. After all, the Emperor himself was with him.

His comrades saw the injuries he had suffered as a disability, a source of pity and secret horror. To Zane, though, they were a liberation. Only the flesh, the most superficial element of his humanity, had been burnt away in the all-cleansing fire. The most important part, his Emperor-given soul, remained, and his new machine-body freed him from the weaknesses of the flesh, allowing him to better carry out his holy work.

He brought the nose of his Fury up, sensing rather than seeing yet another new kill opportunity. Machine eyes allowed him to see and feel all his fighter craft

saw. The distant shapes of two ork craft drifted into view. The ork fighters were difficult for his wing-mounted missile weaponry to lock onto, he knew. The orks' primitive power systems and crude fossil fuel engines threw out unpredictable energy signals, confounding the Imperium's more sophisticated scanning devices.

His machine-augmented brain judged the distance from him to the targets. Machine hands powered up his engines' thruster power, pushing him forward towards the targets at an accelerated speed but which would not yet alert the targets to his presence. Machine patience, freed from the emotions of flesh, calmly counted out the seconds until the moment of interception.

A human soul, free and untainted, exalted in the expectation of the imminent deaths of the Emperor's enemies.

The first target drifted into his cockpit screen's targeting display. Flesh was weak. Flesh would have fired already. Machine patience still held sway, counselling caution, knowing that the target lock-on was never certain in the first few crucial moments.

Machine-mind gave the command. Machine hands moved calmly across the firing controls. The quad-cannons mounted in his Fury's nose fired as one, spitting out a stream of laser energy. The brief storm of las-bolts found and pursued its quarry. The target broke apart in a sudden, fiery burst.

Machine mind calmly replayed the incident, satisfied at its choice of the correct course of action. Human soul offered up a silent prayer of rejoice.

The last remaining target peeled away, hitting its afterburners and tracing a long burning arc across the starfield. Machine mind and machine hands matched the target's movements. Machine eyes kept the target fixed in sight, working with machine mind to calculate angles of fire and likely speeds and trajectories.

The target looped round and reversed its course, coming straight at them. The servitor navigator clicked and whirred in faint alarm. Machine mind did not panic. Machine hands did not waver. Human mind recognised the signs of an experienced and skilled enemy pilot. Human soul thrilled at the prospect of the death of such an enemy.

Human mind took over, doing what no mere machine could not. Flying straight towards the oncoming target. Skilfully jinking the fighter craft through the hail of autocannon fire now filling the void around it. A stray shell careered off the hull just in front of the cockpit. A stream of shells shredded part of his tailfin. Another stray blast blew away the cowling on his starboard engine.

Warning runes flashed across instrumentation panels. Machine mind made urgent calculations and counselled withdrawal. Machine hands longed to seize the control stick and steer them out of the path of imminent destruction.

Human soul ignored them. Human soul, and human mind bided their time, Human soul and mind had been here many times before in previous battles.

The Fury jinked aside at the last moment, unleashing two wing missiles at the target. The ork craft disappeared in an explosive rush. Zane's Fury flew through the midst of the still-expanding debris cloud. Pieces of wreckage smashed off its armoured hull, adding to the chorus of warning runes going off within the cockpit.

Zane ignored them all. Machine was strong and efficient, but human was always better. Human was that part of us which belonged to the Holy Emperor, and so was in itself partly divine.

He brought the fighter up tight and fast, skimming low-level across the rocky canyons and plains of a nearby rok. His eyes and the Fury's augur senses scanned the rok's surface, seeking suitable targets. Machine eyes saw the tell-tale heat trails from exhaust vents hidden amongst a cluster of needle-like stalactite rock formations. An extremely tempting and vulnerable target for a bomber run, but not with any of the lesser ordnance his fighter was carrying.

Light flashed out at him from the rim of a crater half a kilometre over. Zane directed his attention in that direction, and saw a cavern mouth set into the wall of the crater, protected by at least two small defence turrets, turrets which were now firing at him. Without the lines of tracer fire coming from them, he might not have noticed the hidden crater at all.

He gave praise to the Emperor for the stupidity and over-eagerness of some anonymous ork gunner as he hit his forward braking jets and guided the fighter

down into the crater for a closer look at the potential target within it.

Defence turret fire zigzagged past him, ploughing the surface of the crater and throwing up chunks of rocky debris. He saw light flooding out from the cave mouth, and, within the light, the shapes of ork fighter-bombers sitting there in the wide cavern beyond. Squat, orkoid figures in some form of crude, gas-belching, armoured vacuum suits moved amongst them, and Zane saw fuel cables and power couplings snaking amongst the parked craft, and stocks of munitions piled up nearby. No matter how disorganised and ramshackle the scene, Zane still recognised an attack craft launch deck when he saw one.

One of the orks saw him, and, aggressively if futilely, raised a handgun to fire several shots at his cruising Fury. Zane hits the lift thrusters and pulled up, intending to turn round again and make a proper attack run on the launch bay cavern. A few missiles into the munitions stacks and fuel dumps at the back of the cave would quickly wipe the place clean of all trace of greenskin life.

Tracer fire from the defence turrets chased after him. He easily outran it, arcing up out of the crater. The view through his cockpit window rolled and yawed. Cratered and pitted rock fell away, to be replaced by a glittering starfield. He pulled on the altitude controls, rolling the fighter over as he prepared to dive back down on the target.

A shadow, huge and dark, fell over his fighter, blotting out the starfield above.

The servitor navigator gave an electronic squawk of alarm. Zane looked up, seeing the huge, gaping, brightly painted jaws of a giant creature looming above him in space. Metallic, jagged teeth gaped open, revealing a battery of rudimentary, ugly and deadly weapon barrels clustering within its mouth. A giant red eye, painted onto the side of a hull crudely patchworked together from great, thick slabs of ill-matched metals, glared balefully down at him.

The gargantuan ork cruiser rumbled past overhead, hiding within the cluttered surveyor shadow of the surrounding asteroids. Another ork cruiser vessel, different in outline and configuration, but identical in the same deadly, lumbering purpose followed along behind it, accompanied by a school of smaller and eager-looking escort craft.

Human mind and soul faltered, temporarily overwhelmed by the sheer savage scale and ferocity of the ork vessels. Machine mind took over. Machine hands opened up a comm-channel. Other than the whisper of prayer-words to himself, it had been several days since Zane had spoken aloud, and the sound of his own voice, harsh and machine-formed, almost came as a shock to him.

“Storm Four to *Macharius*. Have sighted two ork cruiser vessels and escorts. They’re powering up engines and heading towards you. Be warned, *Macharius*: the bait has definitely been taken, and the prey is coming out into the open.”

EIGHT

“We’re sure that it’s really them?”

Semper stared at the hazy augur screen images being transmitted back by their forward reconnaissance scout craft. The squadron of ork vessels was just beginning to clear the final fringes of the asteroid field. The smashed and gutted remains of several roks drifted nearby, dead and derelict. The ork vessels moved past them, unheeding and uncaring. They had changed course since their first sighting, taking a vector which would take them away from the Imperial force and out towards the warp jump point on the system’s distant outer edge. The consensus amongst the captains of the Imperial battle-force was that the ork commander was cutting and running, abandoning the roks and their crews to their fate at the hands of the Imperial warships’ gun batteries.

“As much as we can be,” answered Ulanti, in response to his captain’s question. “The energy signals from ork vessels are notoriously unpredictable, and the greenskins have an irritating habit of tearing down and altering their ships’ superstructure at any apparent random whim. Still, as far as we can tell, based on the information from survivors of the ork pirate raids in this sub-sector, those floating junk-piles we’re looking at now are indeed the Wolverine and the Sabretooth.”

Semper looked again at the ship images, seeing the clear evidence of the trademark primitive and brutish ork manufacturing process, seeing the rough patchwork of their thickly armoured skins, seeing the gun batteries bristling across their surfaces, seeing the outlandish greenskin markings and glyphs burned or cut hundreds of metres high into the vessels’ flanks.

He had no idea what those markings might mean. Perhaps such primitive pagan symbols actually spelled out the vessels’ true names, he supposed. There were Imperium adepts who could read and translate orkish writing, he knew; oddly-minded scribes within the Ordo Xenos or various obscure branches of the Administratum who dedicated their lives to the study of alien races. No captain of the Imperial Navy, however, would ever sully themselves with the knowledge

of such things, and so the tacticians of Battlefleet Gothic had merely followed the traditional custom in such matters and assigned their own codenames to the ork vessels in question.

Wolverine and Sabretooth, two suitably feral and savage names for the two ork pirate vessels which, together with their attendant flotilla of escort vessels, had been preying upon unprotected Imperial convoys throughout this sub-sector for months now, each time evading retribution by retreating back into their rok-protected lair here in the Mather system. The cleansing and securing of this system was important, yes, but more important still was the destruction of the two ork cruisers. If they were allowed to escape, then no doubt in a few months' time Lord Admiral Ravensburg would be forced to reallocate more precious resources to clear out the next empty star system to be occupied and quickly infested by these same ork pirates.

Open comm-channels hissed in empty expectation, as Semper's fellow captains waited on him to decide the deployment of his forces for this next final and vital stage of the battle.

"Graf Orlok and Fearsome, with me. We'll also need Triton and Vanguard squadron with us, to take care of their escorts and provide supporting firepower. Drachenfels, I need you here to keep these damn roks occupied. Mannan and Paladin squadron will assist you, and be seconded to your command. You'll also have attack craft support from my Furies and the fighter and bomber squadrons from Belatis and Briniga. No heroics, Drachenfels," he added, dryly, "just make them keep their distance. There'll be plenty of time to deal with them properly after we've run Wolverine and its pack-mates to ground."

The reply over the crackling comm-channel was typical Ramas: a dry, barking laugh, a scathing, impatient edge to his machine-modulated voice, hiding, for those who didn't know the illustrious and irascible captain of the Drachenfels, a deep-held respect for those rare few he considered worthy of his friendship.

"Hah! I see you're thinking like a real commodore already, Leoten. The youngbloods get to chase glory and promotion, while the old warhorses like me can only be entrusted to keep taking potshots at a few floating rocks. Good to see some things haven't changed yet in glorious Battlefleet Gothic!" He laughed, the sound turning into a weird electronic whinnying sound as the Adeptus

Mechanicus constructed voice-box in his rebuilt throat struggled to interpret the sounds of human laughter.

“Good hunting, *Macharius*,” the master of the Drachenfels added in a more serious tone, the traditional good luck message between brother captains of Battlefleet Gothic being too much of a sacred custom for even Erwin Ramas to ignore or make sport of.

“And to you, Drachenfels,” replied Semper, signalling for his helm crew to bring them around to their new battle course.

In normal terms, an hour does not seem such a long time. In terms of space combat, a lot can happen in a short hour. In a naval battle, an hour can seem an eternity.

Fearsome drifted somewhere in the mid-distance off the *Macharius*’s starboard bow. The Dominator-class cruiser’s command tower was gone, sheared right off by an ork ram ship attack, and a salvo of giant macro-cannon shells had stitched lines of catastrophic ruin across the cruiser’s flanks. Its main hull section was shattered and broken, with an area fully three-quarters of a kilometre long gouged away and missing, as if a giant pair of jaws had simply ripped away a portion of the vessel.

The crews of the other vessels would not have believed it possible had they not seen it with their own eyes. The battle-squadron’s comm-channels had been filled with a babble of pleading, desperate voices from aboard the Fearsome: the voices of crew still trapped aboard her in airtight compartments, and begging for rescue before they suffocated to death, or before the wrecked and burning vessel exploded or began to break up. Semper had ordered that all comm-links to the Fearsome be cut, knowing the damaging effect such pitiful transmissions could have on the minds of a ship’s crew during time of battle. The survivors trapped aboard the Fearsome would have to wait until the battle was over until rescue craft could be sent to sift amongst the wreckage of the vanquished cruiser. In the meantime, only the Emperor would hear their pleas for help.

One of the Fearsome’s killers drifted not too far away. Wolverine was a fragmenting hulk, with little left to suggest the armoured and heavily armed

leviathan it had been less than an hour before. The *Macharius*'s Starhawk bomber squadrons, held back from battle with the roks for just this moment, had relentlessly harried and pursued the ork monstrosity, targeting its drive systems and leaving it crippled and limping, unable to outrun the gunsights of the Imperial cruisers' weapons batteries. The Fearsome's nova cannon, combined with the prow lances of the Triton and the torpedoes and weapons batteries of *Macharius* and Graf Orlok, had reduced it to just so much scattered space debris.

The retaliation from the Sabretooth and its escorts had been swift and brutal. Triton lay somewhere far to the *Macharius*'s stern, the light cruiser's engine drives pounded into slag by the Sabretooth's macro-cannon batteries. Graf Orlok was closer, still nominally in the battle but with the metal-jawed prow of an ork escort vessel buried snout-deep into its forward portside. Ork warriors, huge and savage, wild and merciless, had poured into the interior of the Lunar-class cruiser in their hundreds, and the last comm-channel transmission from Captain von Blucher had indicated heavy fighting in his ship's forward sections, with his gun batteries left unmanned as he was forced to withdraw their crews to join the shipboard combat.

Graf Orlok, for the moment at least, was out of the battle, leaving the *Macharius* to face the terrifying power of the Sabretooth on its own.

"Vandire's oath! I don't believe it. The bloody thing's powering up and coming round again!"

Alerted by the incredulous voice of one of his gunnery officers, Semper looked at the image on the augur screen, sharing the man's disbelief.

The Sabretooth was a wreck, its hull riddled with blast craters and torpedo wounds. Somehow, though, it continued to fight. Semper could only secretly marvel at the very orkoid inability to admit defeat as, in complete defiance of all the odds, the vessel's commander managed to fire up manoeuvring thrusters and to crew to man the gun batteries.

The vessel swung round in space, its side batteries sending out a wave of fire to crash explosively against the *Macharius*'s shields and hull. As it did, Semper could see the horrific damage so far inflicted on it. Through the gaping holes in its armoured skin, fires could clearly be seen burning inside its decks and

compartments. As it continued to swing round, Semper could see the starfield behind it, visible through the holes blasted clean through its body.

“Vandire’s oath,” breathed Ulanti, standing beside his captain. “What’s keeping them going?”

“Sheer bloody-mindedness, Mister Ulanti,” replied Semper. “You can’t convince a greenskin that it’s truly dead until you hold up its severed head and show it its own bullet-riddled body.”

The *Macharius*’s own gun batteries replied, blowing away more fragments of the unshielded target’s hull, but still the monster kept on moving. The dark maw of its prow mouth gaped open in threat, and Semper had a sudden and terrifying vision of the fate of the Fearsome.

“Engage portside thrusters. Hard to starboard! Get us out of reach of that damned tractor beam!”

There was that familiar, sickening lurch in the pit of the stomach as the ship swung round and the artificial gravity generators lagged a second or two behind in readjusting to the vessel’s new orientation. A further, this time reassuring, shudder ran through the ship as its engines fired up, taking it out of harm’s way. The sense of relief amongst the command deck crew was almost palpable.

The elation did not last long. Semper was thrown to the ground as the deck beneath his feet vanished from under him. There was a crash from high above, and the jagged spear of a great, splintered stalactite of machinery crashed into the flag-stoned floor several metres away, crushing and killing a tech-priest and a junior ordnance officer.

There was the scream of tortured metal from all around them, and the whole ship shook under a continuous series of violent, pounding impacts.

Klaxons and warning alarms reverberated from dozens of points throughout the ship. Leoten Semper climbed to his feet, wiping away the blood from his face from a flying metal sliver thrown out by the falling machinery. There was a dry, foul taste in his mouth, and a sensation of sick dread in his heart. His ship, he knew, was now in the deadliest of perils.

The internal comm-channels were filled with panicked damage reports from the intolerable strain now being put on the ship's innermost structural integrity.

"Hull breach… gun-deck three. Requesting permission to evacuate."

"Fires on decks eighteen, nineteen and twenty-one."

"Got a hull breach here on forward compartment, deck sixteen. Sealing blast doors now."

"Enginarium… serious coolant failure on Reactor Tertius… engaging emergency coolant systems."

"Open the blast doors… We're trapped in here! Emperor's mercy, we can't get out!"

Semper gathered his wits. His ship was in pain, and could be destroyed any minute. "Mister Ulanti, what's our situation?" he barked.

Ulanti's face was grim. "Definitely still some life in Sabretooth, sir. It's sunk its teeth in, and now it's trying to take a bite of us. A large bite, it would seem."

Semper cursed. A tractor beam, one of the few high technologies which the orks had managed to master for their own use. And, being orks, that use was as a weapon, of course.

The *Macharius* was caught in the invisible grip of a huge and powerful ork tractor beam weapon mounted in the Sabretooth's mouth-like prow. The tractor beam wasn't powerful enough to bodily drag or hurl the *Macharius* through space, as the orks had done with the asteroid missiles which had been directed at the Graf Orlok and which had smashed apart one of Vanguard squadron's Cobra destroyers, but it was still easily capable of destroying the ship. The powerful gravitic forces of a tractor beam, recklessly manipulated in the right way, could be used to crush or tear apart a target, or at least a portion of a larger target.

This was what was happening to the *Macharius* now. The tractor beam had seized a large hull section, and was attempting to tear it free from the rest of the ship. Less than half an hour ago, Semper and the crew of the *Macharius* had seen the Fearsome ripped apart by Sabretooth's savage tractor beam jaws. Now

the same thing was happening to them.

Semper could sense his ship starting to tear apart. Metal buckled. Armoured hull plates ruptured. Power conduits exploded or failed. The *Macharius* screamed in torment at the intolerable strain being put upon its metal body.

Maxim Borusa heard the deep, echoing boom from somewhere deep within the ship's interior, and felt the decking lurch beneath his feet. He uttered a coarse Stranivar curse as the unexpected and violent movement threw off his aim. A bolt shell which should have taken off the head of the figure at the other end of the catwalk instead ruptured a steam pipe several metres wide of its target.

The man, one of Sejarra's thugs, turned and began to bring his own weapon—a battered old stub pistol, Sejarra had a tendency to skimp on arming his boys with the proper heavy stuff, Maxim knew—up to bear, aiming it at Maxim.

"Dumb bastard," sneered Maxim, putting a bolt shell through his chest, "should have run when you had the chance."

Another violent impact shook the ship. Maxim had to grab onto the handrail to prevent himself keeling over the side of the walkway and into the guts of the lower enginarium levels, several decks below. Someone a few decks above wasn't so fortunate, and a screaming body plunged down the metal chasm, which ran almost the full height of the ship, through twenty-two decks of machinery-crammed engineering sections. There was an explosion from somewhere down below, followed by the fiery rush of released plasma and the screams of several men caught in the blast.

Maxim grinned. The ship was clearly taking a pounding from something, but he wasn't worried. Whatever kind of scrap they'd got into, old Captain Semper would see them through it, of that Maxim had little doubt.

And, besides he thought, still grinning, all this internal damage meant casualties, and casualties meant plenty of opportunity to cover up the evidence of his own private little battle right here.

There were shouts—he recognised the voice of Galba amongst them—and the sound of more gunfire from through the maze of machinery ahead of him.

Maxim checked the load on his bolt pistol and moved off towards the location, homing in on the familiar and welcome sounds of conflict.

The sounds of his ship's distress continued, coming to him both over the command deck's comm-channels and reverberating through the very substance of the ship. Semper knew the *Macharius* was only moments away from suffering irreparable damage.

"Helm—all ahead full. Channel all available power to engines and get us out of this thing's grasp."

"No!"

It was the voice of Magos Castaboras, the most senior servant of the Machine God aboard the *Macharius*, who had just arrived on the command deck, surrounded by his customary train of tech-priest acolytes. Even with destruction looming, the officers and crewmen present stared in complete disbelief at this unforgivable challenge to a captain's authority here on his own command deck.

Semper stared at the impassive gold-masked face of the senior tech-priest. He had little fondness for the cold and aloof Castaboras. Few aboard the *Macharius* did, but he had no doubt of the man's abilities, or his unsurpassed knowledge of the workings and capabilities of the vessel to which he had so far dedicated more than eighty years of his Machine God-extended life.

"Explain!" snapped Semper, as the sound of the ship's torment grew louder all around them.

The tech-priest spoke quickly but calmly, his voice offering little in the way of accent or human emotion. "If we engage the engines, we will only hasten our own destruction, struggling in one direction against the force pulling at us from the other, and tearing the ship apart in the process. However, there is another way…"

The tech-priest's last words were almost drowned out by the tortured shriek of metal on metal. Semper didn't hesitate, knowing they likely only had seconds.

"The Magos has command," he told his officers, doing what many captains

would consider the unthinkable, even under such dire circumstances.

Castaboras set to work immediately. “Engage port and starboard thrusters—anchor us in space. Channel all available power to the defence shields and set the shield frequency to four points above the norm.” He broke off, favouring the officers of the *Macharius* with a rare explanation of his methods. “Studies have shown that changes in shield frequency can interfere with the gravitic fields of tractor beam weapons. I have never seen it done myself, but the great Magos Technicus Sulpicius the Precise proved in his studies in M.39 that—”

Remus Nyder exploded in anger. “Look at the shield output readouts, man. You’re overloading the generators! And now you talk of ‘studies’, and tell us that we’ve put the safety of the ship in the hands of the theories of some long-dead damn Machine God prayer babbler who none of us have even heard of!”

Castaboras looked at Semper, directing his reply to him and ignoring Nyder. “The shields will hold, captain. I know this vessel. I tend to its workings. I commune with its machine-mind. I offer prayers to its sacred spirit. I have faith in its strength, and so too should you and your men.”

The violent shaking took on a different timbre now. A tone of slightly anxious relief crept into the tech-priest’s voice.

“It’s working. The shields are interfering with the tractor beam. They’re boosting the tractor beam’s strength, trying to keep their grip on us.” He stepped back, taking firm hold of a nearby instrumentation panel. “I recommend you and your men hold onto the nearest fixed surface, captain. The venerable magos’s studies suggest that the final moment of uncoupling may be hazardous to a vessel’s human crew components.”

There was a final scream of metal, matched by the shriek of energy generators overloaded to near destruction. Then, suddenly, the ship was moving, tumbling through space, rolling almost thirty degrees on its portside, its artificial gravity field crucially lagging several seconds behind in adjusting to the ship’s radical change of orientation as the *Macharius* was brutally expelled free of the tractor beam’s deadly grasp.

Castaboras’s warning was well-founded. For a second, Semper found himself in

freefall, falling laterally across the command deck, before the firm grasp of Remus Nyder found him and pulled him to safety. Semper nodded his thanks, and hauled himself to his feet. The command deck was still filled with the sound of warning alarms and comm-net distress calls. If anything, the flood of damage reports and distress calls had increased, as the ship took stock of the cost of that last near-disastrous manoeuvre. Still, Semper knew that at least now his ship was safe from imminent destruction.

His ork opponents, however, had different ideas.

The augur screen was cracked, the image on it temporarily flickering and indistinct, but Semper could still make out the flame-wreathed shape of the ork cruiser as it laboriously swung round in space in pursuit of them, presenting its lethal tractor beam maw towards them once more.

“It’s still after us!” shouted a young surveyor adept in near panic. “It’s powering up its tractor beam for another attack!”

“No, it’s not,” said Semper in determination, looking towards Remus Nyder. “Mister Nyder, what do we have in the way of torpedoes?”

Nyder checked the information on the data-slate handed to him by one of his junior officers. It made for grim reading. “Only two in the pipe, captain. It’s a hell of a mess down there, I’m told. That last jolt really shook up our torpedo room. I’ve got two tubes out of action, half my loading crews dead or injured and Emperor only knows how long before we can get the other two tubes loaded and ready to fire.”

Semper looked at the auspex screen, checking the telemetry data scrolling down the sides of the screen and making his own personal calculations about the angle of fire, the closing distance between the two vessels, the current battle status of each of them and the likely outcome of any head-on battle between them. The answer he came up with was not much to his liking, but he was a captain in His Divine Emperor’s Navy, and so it was not in his nature to show any sign of fear or weakness on his own command deck and before the eyes of his expectant crew.

“Two torpedoes will be more than enough,” he said, in a voice filled with more

confidence than he felt. “Helm—bring us around. Ordnance—prepare to fire as soon as you have a good angle of shot.”

The ship’s manoeuvring thrusters fired again, bringing it round to face the oncoming Sabretooth. To the watching crew on the command deck, it seemed to take the prow an eternity to swing through the sixty degree angle which would bring the ship round towards the enemy ship.

All the time, the Sabretooth came on. In the minds of some of the more nervous crewmen aboard the command deck of the *Macharius*, the ork cruiser’s open maw with the tractor beam weapon hidden inside seemed to gape open to swallow up the entire ship.

Light flared within that maw. “Power levels are building,” reported a surveyor adept. “They’ll be activating that thing any second now.”

“In position. Target in range. Angle is good,” reported an ordnance officer a second later.

“Fire torpedoes!”

The words were barely out of Semper’s mouth before he held the dull roar of the torpedoes’ release from their prow silos. The missiles streaked through space towards their target. Light flared stronger between the Sabretooth’s jaws. Aboard the *Macharius*, they felt the first shifting lurch as the tractor beam’s gravity field once again took hold of the ship.

The torpedoes shot between the metal jaws. For a moment, it almost appeared as if the Sabretooth had actually swallowed them, and even the most resolute of veteran navy officers watching felt a moment of sickening fear, as it seemed that almost nothing could destroy the vessel.

Sabretooth’s head exploded. It keeled over, tumbling away through space, a series of secondary explosions gutting what was left of its shattered innards.

“Double impact. Target destroyed,” recorded the surveyor adept.

“Scan the area,” ordered Semper. “Surveyors and augurs to maximum. Search for any remaining enemy vessels.” He waited impatiently while his orders were

carried out, servitors and tech-priests attuning themselves to the massive flood of information gathered by the ship’s electronic senses and sifting through it in search of any further threats. Finally, the answer came back from Hito Ulanti, the second-in-command confirming the scan findings relayed onto the screen of his control lectern.

“No enemy vessels found within surveyor range. The garden is clear, captain.”

For the first time in hours, Semper allowed himself to relax. The battle for the Mather system was over.

NINE

The *Macharius* lay inert in space, tending to its wounds. Vacuum-suited work crews crawled across the outside of its hull, inspecting the most recently-inflicted battle damage, and making what immediate repairs they could. Hull breaches were resealed, using whatever materials were available, including the salvaged remains of other vessels destroyed in the battle. Molten metal salves were applied to the wounds in the ship's armoured flanks, adding further to the ancient patchwork of scars which criss-crossed its centuries-old hull.

Inside the ship too, the necessary post-battle rituals of damage assessment and repair were well underway, as was the grim task of recovering and counting the dead and wounded. Ships' surgeons and their orderlies were at work throughout the vessel, operating a strict and merciless triage system on the wounded men brought to them. The walking wounded would have to wait until after the battle for any kind of attention, and the crew decks and dormitories were filled with the moans and screams of the injured. The only relief from the pain at present would be whatever quantities of illicit narc-stimms they had hidden away or could beg from their comrades.

The more seriously wounded lay piled up in corridors and compartments which now served as makeshift field surgeries. Surgeons and orderlies moved amongst them, dispensing crude and swift battlefield surgery with las-cutters, stimm-packs, damps and flesh-cauterisers. More than one surgeon also carried a chainsword, their blades already dotted with the gory evidence of the number of emergency battlefield surgeries they had already carried out.

The dying, the ones who were beyond help or for whom the surgeons could not spare the additional time needed to tend to their more grievous injuries, were handed silently over to armsmen wearing blood-soaked overalls, who carried them away out of sight of those other wounded still waiting to learn their own fate under the strictures of the surgeons' system. A quick and mercifully-intended piece of knifework by the armsmen, and possibly a few mumbled words of prayer from their killers, and then the bodies were deposited amongst the growing pile of dead, where teams of sweating, gore-covered ratings carried

them in relays to the nearest airlock chamber.

“Get a move on. We haven’t got all day!” cursed Petty Officer Vorshun, wondering why he always seemed to get detailed with this duty after a battle. His words, and the angry blow he casually directed at the nearest of them with the wooden haft of his billy club, spurred on the ratings under his supervision, and they heaved the last few bodies in through the open airlock door. Vorshun looked at the mound of corpses filling the airlock chamber, and decided that enough was enough.

“Right, that’ll do for this one. Stand back while I seal her up,” he warned, casually kicking a corpse’s dangling arm back over the other side of the rim of the airlock hatch. He reached for the manual release lever which would seal the heavy blast door, and, seconds later, release the outer door and expel the gory contents of the airlock chamber out into space.

“Hold on, Vorshun, you lazy whoreson! Time and room for a few more yet!”

Vorshun turned in anger towards the latecomers, ready to take out the worst of his temper on whoever dared to speak to him like that. The intended volley of curses died stillborn on his lips when he caught sight of the uniform and rank sash of a chief petty officer. The fury in him turned to fear when he saw the familiar and powerfully-muscled figure which filled out that uniform.

Maxim Borusa came up the corridor with a group of his picked cut-throats, all of them carrying bodies over their shoulders. “Chief Borusa!” said Vorshun, the surprise in his voice hopefully disguising the fear in there too. “I didn’t know you and your men were working this section.”

“You know me, Vorshun,” grinned Maxim. “Always willing to lend a hand anywhere I’m needed, and always willing to help our dear departed shipmates on their final journey to the Emperor.”

Maxim turned to his men, indicating the open airlock. “Right, lads, in they go, and be gentle about it and mind that you treat these fallen heroes with all the respect they deserve.”

His men laughed, and threw their burdens into the airlock to join the other

bodies piled there. Maxim went last, lobbing the corpse he was carrying halfway across the airlock with a single shrug of his shoulders, and Vorshun tried hard to ignore the fact that the corpse made a distinct moaning, sobbing sound when it landed.

Maxim turned towards him, a dangerous glint of unspoken threat in his eyes. “Right, Petty Officer Vorshun, off you go now. Me and my boys will take care of this. I expect you’ve still got work to do on the next deck down.”

“Right, chief,” mumbled Vorshun, all too glad of the chance to get away from whatever it was the big hiveworld ganger was up to.

Maxim waited until the men were out of sight before he turned and looked into the airlock. The terrified eyes of Ship’s Engineer Second Grade Tyrrus Sejarra stared back at him, wide with fear and silent, desperate pleading. It had been a fine piece of work to capture his old rival alive, Maxim thought. Sejarra was gagged and had his hands and feet bound with wire, while the neat little paralysing cocktail of narc-subs which Maxim had mixed up for him had kept him quiet and subdued while they hauled him and the rest of his dead crew all the way from the enginarium to here, taking the longer sub-deck levels to avoid the prowling likes of Kyogen and his spies.

Sejarra’s jaws worked feebly, and Maxim realised he was trying to say something beneath the strip of plasti-seal fixed over his mouth and bonded to the flesh of his face. Maxim congratulated himself at his skill in mixing together the ingredients of the cocktail. He had wanted Sejarra subdued—it would have been awkward if the “corpse” had started struggling or making noises during the journey here—but he didn’t want the sneaky bastard so doped up that he wouldn’t be able to appreciate what Maxim had planned for him, especially when Maxim had gone to so much effort to get everything organised. So now the drug was wearing off, which, as far as Maxim was concerned, was pretty much perfect timing.

He looked in silence at Sejarra for a few moments, allowing the knowledge of where he was and what was about to happen to him sink into the engineer’s drug-dulled consciousness. Sejarra looked around him and started to thrash about in terror, squirming bound and helpless on top of the bloody heap of corpses. Maxim grinned, and looked him straight in the eye.

“Winner takes all, Sejarra. But no hard feelings, right? After all, it’s just business. Nothing personal.”

Maxim pulled the lever his hand had been resting on. The airlock hatch slid shut with an echoing metallic dang. Inside the airlock, Sejarra tried to scream, but the sound, already muffled by the gag across his mouth, was swept away in the louder scream of the sudden rushing of air as the outer hatch swung open.

“And the roks?”

“We’re estimating sixteen destroyed or crippled, captain,” answered Ulanti. “The remainder have retreated deeper into the safety of the asteroid field, where accurate surveyor scans are problematic, to say the least. We can send attack craft reconnaissance patrols in there to find them, but it’s the greenies’ territory, and they’ll be waiting for us. It’ll be a damn easy way for us to lose some good pilots.”

Semper sighed, and sat back behind his desk, thoughtfully drumming his fingers on the large ork’s skull he kept there as a ceremonial trophy of his first ever boarding action and taste of close-quarters combat. As ever, victory was no assurance of the end to one’s problems. The battle was won, but the full cleansing of the Mather system would take many months yet. As much as over a year, perhaps, if his officers’ informed judgement that there might be as many as twenty other roks lurking undetected elsewhere in the system was accurate. They would all have to be found and destroyed, every one of them, if Battlefleet Gothic was ever to declare the Mather system finally purged of ork infestation.

Ulanti politely cleared his throat, and Semper realised that he had been pondering too long. The senior cadre of his ship’s officers stood assembled in his captain’s study, and they were waiting for their captain to give them their next orders. Ulanti, Nyder, Maeler and Khoir Sabattier, the ship’s master of arms stood to attention before him. Beside them stood Senior Adept Volterman, one of Castaboras’s tech-priest lieutenants. Castaboras himself was inspecting the damage to some of the *Macharius*’s more esoteric but vital control systems, and, in acknowledgement of the magos’s recent actions in saving the ship from tractor beam destruction, Semper had diplomatically granted his request to send an emissary in his stead to the meeting called in the captain’s study.

The tall, regal figure of Ship's Navigator Solon Cassander and the dark-robed figure of Ship's Chief Astropath, Adept Rapavna, stood towards the rear of the dark, low-ceilinged room, voluntarily removing themselves from the others in discreet understanding of the discomfort many navy officers felt in the presence of psykers. The tall, imposing figure of Commissar Koba Kyogen lounged against a wall decorated with crystal-framed images of ancient starcharts and tattered scrolls of battle honours won centuries ago by previous incumbents of the captain's chair which Semper was now sitting in.

Kyogen's position and casual stance was deliberate and meaningful. He did not stand to attention like the other navy officers, because a captain's otherwise unchallengeable authority did not apply in the case of a ship's commissar. He stood apart from the others because he was here voluntarily, and not at Semper's orders. So far, he had said nothing. His task was to observe, to watch and remember everything said and done by the *Macharius*'s most senior command cadre. His bolstered bolt pistol lay across the front of his immaculate, black serge uniformed coat. It was the only sidearm permitted into a captain's chambers, and it was a clear, unspoken reminder of the power of life and death which a ship's commissar held over everyone in the room.

Each officer present had made his after-battle report. Now they awaited their captain's orders on what they and his vessel would do next.

"We leave the hulks where they are," Semper told them. "They don't have warp drive capability, so they aren't going anywhere from here. We've accomplished what we came here to do with the destruction of Sabretooth and Wolverine and their escorts, and we've driven the remaining ork presence in the Mather system back into retreat. This system will be cleansed of any remaining greenskin presence, but it will be the task of others to finish what we have begun here. Lord Admiral Ravensburg and Battlefleet Command, in their glorious wisdom, have decided that there are other duties elsewhere which demand our immediate attention."

The sense of barely-retrained relief from his officers was almost palpable. While none of them balked at the prospect of battle with the Emperor's enemies, neither did they much relish the idea of the long and tedious work involved in rooting out the remnants of the ork infestation of Mather, especially as it would keep them away from the crux of the real war in the Gothic sector.

Typically, it was Ulanti who was first to ask what everyone else was thinking. “Then you’ve been in touch with Port Maw, sir?”

“I have,” answered Semper, indicating towards the figure of the astropath. “Adept Rapavna has conveyed my battle report to Battlefleet Command, and we have received word back from them in return. A battle-squadron comprising of the Ark Imperial, two more squadrons of Cobras and a force of troop transports and warp-towed defence monitors is already in transit to the Mather system. They will arrive in several days and set up in orbit around the system’s third innermost planet, which will become the home base for a rigorous scouring of any remaining greenskin presence in the system.”

Ulanti nodded. It was a good plan. The Ark Imperial was one of the old super-carriers of the now defunct Majestic-class of battleship. Its worn-out warp engines were almost past the point of final repair, and the journey through the warp to the Mather system might be its last, but it would make a fine centre of operations for the purposes of this mission. The ork roks had proven highly vulnerable to attack craft assault, and the Ark Imperial’s specialist reconnaissance craft and massed wings of bombers would be ideal for seeking out and destroying the things.

“Then what are our orders, captain?” ventured Castaboras’s stand-in. “The ship’s sacred machine spirit is in pain. Urgent repairs are needed and sacred rites of re-consecration, and all these things can only be done in an orbital dry-dock.”

Semper held up his open hand, cutting off the tech-priest. “Our orders, effective immediately, are to make way at once to the Ramilies star fort Stygian, in the Elysium system. Drachenfels and Graf Orlok are to accompany us. We’ll apparently have several days there to make good any battle damage and re-crew and re-equip before the commencement of our next mission.”

Semper saw the look of dismay on the tech-priest’s face. “Have faith in the spirit of the *Macharius*, brother adept. She’s been injured before, and no doubt she’ll be injured again, but she’s a strong, stout-hearted old maid, and I haven’t seen anything in these damage reports to suggest she won’t be able to make it through whatever’s ahead of us.”

“Then Battlefleet Command haven’t told you what that mission is, captain?”

The enquiry came from Ulanti. Semper hesitated a moment before answering. “All I’ve been told is that we are to wait at Stygian until the arrival of the Bernardo Gui. It will apparently dock with Stygian, and a group of passengers will disembark from her and transfer over to us. What our mission and next destination will be, and exactly who these passengers are, Battlefleet Command have not yet seen fit to tell us.”

There was a pause while the others in the room digested this information. Nyder, shifting uncomfortably, was the first to break the silence.

“The Bernardo Gui, you say, sir? That’s the vessel we are to rendezvous with?”

Semper gave a tight smile, knowing what his Master of Ordnance was really asking. “Yes, Mister Nyder, you heard me correctly, and you know just as well as I do which branch of the Imperial service that particular vessel belongs to.”

His smile grew tighter, as he looked his officers in the eye. “We’d better tidy the place up and have the *Macharius* looking its best for the arrival of our distinguished passengers, since it would appear, gentlemen, that we’ll soon be playing host to the representatives of His Divine Majesty’s most sacred and noble Inquisition.”

Minutes later, and Semper had dismissed the other men and sent them to oversee the necessary preparations for the ship’s departure from the Mather system. All of them except Solon Cassander, whom Semper had requested to stay behind, ostensibly to consult with him on the safest and quickest course through the immaterium to their new destination. The *Macharius* captain had been afraid that Kyogen would stay to observe, and had been secretly relieved when the stern and silent ship’s commissar had left with the others. Kyogen, a native Stranivarite, was investigating reports of some minor but troubling incident of typical below-decks mayhem and was keen to begin. Semper had not paid much attention to the details—something about a gunfight in the enginarium section, and possibly another one elsewhere too, and the disappearance of several engineering crew—and had been only too glad to see the back of the man.

Semper sat at his desk again, with Cassander seated on the other side, facing him. Semper did not consider himself to be superstitious—in many respects, he

was the epitome of the hardnosed and practical-minded Schola Progenium-trained naval man—and would not wish his crew to know that, from time to time, when he felt it necessary, it was his secret custom to consult the psychic visions of the *Macharius*'s Navigator. The mutant warp-sight of many Navigators could see into the future as well as into the immaterium. Solon Cassander was one so gifted, and, now, as Semper watched, the Navigator reached up to remove the gold-woven headband which he wore across his forehead. Semper tried not to stare at the unnatural eye now revealed there, larger than any normal human eye and set into the centre of the man's forehead.

The eye, the trademark of the Imperium-sanctioned and almost priceless mutation of the Navigator strain of genetically-modified humanity which allowed the mighty ships of the Imperium of Mankind to traverse the galaxy, stared back at him, eerie and unblinking. Semper knew that its mystic gaze was fixed not on him but on those images which it saw reflected across the flickering surface of the sub-empyrean, a realm which to Navigators was real and all around them, but the reality and shape of which eluded the understanding and sight of mere normal human consciousness and vision.

"Tell me what lies ahead of us, Master Cassander. Tell me what you see out there in the immaterium."

Cassander closed his two normal eyed, frowned in concentration, and cast his gaze out into the void at his captain's command. The frown grew deeper as he focussed his concentration. Semper fancied that he saw something—brief, indistinct images of something—flicker across the milky surface of the Navigator's third eye, although it may only have been a trick of the low light in the room.

Finally, Cassander heaved a sigh, and opened his two normal eyes again, his third eye closing indistinctively at the same time. He secured the bindings back into place on his forehead, and leaned forward to take the glass of wine which Semper proffered to him, flavoured with silver flecks of the psycho-active substance commonly known as spook. All Navigators, even those seconded to lifetime service within the armed forces of the Imperium, belonged to the Navis Nobilite, the great aristocratic houses and merchant guilds which so dominated the Senatorum Imperialis and even commanded a place amongst the High Council of Terra itself, and Semper had not met one of their kind yet who did not

enjoy a few expensive and aristocratic creature comforts. Semper waited patiently while his Navigator drank fully half the glass and composed his thoughts.

“What do you see, Master Cassander?” asked Semper, when he was sure the man was ready to speak.

The Navigator’s voice was low and atonal, carrying no trace of an accent or homeworld origin. He was a typical member of his class, reared in seclusion from the rest of inferior humanity, and owing his loyalty solely to Emperor and his Navigator clan rather than any one world or region. “As you know, captain, the gift of future-sight is never precise or fully controllable. Sometimes the warp shuns its face to those with the sight, and the vision-path to the future is blocked. Then we see nothing, and have no more knowledge of what lies ahead than any other human.”

Semper felt a surge of disappointment. “Then you saw nothing?”

“Yes, and no, if that can be possible,” answered the Navigator. “The path was open, but I still do not understand what it was I saw. I saw the future, Leoten, but I did not recognise its shape. It was…” He broke off, nervously draining the rest of the wine, setting the empty glass down and looking across at Semper, his normal expression of calm expectancy replaced with one of troubled nervousness. When he spoke again, it was in a voice barely more than a troubled whisper.

“Shadows, Leoten. I looked into the future, and all I found there were shadows.”

The harlequin troupe had been on the move for days now, travelling by some of the webway’s most secret and hidden routes, the full extent of which were known only to the oldest and most venerable of their kind. They stopped only when truly necessary, eating on the move, and even sleeping too, taking it in turns to use the lia’dhethi discipline of mastery of mind and body, the mind resting while the body continued its crude automaton functions. They left the web-way only when necessary too, entering the real universe at several different points over the last few days, transferring between one hidden portal and another when there was no other choice, moving swiftly and silently across the surface

of worlds which were many light years apart in real universe terms but only a day or two's webway travel from each other.

They did not speak unless necessary, and when they did, they never used another's name aloud. The walls of the web-way were thin, and there were things swimming hungrily in the psychic ether beyond those walls, things which prowled eagerly for any due of power or knowledge over the living, mortal inhabitants of the real universe. Even silence could be used as a weapon against the things which waited for them in the realm of the Immaterium.

The troupe was cautious and alert on every step of their journey. Many of their race thought the webway safe from the dangers which threatened them in the real universe, but those who followed the path of the Laughing God knew better. They knew that the darkest and most secret routes of the webway often hid terrible things, and that, even if many of their race could never admit it, there were those other than the scattered eldar of the craftworlds and the Exodite worlds who knew how to find and access the secret routes into the main webway.

The athair leader of the troupe suddenly froze in alert, as the silent mind-speech warning from the margorach scout ahead of them echoed through his consciousness. The rest of the troupe reacted instantly to the mutually-shared warning, dancing into position, nimble hands unhesitatingly finding and drawing forth scabbarded wraithbone swords and bolstered shuriken pistols. The shifting, mystic stuff of the walls of the webway tunnel flickered and pulsed with the reflected rainbow dazzle of activated dathedi holo-suits.

The troupe tensed, ready for whatever threat the Death Jester scout had sensed ahead of them. The athair flashed an urgent mind-speech query to the black-armoured scout, demanding more information. There was a worrying pause, before he received back a confused mélange of the scout's surface thoughts. He sensed doubt and fear in the Death Jester's mind, and a growing feeling of awe and disbelief.

A matching ripple of fear passed through the thoughts of the rest of the troupe. What, they wondered, could bring fear into the mind of one such as a margorach Harlequin, who bodily assumed the role of Death itself in the troupe's mime-pantheon?

In a flash of mind-speech, the troupe saw all that the scout saw, and instantly they knew and understood the reasons for his fear. As one, before even the athair could issue the mind-speech command, they dropped to the ground, sheathing their weapons, bowing their heads and kneeling in respectful abeyance to the entity now coming along the webway passage towards them.

They felt the heat of its passing, heard the heavy tread of its feet, recoiled in mental shock as they brushed minds with it and met the furnace fire of its thoughts.

They remained thus as the entity moved unseen amongst them, only daring to raise their heads once it had safely passed them by. It did not acknowledge their salute. It did not even acknowledge that it had ever been aware of their existence as it moved amongst them, its burning gaze fixed only on some remote and unknown destination.

The athair was the first to raise his head, not daring to look behind him but still seeing the evidence of the entity's passing. A trail of fiery footmarks, too large to belong to any mortal creature, burned into the supposedly immutable stuff of the webway tunnel's floor.

The troupe exchanged nervous, frightened glances, none daring to share their thoughts with any others, but all of them dwelling on the same terrible, awe-filled knowledge.

The burning god walked abroad, unbidden and uncontrolled. The deadly fury which was the avatar of the Bloody-Handed God was awake, and death and catastrophe surely followed in its wake.

PART TWO

CONVERGENCE

TEN

The planet lay somewhere out in the barren reaches beyond the Quinrox Sound, orbiting a dwindling pair of binary dwarfs. Both stars were dying, one already all but extinguished, slowly collapsing into a pulsar and beaming out its distress as a long and silent electronic death-scream to an uncaring universe. Its twin faced its own imminent death with a little more dignity, diminishing quietly but steadily over the long millennia, the stellar heat of its nuclear fires fading and dying, the very substance of its aeons-old body dissipating and fading away in faint, fiery ribbons into the surrounding void.

The world had two remote and distant siblings. Once it had had more, but the fierce gravitic forces exerted by the binary twins had long since taken their toll, and all that now remained of these worlds were thin garlands of broken rock, strung out in long, elliptical orbits round their murderously uncaring parent stars. One of the remaining siblings swung about in an eccentric orbit of both stars, captured in the orbit of first one then the other, alternately freezing and burning as the parent stars fought a jealous gravity tide tug of war over their errant child, each seeking to draw it as close to itself as it could. It was completely uninhabitable, rent constantly by earthquakes, volcanic eruptions and gravity storms which stripped away whole segments of its ravaged planetary surface. The process of its inevitable destruction was already far advanced, and, in time, it too would end its days as a scattered belt of asteroid fields, forever orbiting in mute testimony to its two parents' murderous rivalry.

The other planetary sibling was an adopted orphan: a lone cosmic wanderer, really more a giant meteorite or rogue moon, which had long ago been captured in the twins' eager grasp and had since assumed an eccentric and wild orbit on the remote fringes of the system, resisting its adoptive parents' insistent but gradually weakening pull and remaining far beyond both the knowledge of its two siblings and that invisible but fixed point past which no life could ever flourish upon its dismal and barren surface.

No, the planet drifted alone, safely secured in a narrow marginal orbit between its two warring parents, heedless of the fate which had befallen its less fortunate

siblings.

It had had several names in its time. Names given to it by the ancient races that had trodden the stars long before the birth of humanity, and which had built their monuments and cities upon its surface. Those races were long gone now. They had become less than the drifting dust which was now mostly all that remained of those same supposedly indestructible cities and monuments. After these ancient ones had come the eldar, following in the footsteps of these older races and seeking to recapture their lost glories for themselves. For a while, the eldar had flourished, achieving many of their highest and most secret aims, and then, in one brief but terrible instant, they had fallen, betrayed by their own hubris and secret, dreadful weakness. After the cataclysm, the ones who were left had mostly abandoned worlds such as this, retreating into their scattered and drifting craftworlds and often closing and sealing behind them the webway portals which led to these now dead and empty worlds.

The planet's surface had known the tread of eldar feet since then, but these new ones had come like thieves in the night, moving swiftly and in fear where once their ancestors had walked proud and confident. They had entered the halls and homes of their ancestors, exploring them in a manner more akin to nervous and over-awed tomb raiders than as presumptive heirs to their ancestors' fallen glories.

After the eldar had come the humans, briefly and almost insignificantly. They had come several thousand years ago, just another explorator team investigating the surface of another dead and empty world. They had made their studies, measured the monuments and scratched around amongst the time-worn ruins, tabulated their findings, then had left again with barely a backwards glance. Just another dead and empty world, they surmised, just another one of thousands of such worlds within their Imperium, an Imperium which, unknown to them, had been built in wilful ignorance upon the ruins of so many other, greater and more ancient civilisations which had ruled the galaxy long before the age of man.

Before leaving, though, they had given the world a name: a name which had only recently been remembered for the first time in centuries. Orders from the office of no less a personage than Lord Admiral Ravensburg himself had sent anxious teams of scribes scurrying into the deepest labyrinth reaches of the Administratum archives on Port Maw in search of the urgently required

information. The dusty and long-forgotten transcripts of that ancient explorator mission had been successfully found and recovered, and, once again, the planet's human-given name, a name most probably assigned to it at random by some bored and now long-dead explorator scribe, had been spoken aloud for perhaps the first time ever.

Stabia, they called it. A forgotten and utterly insignificant world on the remotest fringes of the Quinrox Sound, and upon which was focussed the gaze of a select handful of the most powerful men in the Gothic sector. And, beyond them, the secret gaze of others, non-human as well as those who, no matter what they had once been, were now something less than human, was also turned towards Stabia.

The world continued serene and undisturbed in its long slumber, but perhaps even it itself was aware of the forces now descending on it. They came through the warp and through the myriad, twisting paths of the webway, racing towards the prize.

Towards Stabia. Towards the moment of convergence. Towards the shadow point.

Once, long ago, the world now known as Stabia had known the touch of greatness, as the ancient eldar races and those who had sought to follow in their footsteps had walked its surface and left their hidden marks upon it. Now, and soon, Stabia would know something of greatness once more, for it would be upon its lifeless surface that the fate of the Gothic sector, of hundreds of inhabited worlds, and, perhaps the entire Imperium of Mankind itself, would be decided.

In their cells and reliquaries all over the Gothic sector, blind astropath seers consulted the ever-mutable faces of the sacred cards of the Imperial tarot, and paused in fear and wonder at what they found.

In the dome of the crystal seers on far-distant craftworld An-Iolsus, where the dreaming souls of dead eldar gazed forever up through the transparent diamond skin of the dome high above them at the panoply of stars, a faint current of unease breezed through the crystalline forest, disturbing the dreamers' reveries.

In his secure and heavily-guarded sanctum buried deep within the decks of his venerable battle barge flagship Harbinger of Doom, Abaddon the Despoiler listened to the prophecy-whispers of his most favoured pet daemon-things and looked out into the face of the warp with his Chaos-given mystic sight. His plans were well advanced now. His allies were not to be trusted, and would certainly betray or abandon him when it best suited their own purposes, he knew, but the factor had long ago been taken into consideration, and the necessary precautions taken. After all, he reminded himself, smiling briefly at the thought, why else would he have entrusted such a task to a treacherous viper such as Siaphas?

Still, there were uncharacteristic doubts in the mind of the Chaos Warmaster. The daemon-prophecies were confused and contradictory, while his own mystic sight could make little sense of the blurred and shadowy future-images which moved fleetingly across the face of the warp. Deep down, the Chaos Warmaster was troubled. His daemon sword Drach'nyen, hanging on the wall in its jewel-encrusted scabbard of tan-hide Space Marine skin, sensed its master's disquiet and made a long, keening sound of displeasure. Beyond the void-shielded entrance to Abaddon's quarters, his phalanx of Black Legion Terminator bodyguards heard the sound and looked at each other in apprehension, understanding what it meant. The command would not come from the Despoiler for perhaps another minute or two, but already one of the Terminators had activated his vox-link to the slave decks below to order living flesh to be brought up to feed the sword's blood-thirst and help assuage the Warmaster's mood.

Elsewhere, in a place remote from but connected to all other places, other minds and eyes looked at the hidden face of events still to come. They saw the same shadows, the same blurred confusion, but these watchers were unlike those others. They and their kind were masters of the shadows, long at home amongst the dark and hidden places of the universe, and they understood the shadow images as all others did not. They saw the shape of the future and they rejoiced at the death and slaughter to come, for it was all that they had anticipated.

Or, at least, so they thought.

By warp and webway, the players in the coming drama drew closer towards the meeting place. Stabia awaited them. The fhaisorr'ko, the shadow point, awaited them too. As they approached, their fatelines become even more complex and

entangled. The many distorted, mocking faces presented by the mystic shadow point to any who tried to divine its secrets now blurred and changed again, the patterns of intersecting fatelines changing by the moment. Perhaps the very oldest of the ones in the dome of crystal seers, the ones whose life memories reached beyond the dreadful time of the Fall, could have understood what was happening, but they were mostly gone now, their spirits completely subsumed within the soul stream of the infinity circuit, and their voices had not been heard since before even wise old Kariadryl was born. The knowledge was gone now, just another marker on the path of a dying race's slow slide into extinction, and so no eldar alive in the last few thousand years could have known the secret understood by their forebears.

The fhaisorr'ko itself is a trap. It does not hide the future from view, for there is no pre-determined future to conceal. Try to penetrate its mysteries and it will show you the future which most favours you, but the shape of that future is no more real than the phantom images which conceal it.

Perhaps Kariadryl understood something of the true dangerous nature of the shadow point, but these darker ones, who had fallen far further and far more terribly than their one-time craftworld brethren ever had, did not, and, in their cruel arrogance and conceit, they had already become entrapped by the beguiling falsehood of the fhaisorr'ko. They did not know what the ancient pre-Fall eldar had known: the future within the fhaisorr'ko is not set. Anyone within the shadow point can, by their own actions, change their future and that of all others. Nothing is known. Nothing is predetermined. All is there to be won by any of the participants in the coming shadow play.

In the enclosed shell of his armoured strategium, the crippled human husk that was Erwin Ramas floated in an all-enveloping and protecting environment of synthetic amniotic fluid, surrounded by the myriad of wires, tubes, nourishment feeds and tendril-like mechadendrites which kept him alive and connected to the living mind of his vessel. He was asleep, or at least the nearest thing to sleep he would ever know, but, while he slept, that part of him which was so intimately involved with the innermost workings of his ship was awake and active. It communed with the Drachenfels's machine-mind, browsing through the never-ending stream of information flowing through the ship's mighty logic engines. It assessed surveyor and auspex readings, and kept half an eye on the ongoing

status of the ship's weapons and defence systems. It monitored too the steady input of information from the ship's non-mechanical components: duty logs and crew assessments from his officers, damage repair updates from the vast teams of ratings still slaving round the clock to make good the last of the damage suffered in the battle against the greenskins.

Meanwhile, as that mind impulse-linked part of him continued to function, the human part of him slept, reliving the trauma of old battles and old wounds.

"Enemy contact four hundred kilometres to our rear, and starboard! Sigmuth's balls, look how fast it's coming in. Where the hell were our close-range defence augurs? How did he get in so close to us?"

For perhaps the thousandth time in the last one hundred and fifty years, Erwin Ramas heard the panicked voice of his second-in-command as it rang out across the bridge of the ship. Vhoten Kamares, that had been his name. A good enough number two, Ramas had always thought, but too prone to fright, and almost certainly never destined to rise any higher in Imperial Navy service than the rank he already held.

For perhaps the thousandth time, Ramas turned to look at the image on the bank of augur screens. The image captured upon them was simultaneously beguiling and terrifying. The eldar ship raced towards them with its solar sails fully extended, and, for a moment, the pragmatic Ramas was uncharacteristically reminded of the old spaceman's myths of the vacuum valkyries, vast, angel-like creatures which drifted serenely amongst the scattered wreckage of the aftermath of space battles, gathering up the souls of the dead and dying aboard the burned-out hulks and carrying them off to their earned place by the side of the Emperor. The ominous black maws of the ship's forward-mounted torpedo tubes, however, and the clear and deadly intent with which the vessel bore down on its intended prey, gave immediate lie to this particular piece of fanciful spacer legend.

"Hard to starboard," Ramas heard himself say, for perhaps the thousandth time. "Deploy starboard side turrets quintus to octus, and let's give those xenos bastards a good, clean taste of lance fire!"

They were patrolling the trade route circuit between Sicyon and Bladen in the

Lysades sub-sector. Nothing too special or demanding. Just another routine patrol mission to fly the aquila eagle standard across one small part of the Emperor's domain to assure or remind the Emperor's nervous and/or potentially rebellious subjects that the forces of the Imperium were still keeping a careful watch over their worlds.

The eldar attack had come out of nowhere, unprovoked and without warning. They had no way of knowing what the alien ship was even doing here, on the fringes of the sparsely-populated and unimportant Lament system. Ramas doubted they ever would find out, because, as soon as the attack began, it became his firm intention to reduce the alien vessel to just so much drifting space debris.

Now, as Ramas watched the images projected on his bridge's augur screens, he felt the first stirrings of secret doubt about whether he could make good on that promise. The eldar ship seemed to flicker in and out of existence, its image actually jumping confusedly from one place to another in space. At times, Ramas saw multiple images appearing around it, often merging and blurring into each other. Whatever damnable alien technology the vessel was using to defend itself, it had the same confusing effect on his gunners' targeting systems as it did on the human eye. Lance beams cut through space around the oncoming ship, probing in vain to find it. Ramas saw one energy beam harmlessly pass right through what he would have sworn had been the real target and not one of its phantom after-images.

Ghosts, he thought to himself. It's like trying to fight ghosts.

The catastrophe, when it happened, came without warning. As far as Ramas and his officers were aware, they had never even known the eldar ship had launched any torpedoes, not until the brace of missiles, moving almost impossibly fast and seemingly undetectable to the Imperium vessel's senses, struck the base of the Drachenfels's command tower.

An explosion, ferocious, sudden and terrifying, ripped through the floor of the ship's bridge. Ramas saw his second-in-command decapitated by a flying piece of torn deck-plating, and then the blast wave struck him and blew him across the entire deck, smashing him with bone-crushing force against the far wall and impaling him upon the beak point of a gargoyle-faced atmo-breather pipe.

Incredibly, Ramas struggled for a few seconds to pull himself off the thing, before realising, just as a second and more powerful blast ripped up through the gaping hole in the floor, that the effort was futile since the first blast had removed his left arm and both of his legs.

For the thousandth time, Ramas saw the eruption of flame from the torpedo-destroyed decks below. For the thousandth time, he saw it burst across the command deck in a living wall of flame, immolating screaming officers, crewmen and adepts as it swept towards him.

For the thousandth time, he opened his mouth to scream too, but all was lost in the hungry roar of flame as the heat consumed most of his lungs and burned away the flesh of his face.

His last conscious memory, before he mercifully passed out, before the rescue crews cut their way into the wreckage of the command deck and found him impossibly hanging there, barely alive, was of seeing the image of their attacker on a cracked but still-functioning augur screen, as the eldar ship executed a graceful, looping turn around its victim and moved off dispassionately towards the system's edge, swiftly disappearing into the blackness of space.

They had had the Drachenfels at their mercy, and, in their supreme arrogance, had disdained to deliver the killing blow.

A thousand times he had relived these memories. A thousand times he had relived every moment of the crippling of his ship and the destruction of his body. And, a thousand times, he swore he would one day exact his revenge for what they had done to him and his ship.

Fully awake now, he linked his consciousness into his ship's gunnery systems, for the thousandth time rerunning the unique firing solutions and target pattern equations which he had long ago laid into the ship's logic engines. Trapped as he was in this wreck of a body inside his strategium home, he had had plenty of time and opportunity to prepare for another encounter with the eldar in the last century and a half, should any of their kind ever cross his path again.

Yes, just let the arrogant alien bastards come, he told himself, smiling a lipless smile. Next time, he and his ship would be ready for them.

“Prepare yourself, mage. They are coming.”

Siaphas turned at the sound of the eldar lord’s whispering, sibilant voice, the Chaos sorcerer silently angry and alarmed that his mystic senses had not earlier detected the creature’s approach.

There is still so much I do not know or understand about these things, he thought once more, again questioning Abaddon’s wisdom in forming a pact with such strange and unknowable allies.

The eldar lord stood there in the dim light of the chamber. The surrounding shadows seemed to enfold around him, making him part of themselves. Siaphas’s Chaos-altered eyes and mystic warp-sight allowed his gaze to see far beyond mere human limits, but the shadows in which these creatures so often surrounded themselves defied even his abilities to properly see through.

Dark eldar, he thought to himself. An appropriate name, although one he dared not utter in front of them.

The eldar lord’s name was Kailasa—Kailasa of the Kabal of the Poison Heart, in the clannish and baroque way these creatures termed themselves. He was entirely encased in armour, coloured dark red and streaked through with shots of some strange black material which glittered and shifted when he moved, breaking up the shape of his body. Whether this was for decoration or, more likely, designed for a defensive purpose in battle, was something the Chaos sorcerer had yet to discover. Cruel, mono-molecular edged blades ran down the seams of the limbs of the eldar’s armoured suit, and one hand ended in an ominous, lumpy metal protuberance which could variously be, Siaphas speculated, either an unfamiliar type of hand-held weapon, a mechanical limb attachment, part of the eldar’s armour or even a combination of all three.

The dark eldar lord wore a full closed helm, styled in the same design as his suit. Like many of his kind, Kailasa seemed to prefer to go about his business masked, even here, aboard the relative safety of his own cruiser vessel. Even so, Siaphas could imagine the set of the kabal commander’s features beneath the burnished and featureless face of the helm: his skin pale and taut across his

slender eldar skull, his eyes dark and glittering, full of cruel malice, his lips fixed in a constant and secret arrogant sneer.

Siaphas had served several lifetimes in the court of the Despoiler and had travelled extensively throughout the daemon worlds of the Eye of Terror at the bidding of both Abaddon and Zaraphiston. He thought he had encountered evil and malicious cunning in all its forms, in the inexhaustible variety of the monstrous and degenerate shapes thrown up by the whim of the Powers of Chaos and lovingly nurtured along and brought to full, abominable fruition by the daemonic forces within the Eye of Terror, but these dark eldar creatures were of a more terrible nature than anything he could ever have imagined. He had seen something of the place Commorragh, their hidden fastness concealed within the vast, mystic labyrinth they called the webway, and he was both awestruck and repelled by the cruel depravities which these beings, unclaimed and unwarped by the tainting glories of Chaos, could devise using nothing more than their own still-mortal intelligence and imagination.

Pure hate, that was what they were, he had realised from the time he had spent in their company. Their hate was stellar in its pureness and intensity, directed at a pitiless universe which so uncaringly reduced them to such degenerate circumstances; hate directed at those who had once been their race-kin, and who had not been consumed by the same dire fate which had befallen them.

And hatred too, directed most terribly and secretly at themselves. Siaphas did not yet know the secrets these dark eldar creatures hid about themselves and their past, but he knew that they had once been something far greater than the malice-consumed things which they now were. They secretly hated all that they were and even more secretly coveted all that they had once been, and so they took their pent-up fury out on all other races in the universe.

Hate consumed them, and, Siaphas was sure, fear drove them. They were filled with an overriding fear of something, something that loomed vast and terrible over them, blotting out all other concerns. Siaphas did not know what the root of this fear was, although he intended to find out, and soon, but already he realised that, in combination with that all-consuming hatred, it was the source of everything which made the dark eldar what they now were.

Yes, dangerous allies, Siaphas reminded himself. But, potentially, very useful

ones too. These creatures were a weapon; a weapon which in the right hands could advance the one who knew how to wield it correctly to unparalleled heights of power.

Had the Despoiler made a dual mistake in sending him here, the Chaos sorcerer wondered? The first mistake was perhaps trying to make an alliance with such beings, but the second was surely in bringing Siaphas and these creatures together. The Despoiler, in his conceit and arrogance, thought that the dark eldar existed only to serve him and his purposes, but Siaphas already knew that beings such as these did not comply so easily with the plots and plans of others.

Perhaps, the Chaos sorcerer mused pleasurably to himself, it took a schemer of his own intelligence and vision to truly understand the nature of these dark eldar, and to realise that, with the correct measure of cunning and manipulation, it might be possible to engineer an alliance of mutual benefit with such as they.

Siaphas smiled again at the thought. Perhaps, after so many thousands of years of dominance, Abaddon the Despoiler was indeed finally beginning to lose his grip, for how else could he have made the potentially fatal error of delivering so potent a weapon as these dark eldar into the hands of one such as Siaphas?

“My lord Kailasa,” the Chaos sorcerer bowed, displaying all the gestures of false abeyance and respect which had served him so well during centuries of service in the court of Abaddon the Despoiler, while adding an extra and subtle flourish to his body language picked up from his observations of the mannerism of his dark eldar hosts. “You are certain of this? I have cast my own augur-spells, and have seen nothing, although I readily admit my own humble inferiority in such matters, in comparison to whatever scrying methods your lordship and his servants have call on.”

Behind his burnished mask, Kailasa smiled in amusement. The mon-keigh sought to use him for its own purposes, he knew. It pleased the kabal lord to continue this amusing fiction for the mon-keigh creature’s benefit, if only because it made the end all the more pleasurable when, at the close of the game, the would-be manipulator realised the extent to which he himself had been manipulated right from the very start.

“We are certain,” Kailasa said simply, knowing how much his answer would

only further set the mon-keigh's mind pondering. "Your own forces are ready?"

"They are, my lord," said the mon-keigh, executing another overly-extravagant and crudely-interpreted flourish. "They await my signal. When do we make our move?"

"We allow our enemies to gather. We allow them to get a sense of each other. We allow their mutual fears and suspicion to grow."

"And then what, lord Kailasa?"

Another bow, another flourish, more ridiculous mon-keigh apeing of eldar mannerisms. Kailasa allowed the question to hang in the air for a few seconds before he finally deigned to answer.

"And then, mage, we begin the hunt."

ELEVEN

“My compliments, Semper. You command a fine vessel, and lay on an even finer spread at your captain’s table!”

There was a polite ripple of laughter at Pardain’s joke as the admiral crammed another forkful of Stranivarite borsch meat into his mouth. Red juice dribbled down the man’s chin, and he dabbed at it with a napkin as he soaked up the mirth of his fellow diners.

Despite appearances, the fat, aged and ruddy-faced rear admiral was nobody’s fool. Lothar Pardain—Lothar Rodriguez Ravensburg-Pardain, to give him his full name—was uncle to the commander of Battlefleet Gothic. Unlike other members of the vast and disparate Ravensburg clan such as captain of the Graf Orlok, Titus von Blucher, however, Pardain owed his position far more to ability and shrewd intelligence than common nepotism. Semper knew his Battlefleet Gothic history, and knew that Pardain, before accepting a senior staff position at Battlefleet Command on Port Maw, had been a highly able and distinguished commander in his own right. His treatises on orbital siege and close in-system fighting were required reading during Semper’s days as a young officer.

“I don’t know what qualifications you have as a connoisseur, admiral,” said Semper, lifting his glass in acknowledgement to Pardain and raising another polite ripple of laughter from the other diners, “but, coming from the man who commanded the battlecruiser Manifest Destiny during the Vara Campaign and who also carried the day in the Holy Emperor’s favour during the Kierkegaard Heresy, I shall humbly accept your first observation as a compliment of the very highest kind. Your health, admiral.”

Semper downed the glass—full to the brim with the peppery red Cypra Mundian liqueur which the rear admiral had gifted to the ship when he first came aboard at Elysium—in one swift motion, choking back the taste which, as a young cadet at naval academy, he had quickly come to loathe.

The others at the table followed suit. Pardain accepted the toast and then downed his measure in the same way, laughing as he slammed the empty glass down on

the table before him.

“Ha, no matter how long it’s been, you don’t forget the taste of raikhi in a hurry, do you, Semper? Emperor only knows why we in the Segmentum Obscuras battlefleets are required by tradition to drink the damnably foul stuff all the time. I once met a Master of Ordnance who told me that the Fury pilots aboard his carrier ship mixed it with promethium fuel from their own fighters for new arrivals aboard ship to drink as some kind of initiation rite into their squadron. Unfortunately, the man was unable to tell me whether, as I suspect, the resulting concoction actually improved the taste of the original drink!”

There was more laughter from the other diners, but this time it was more sincere and heartfelt, encouraged all the further by Pardain’s own bellowing laughter to the punchline of his own joke. The mood round the table, until now stiff and formal, palpably relaxed and Semper mentally raised another glass to the rear admiral in appreciation of the adroitness at which the wily old command staffer had broken the ice at the meal.

No, Rear Admiral Lothar Pardain-Ravensburg, holder of the Obscuras Honorifica, the Order of the Gothic Star crimson class and the Golden Seal of Terra, was nobody’s fool, and it was not difficult to understand why Lord Admiral Ravensburg had sent him along on this mission as his own personal envoy and observer.

Pardain crammed in another mouthful of food—Semper had not been keeping count, but believed that the rear admiral was now on his third plateful—and signalled for one of the nearby attendants to refill his glass, waving away the proffered bottle of raikhi.

“Away with that devil’s brew, boy,” he jovially told the nervous young ensign. “Find me a carafe or two of amasec or some of that agreeably potent Stranivarite spirit which old Admiral Haasen, Emperor rest his soul, once had the good grace to introduce me to. Search the ship from prow to stern, if need be. I know your captain must have a secret store of the good stuff hidden somewhere!”

More laughter. More breaking of the ice. Semper glanced down the table, taking stock of the situation. Ulanti, seated several places down, was talking to the grey and gaunt Commodore Neyland, Pardain’s aide-de-camp. Despite the difference

in the two men's ages and temperaments, they seemed to find common cause in both being blueblood aristocrats of suitably fine and venerable stock. Neyland came from some far-flung line of nobility which had an impressively tenacious grasp on power in several star systems within the Gethsemane sub-sector, and Semper looked forward to a full briefing from his second-in-command on anything relevant to their mission by the Port Maw staff officer. Semper assumed that any titbits seemingly dropped by accident by Neyland in the course of casual conversation would be deliberately-revealed information coming, in the end, from Pardain himself.

Further down the table, Broton Styre and Remus Nyder exchanged a raucous and increasingly lewd series of anecdotes between themselves as the meal continued and the drink continued to flow, while, seated at the far end of the table, even Commissar Kyogen deigned to exchange a few words with his closest dinner neighbour. Semper tried hard not to stare, struck by the strangely random thought that, up until this moment, he doubted that he had ever even seen the relentlessly stern Ship's Commissar do anything as mundane as actually eating a meal in other human company.

Occasionally, Kyogen would look up and glower in disapproval towards Semper's end of the table. Semper, following the commissar's latest frowning gaze, saw the figure of Chief Petty Officer Maxim Borusa standing to attention in full dress uniform behind where Ulanti was sitting. If the big Stranivarite was aware of the unfriendly attention of the *Macharius*'s senior Ship's Commissar, he gave no indication. Semper frowned, sensing coming trouble between the two. He knew something of Borusa's below-decks activities, but feigned to turn a deaf ear to any reports on the subject which managed to reach him. Such things had always gone on aboard the vessels of His Divine Majesty's Imperial Navy, and it was a foolish captain who did not realise that these kind of illicit arrangements, if kept within reason, were necessary for the smooth running of any ship and its crew.

Also, he was forced to admit to himself, he had a grudging admiration for the big hiveworld rogue. He had seen the man in action during the events on Belatis, when Borusa had actually saved his life, and Semper had long ago decided that, even if he were an unrepentant cutthroat gangster and killer, Maxim Borusa was still exactly the kind of man he would want by his side in a tight situation.

Still, if Commissar Kyogen was gunning for the *Macharius*'s most valuable and notorious chief petty officer then that was Borusa's look-out, and Semper couldn't and wouldn't intervene if the commissar gathered enough evidence to allow him to take typically swift and summary action against Borusa.

Mindful of his duties as host, Semper turned his attention back to the rest of the table. His other guests, seated on the opposite side of the long table from the navy officers, were noticeably less ebullient in their conversation habits. Semper imagined that the servants of the Holy Orders of the Emperor's Inquisition were not usually selected for service in the Imperium's most arcane and secretive organisation with their more garrulous qualities in mind. Nevertheless, Werner Maeler seemed to have struck up a tentative exchange with the Inquisition man seated across from him early in the meal, and now the two men were deep in conversation. Semper recognised the man as Haller Stavka, Inquisitor Horst's chief lieutenant. When the inquisitor and his retinue came aboard, and even before Semper had been introduced to the man, he recognised Stavka for the ex-arbiter he clearly once had been. The man was in mufti, wearing a plain black and grey bodyglove and a rough woollen waistcoat, but, even without seeing and recognising the tell-tale justice eagle aquila tattoo on his firmly-muscled shoulder, there was no mistaking him for anything other than the highly capable and no doubt brutally lethal servant of the Imperium which he most assuredly was.

Inquisitor Horst, seated beside his chief lieutenant and directly across from Pardain, was still predictably much of an enigma to the officers and crew of the *Macharius*. Tall, thin and greying—he showed all the signs of expensive and subtle rejuve treatment, and Semper could only make a haphazard guess at his age as being somewhere between sixty or as much as four or five times that figure—he was the typical vidpict propaganda drama image of an Imperial inquisitor, right down to the Inquisition skull emblem seal of office which he wore upon his black mesh-leather coat, even at the dinner table.

Semper knew that many Imperial inquisitors possessed some form of psychic ability. Semper had the typical loyal Imperial servant's quiet dread of those touched by the mystic properties of the warp and the things which lurked within it. Despite this, his position as a commander of a vessel of the Imperial Navy meant that he was frequently forced to consort with psychically-endowed Imperial servants such as astropaths and Navigators, and he was aware of the

strange and unsettling sense of otherness which surrounded psykers like an invisible cloak. He got no such sense from Horst on the several occasions he had met him since the inquisitor and his retinue came aboard the *Macharius*. Nevertheless, it was seemingly some kind of prescient sense which caused Horst to glance up at that moment and catch Semper watching him.

Horst held his gaze. Sensing a conversational opening, Semper made his play.

“I trust the quarters you and your staff have been given are comfortable and adequate for your purposes, inquisitor?”

“They are most satisfactory, commodore. In return, I trust your officers haven’t been too discomforted by having to share quarters for the duration of this voyage?”

“Not as far as I know,” answered Semper, all too aware of the endless litany of complaints of the thirty or forty of his junior officers who had been evicted from their quarters to make room for Horst and his servants.

“I’m curious, though, inquisitor,” continued Semper, “I admit to having encountered few servants of the Inquisition during my own time of service in the navy, but I wasn’t aware that inquisitors travelled with such large personal staffs.”

Horst paused, laying down his glass of amasec. “The Inquisition is a broad church, commander,” he answered, looking Semper in the eye. “We all serve the same purpose, my brethren and I, although our methods and philosophies may differ. Some philosophies more than others, perhaps,” he added as a musing afterthought, taking another sip of the fiery spirit. “While some of my brother inquisitors travel almost incognito and surround themselves with only the smallest band of followers seconded to their service, I believe that the purposes of the Inquisition and the Imperium as a whole are best served by an inquisitor’s full use of the power and authority invested in him.”

“How many do you have in your personal staff?” asked Pardain, joining the conversation.

“Ordinarily? Never anything less than between fifty and sixty at any one time,”

answered the inquisitor. “But an inquisitor has the entire resources of the Imperium to draw on, so, when necessary, when I decide that the situation demands it, I have often had good call to second many more than that into my temporary service.”

He looked again at Semper and Pardain. “Many, many more than that,” he repeated again, significantly.

Both navy officers could not fail to pick up his meaning. Pardain cleared his throat noisily then drained the last of the contents of his glass. Even before he set it back down on the table, the ensign attendant was already starting to refill it.

“Three capital vessel ships of the line, not to mention two Sword-class frigates and all the attack craft squadrons aboard this very splendid vessel. You do yourself too little credit, inquisitor. I’ve known entire planets taken with a smaller ‘temporarily seconded staff’ than the one you have under your command here.” Pardain paused, wiping his lips on a napkin, and gestured towards Semper. “The good commodore here thought he was merely transporting an honoured guest, but now he learns that in fact he was welcoming aboard his new commander in chief when you transferred over to the *Macharius* at Elysium!”

Despite the apparent humour in Pardain’s voice, Semper was uncomfortably aware of the rear admiral’s barely-concealed anger at the idea that the naval vessels and their crews might be under Horst’s direct command if the inquisitor deemed such action necessary. Aware of the long-standing historical enmity between the Inquisition and the most senior levels of Battlefleet Gothic Command, Semper felt that some subtle diplomacy was called for.

“As you say, inquisitor, and like you and your comrades in the Inquisition, we all serve in different ways, but we still all serve the same purpose. My ship, my crew and my own loyalty to the Emperor are all at your disposal, should you so wish them.”

Horst nodded in polite gratitude in reply to Semper’s words. Pardain followed up with a more measured reply of his own.

“As is my loyalty. I meant no disrespect, of course, inquisitor, but I’m sure our good Commodore Semper and his officers would be more assured of the role

you perhaps intend for them to play if they actually knew more of the purpose of this mission?"

Horst smiled. "I thought the Lord Admiral's orders were clear on the matter. Admiral Pardain. We will take up rendezvous station in far orbit around the world of Stabia and await further orders."

Yes, but who is it that we're supposed to be having this rendezvous with, thought Semper to himself? He wondered again about the possibility of Horst possessing some kind of psychic ability as the inquisitor looked over at him and smiled.

"Patience, commodore. I promise you'll be fully briefed when we reach the rendezvous point."

A junior helm officer entered the dining room and nervously hurried over to Semper, whispering something urgently into his captain's ear. Semper laid down his cutlery, carefully wiped his lips with a napkin, and rose to his feet. The other conversation round the table died away. The senior officers of the *Macharius* looked expectantly towards their captain.

"I look forward to finally learning more about this mission, inquisitor, especially since it appears it will be occurring even earlier than expected." He looked towards his officers, who rose as one from the table. For the men of the *Macharius*, at least, the meal was now over and duty called once more.

"Gentlemen, our Ship's Navigator has surpassed himself once more. Our voyage is ahead of schedule and we'll shortly be arriving at our destination. Duty positions, gentlemen. We exit the warp in less than one hour."

In a series of closely synchronised energy eruptions, the *Macharius* and its sister vessels burst through the barrier of the immaterium and re-entered the real universe on the edge of the Stabia system.

The *Macharius* led the way, flanked on either side by its two companions, Drachenfels and Graf Orlok. Two Sword-class frigates, the Volpone and the Mosca, followed in the larger vessels' warp wakes, immediately separating away from the three capital ships to form their own squadron formation.

Surveyor and augur scans from all five vessels probed into the unfamiliar reaches of the system, searching for any source of danger to the Imperial vessels. Quickly, and one by one, the captains of each vessel received the collected information from their bridge crews.

“The system is clear, captain,” reported Ulanti. “No signs of any potential hostiles or any hazards to navigation, other than those already charted.”

Semper nodded, and studied the data-slate summary of the surveyor scan findings. “So what do you think, Mister Ulanti?”

“I think, captain, that if I were planning to lay an ambush for someone then this would be the perfect spot to do so. You could hide a Ramilies star-fort or two in the electronic backwash from that damned pulsar and any recently-arriving vessel here would be none the wiser from the scrambled surveyor readings it would get back from the thing. Emperor only knows how many ships you could cloak in amongst those asteroid belts.”

Semper smiled. “Agreed, Mister Ulanti. By the time you get close enough in-system to see what might be hiding in the petticoats of that pulsar star, then whatever’s waiting for you in those rock fields would have had plenty of opportunity to jump out and bite you on the arse.”

Now Ulanti smiled. “So what are your orders, captain?”

“We’re Battlefleet Gothic, Mister Ulanti,” came the expected and welcome reply. “The best damn fleet in the best damn segmentum in the whole damn galaxy, and we don’t turn tail at the suggestion of the possibility of trouble.”

“Indeed not, captain,” said Ulanti, taking his role in the traditional and well-loved old navy man’s joke. “After all, that’s what the Holy Emperor, in His divine wisdom, created the battlefleets of the Segmentums Solar, Tempestus and Ultima for.”

“Indeed so, Mister Ulanti. Signal the battle-squadron—all vessels to continue in-system on their current course and speed. Defence shields raised and fully charged. Long-range surveyor scans at maximum powers. Any scan anomalies to be reported at once and fully catalogued and investigated.”

Semper caught the querying glance from his second-in-command.

“We’re Battlefleet Gothic, Hito, and that means we don’t run away from a scrap, but it also means that we don’t go running blind straight into the jaws of trouble like a bunch of over-zealous and battle-eager Space Marines.”

“A sound policy, commodore, although perhaps it’s best for you that there aren’t any brethren of the Adeptus Astartes around here to hear you express such sentiments.”

Semper turned, seeing Horst entering the command deck and coming towards him. He was accompanied by his Arbites right-hand man, Stavka, who was now wearing a flak vest and a holstered bolt pistol harness. With them also was the inquisitor’s other main lieutenant. Semper had only briefly glimpsed the man when he had first come aboard the *Macharius* and he had not attended the earlier meal, even though an invitation had been extended to him. Semper tried hard not to stare too much in curiosity at the glowing circuit patterns of electro-glyph markings on the man’s face and shaven skull, nor at the unfamiliar nature of the man’s cyber-adaptations. Emperor knows, the tech-priest servants of the Adeptus Mechanicus were common enough aboard an Imperial warship, especially on the command deck, but Semper had never before encountered one such as this.

Officer of the Watch Broton Styre and his armsmen guards bristled in righteous indignation at the sight of the sidearm openly worn by the ex-Arbites man. It was bad enough that non-naval personnel had entered the bridge without first seeking the captain’s permission, but the fact that at least one of them—and Semper suspected that Horst rarely if ever went about unarmed—was blatantly carrying a firearm, the most severe kind of breach of command deck security imaginable to the navy men. Semper quelled their indignation with a subtle glance. As with so many other things this was yet another example of the fact that the members of the Inquisition seemed to operate under entirely different rules than those which applied to the more lowly servants of the Imperium of Mankind.

“Inquisitor Horst, welcome to the bridge of His Divine Majesty’s Ship, the Lord Solar *Macharius*,” noted Semper, dryly.

If the inquisitor detected any irony in Semper’s welcome, he gave no indication.

Instead, he indicated the figure of his tech-priest advisor. “Commodore, with your permission, I would like my associate Monomachus to check your surveyor readings and possibly make some adjustments to their frequency range.”

Navy captains had been known to throw civilians not just off their bridge but right off their ship for such apparent impertinence, but Semper knew that, sadly, such an option did not apply in this case. He acquiesced to the inquisitor’s request with a simple gesture.

Monomachus went to work at the bridge’s surveyor section. Anxious and irritated surveyor officers hovered around him, maintaining a suspicious watch on everything he was doing.

“We’ve conducted a full surveyor sweep of the system,” Semper told Horst, careful to keep any irritation out of his voice. “If there’s anything out there other than us, we’ve not found it yet.”

Horst’s reply was smooth and diplomatic. “I don’t doubt the skills of your surveyor crewmen or the quality of your ship’s technical systems, commodore, but sometimes it helps to know exactly what you’re looking for.”

Monomachus was approaching them now, handing a data-slate to Semper. “Commodore Semper, with your permission, I would suggest a temporary adjustment of your vessel’s surveyor systems’ frequency range to the following new settings.”

Semper looked down at the technical data scrolling across the slate’s viewing plate, and frowned. “These frequencies are extremely low-level, and the prime fluctuation vector you’re suggesting in these equations is extremely unorthodox. The Despoiler’s vessels aren’t too dissimilar to our own, with a broadly similar power output signature. Anything two or more ratio levels above these figures is enough to detect anything, friend and foe alike, within a radius of at least three AUs.”

“Indulge us, commodore,” smiled Horst.

Semper nodded curtly to his surveyor officers, who immediately set about making the necessary adjustments to their instruments.

“The surveyor devices will take some moments to match the recalibrated settings we have introduced into them,” warned Monomachus. “In the meantime, it would be best if…”

He broke off, looking meaningfully towards Horst.

“Tell your crew to be prepared, Semper,” said Horst, taking up the warning. “Tell them that, no matter what appears on their auspex screens, they are to take no offensive action of any kind. You can consider this a command backed by the full authority of the Emperor’s Inquisition.”

“And what exactly are you expecting to find out here, inquisitor?” asked Semper, refusing to be intimidated on the bridge of his own vessel by anyone, even a senior inquisitor.

Horst did not immediately answer. A few moments later, one of the junior gunnery officers did it for him.

“Throne of Earth! There, eighteen thousand kilometres to our starboard rear. Vandire’s teeth, they’re practically staring right up our arse!”

A loud babble of exclamations and oaths from tech-adepts and surveyor officers quickly confirmed the sightings. Semper looked at the data-images suddenly appearing on the augur screens all round the command deck. He kept his composure, but it took all his will not to react in the way which his every command instinct compelled him to.

Eldar vessels. Three of them, all easily within striking distance of the *Macharius* and its sister ships.

The newly recalibrated surveyor readings clearly showed the signatures of three alien ships—one capital-class ship and two escorts—keeping perfectly synchronised formation as they shadowed the Imperial ships’ course into the Stabia system.

“Remember my command, commodore, and pass it on to your fellow captains. No hostile action is to be taken against the alien ships unless they attack first, or unless I command it. Maintain your present course in-system, and have your communications officers closely monitor these comm-net frequencies. They may

have to make some changes to their equipment. If that is the case, then Monomachus will be glad to show them how."

Semper looked at the comm-channel frequency information on the data-slate handed to him by Horst. As with the surveyor settings, the information displayed was strange and unfamiliar, the frequencies at the far end of the spectrum from those used by the Imperium. He handed the data-slate to a communications officer, and looked speculatively at Horst.

"I assume then that we have just made a successful rendezvous with the parties you were expecting to meet here, inquisitor?"

Horst smiled. "I understand your concern, commodore, but, if we achieve everything I hope, then what we do today may change the course of the war and save untold numbers of worlds."

Erwin Ramas sifted through the streams of new data flooding into him through the mind-link with the Drachenfels. He had received the almost incomprehensible orders relayed from the inquisitor aboard the *Macharius*, and, like the other vessels in the Imperial formation, his crew had recalibrated their surveyor systems in the same way as the *Macharius* had. Now the four eldar ships stood revealed to the Drachenfels's electronic senses, and Semper studied their detestably alien and unfamiliar shapes with a detached and coldly cruel interest.

It had been more than a hundred and fifty years since he had last encountered the eldar, but here they were again, cruising through space well within range of his vessel's lance turrets like a peace-time flotilla parading before some local planetary dignitary at a ceremonial review of the fleet.

Ramas didn't know what dangerous foolishness the Lord Admiral and that damnable inquisitor on the *Macharius* had had in mind when they had come up with the idea for this mission the Drachenfels and its two sister ships had been despatched on, but he knew one important thing.

The eldar were not to be trusted. He'd follow orders and hold his fire, but, at the first sign of treachery from those xenos scum, he'd let fly with everything the

Drachenfels had.

He reached out through the mind link into the ship's matriculators, retrieving his precious firing solution programs. He activated them, running them in a practice simulation through the Drachenfels's logic engines, his mind flickering back and forth between the simulation and the real-time information relayed to him by the ship's surveyor and auspex systems. He compared the two data streams, and then merged them, using the surveyor-gathered information on the nearby eldar ships as the new model for the firing simulation.

Ramas's equations had been good, he knew, and the logic engine-created phantasm images were fine enough for what they were, but it was always better to have a real target and hard data to work with.

The logic engines waged the imaginary battle amongst themselves. Non-existent lance beams cut through an imaginary void to find and strike illusionary targets. Phantom explosions erupted in an intangible battle-zone which existed only in the ship's dreaming machine-mind.

Ramas studied the results, and made the necessary corrections to his firing solutions and targeting equations. He ran the simulation again. This time, he was far more satisfied with the outcome.

He smiled his lipless smile. He would follow orders, but he would watch the enemy ships and be ready for the first sign of treachery. When that happened, he promised himself, they would find him more than ready and prepared to settle old scores.

Somewhere else within the Stabia system, hidden vessels watched and waited. They hid in shadow, cloaked from the senses of the other vessels, even those of the eldar ships. They monitored the transmission bursts that passed between the two groups of ships. The occupants of these hidden watcher ships could not decode these transmissions, but their meaning was clear enough.

Slowly, the two formations split up, spreading out to take up preset positions throughout the small solar system. The remaining two ships, one eldar, one human, remained in high orbit above the dead world, each of them balefully

studying the other as their comrade ships warily stalked each other in wide, elliptical picket guard orbits, their scanner senses trained more on each other than in search of any unknown threat which might be waiting out there for them.

Aboard the hidden watcher ships, power and propulsion systems were slowly nursed into life, and the abominable, twisted things they carried in their prison-holds were roused and brutally herded into their waiting positions aboard barb-prowed boarding torpedoes and assault craft.

Swiftly, silently, the dark eldar ships slid out of their place of concealment, like an assassin's poisoned dagger being stealthily drawn from its hidden sheath.

The hunt had begun.

For the first time in millennia, the burning god walked upon the earth of a world. Wherever it walked, destruction followed in its wake.

The world itself was unimportant. Once it may have belonged to the children of Asuryan, but they had abandoned it long ago, retreating back to the comparative safety of their craftworlds.

Now other, lesser, races had chanced upon the world, not caring or knowing anything of its previous inhabitants, and, in their ignorance and conceit, these new would-be conquerors had built their settlements upon the ruins left behind by their vanquished betters.

The burning god was angry. So much of the webway had been lost since it had last walked its secret, mystic byways. Passages were blocked off or too unstable to be safely traversed. Whole sections had disappeared or been destroyed. Several times now, it had been forced to make detours, seeking alternative paths towards its destination via several remote and long-unused nodal points.

This world was one such nodal point, containing several hidden but still-active entrances to the webway. The burning god had exited the webway several hundred kilometres to the south, amongst the ruins of what had once, long-ago, been an Exodite colony. Little remained of the place's delicate wraithbone towers and shimmering crystalline fortifications, though. Instead, the burning god had found the place overrun by the planet's new inhabitants, the universal

pestilence known as orks. Foolishly, the greenskin animals had built their own foul settlement upon the ruins of the Exodite colony. Emerging through the hidden webway portal which, unknown to the orks had been active and amongst them all along, the burning god had immediately set about showing them the error of their ways.

When it left the place, nothing but dead ashes remained.

Travelling across the surface of the world, it encountered more of the creatures. Its anger grew with each encounter, anger at the realisation that all the children of Asuryan had once achieved here had been swept away by the seemingly endless tide of greenskins.

Now, reaching its destination, it found that this place too had been colonised by the ork pestilence. The animals seemed to have been warned of its coming and rode out to meet it in battle. They bore down on it in waves of their bizarre and noisome vehicles. They whooped and shouted in excitement, firing their weapons into the air.

The burning god met them with the full force of its rising anger.

Another wave of gunfire struck it as it stepped through the tangled, burned-out remnants of an orkoid vehicle, crushing the wreck beneath its burning tread. The gunfire increased in intensity. Many of the projectiles—crudely-cast metal slugs—vaporised into molten mist even as they struck the white-hot iron exterior of its armoured skin. Other, larger calibre shots impacted against it, although it barely registered the blows.

The burning god growled to itself in irritation, turning its glowering gaze towards the source of the gunfire, and sent out a blast of glowing fire with one sweep of its rune-carved sword blade. The line of greenskin vehicles exploded in sequence, the mystic fire jumping from one to the other, consuming their screaming crews in a halo of black fire and detonating ammunition stocks and primitive fossil fuel tanks. Ork infantry ran in panic from the conflagration, and were reduced to ash by another sweep of the burning blade held in the god’s hand. Their shrieks mingled with the sword’s scream as it gloried in the psychic aura of their death agonies.

Three more of the orks' crude, smoke-belching vehicles rode towards it, spitting out streams of rapid-fire projectiles from the swivel-mounted weapons built upon them. The burning god blew one apart with a brief flick of its mystic blade. The next was armed with some kind of flamer weapon. Had it been able, the burning god might have laughed at the pathetic futility of the attack as the flamer vehicle's gunner directed the weapon at it and enveloped it in a heavy blanket of chemically-produced flame. The burning god strode through the wall of fire, and swung its sword, shearing through bike, driver, weapon and gunner with one simple slash.

The third vehicle, a rumbling half-track loaded down with howling orks, bore down straight at it. The burning god braced itself in readiness. The orks did not realise it, but, even if they had had one to use, not even a traktor beam weapon could have moved the avatar from the spot where it now stood.

The vehicle impacted against the burning god, completely destroying itself just as if it had run straight into the immobile, immovable foot of one of the humans' great Titan war-machines. Screaming orks, bursting into flames as they came into contact with the super-heated air around the burning god, flew through the air amidst the wreckage of their vehicle. The burning god lowered its guard and moved on, walking through the scattered wreckage, the heat of its passing detonating the vehicle's fuel tank and causing ammunition-loaded weapons in the hands of dead and dying orks to explode apart.

More gunfire buzzed through the air around the burning god, the occasional heavier round splattering in a molten mess against its skin. It saw its objective before it, the distinctive, conical-shell shape of the ancient temple of Asuryan still visible amidst the desecrating jumble of barrack huts, watchtowers and weapon workshops that the ork animals had constructed around it.

A haphazardly-designed battlement wall ran round the settlement, its single gate made from a section of scavenged space vessel hull, and firmly barred against the burning god's advance. The battlements were lined with orks, and sweating teams of smaller orkoid creatures laboured to turn a huge rusty capstan wheel, bringing the wide muzzles of the turret weapons on top of the gate swinging round towards the burning god.

The god spoke, uttering a few sounds which only the most venerable farseers

would recognise as being words of power. As it spoke, it thrust its burning blade into the ground at its feet. The earth erupted open, and a blazing line of fire ran towards the gate with preternatural speed. Immediately, the ork shouts of triumph and scorn from the battlement walls turned to howls of fear and panic. A few seconds later, the fire line found its target. The gate and large portions of the battlements on either side of it blew apart in an incandescent fireball.

The burning god walked on, oblivious to the soil, battlement wreckage and orkoid remains showering down all around it from the sky.

It strode through the cratered hole where the gates had stood. A crude, clanking ork machine-thing lumbered forward to meet it. The burning god advanced on it, ignoring the pounding hail of shells from the machine's weapon arm which hammered against its iron skin. Reaching the machine, the burning god severed the thing's clumsy power-claw limb with one blow from its wailing blade. Sparks and black hydraulic fluid sprayed out from the twitching metal stump, and the machine-thing staggered back as if it were in pain. The burning god ran it through with its sword, the weapon wailing with surprised glee as it tasted the flesh of the ork pilot hidden inside the machine.

The burning god continued into the ork settlement, killing everything that attempted to stop it.

A massive ork in primitive power armour charged at it, roaring in ferocious anger as it swung a whirring, double-handed chainsword round its head. The burning god reached out and grabbed the ork by the throat, lifting it clear off the ground. Holding it by one hand, it shook the screaming ork as if it were nothing more than a puppet. The unnatural heat from its hand melted through the stuff of the ork's armour, igniting the creature's flesh. In seconds, the creature was ablaze from head to foot. The burning god shook the blazing puppet-thing, causing pieces of it to fall to the ground in a rain of fiery gobbets. Finally, it dropped the empty, fire-blackened armour to the ground and continued on.

A strange, giggling ork in brightly-coloured robes danced and capered before the god on the steps of the temple building, waving a brass-knobbed staff at the burning god as it chanted out a stream of gibberish. The air between them swam with psychic energy, and flickering ribbons of destructive warp power crackled harmlessly against the god's skin.

The avatar killed the ork psyker with one fiery glance. The ork collapsed onto the steps, rolling in agony. Smoke and weird-coloured flame emerged from its mouth, nose and eyes as the contents of its skull ignited from within.

The burning god entered the temple. It could sense the faint aura of the hidden webway portal buried deep amongst the building's foundations. It would take some time to locate the portal, and more time still to activate and open it.

Unhurried and relentless, the burning god continued on its journey. It sensed the events unfolding at its ultimate destination. This detour and the unnecessary distraction of having to deal with the greenskin animals had cost it much precious time. Now it was no longer sure it would be able to arrive in time to change the course of those events.

TWELVE

“As commander of this vessel and the man responsible for your safety, inquisitor, I really must protest in the strongest possible terms to this course of action.”

Yes, and also as the man whose head Lord Admiral Ravensburg will surely serve up on a silver platter to the Inquisition and the High Lords of Terra, should anything happen to their personal envoy to the Gothic sector, thought Semper, no longer caring about the unknown possibilities of Horst’s mind-reading abilities.

“Duly noted,” said Horst smoothly, as they rode the elevator together down to the shuttle bay. “You may, if you wish and with my full approval and Inquisitorial authorization, register your protest with Monomachus, who, in the event of my not returning from the planet below, will convey it to Battlefleet Command when this mission is over.”

Horst caught the look of surprise on Semper’s face. “If, as you suspect, this is indeed some kind of xenos trick, commodore, then my mission is already a failure. The war will go as it has done already, and the interests of Battlefleet Gothic will be poorly served by blaming one of its most able commanders for my mistake. This mission is my idea alone, and I take full responsibility for its outcome, including the possibility of my own death.”

Semper nodded in silent thanks, surprised by Horst’s words. While he was still dwelling on the inquisitor’s unexpected depths of selfless practicality, the elevator doors rumbled open, and they strode together out into the shuttle bay flight deck. Rows of booted feet crashed together in unison at their arrival. Now it was the inquisitor’s turn to be surprised as he looked at the four squads of armsmen lined up on the shuttle deck, all of them in carapace armour and bearing fearsome shotcannon weapons and bolstered navy pistols.

“I assume this is something more than an honour guard formed to see me politely aboard my shuttle,” noted Horst dryly, seeing the strings of ammunition bandoliers worn by each armsman, and the bulging pouches of grenades, power cells and rebreather rigs hanging from their equipment harnesses. Hito Ulanti

and Maxim Borusa, both also in full naval battle dress, stood nearby. Ulanti was armed with his sabre and a holstered laspistol. Borusa had a brace of holstered navy pattern pistols and a heavy bolter, holding the cumbersome heavy weapon as if it were nothing more than an ordinary bolter.

“Let’s just call it an extra precaution, inquisitor,” answered Semper. “You have your mission, but I also have mine, and that mission it to safeguard your life to the best of my abilities. With your permission, Lieutenant Ulanti and four squads of my ship’s best armsmen will accompany you and your group down to the planet’s surface, to provide additional security.”

Semper saw the look of wry amusement in Horst’s eyes. “We can’t have it said that Battlefleet Gothic and the captain and crew of the *Macharius* don’t know how to look after their guests,” he added, with the same wry smile.

“A fine idea,” nodded Horst, diplomatically. “It will be reassuring to know that the forces of Battlefleet Gothic will be watching over us both from up here and closer by on the planet’s surface.”

A klaxon sounded, signalling the beginning of the shuttle launch procedure. The deck shook under the impact of dozens of pairs of heavy boots as the armsmen squads and Horst’s bodyguard marched up the ramps into their separate shuttles. The shaking increased tenfold as, one by one, the three armoured troop carrier shuttles fired up their engines in preparation for take-off.

Semper retreated back towards the deck’s safe zone. He spotted Ulanti climbing the entrance ramp of one of the shuttles, and saw him turn to salute him from the top of the ramp.

Semper returned the salute. “Good hunting, Hito,” he shouted as an afterthought, aware that his words would certainly be lost amongst the rising howl of the shuttle engines. It was the traditional good luck farewell call of Battlefleet Gothic, exchanged whenever a ship left port for battle or just routine patrol. Its use here seemed somewhat inappropriate, Semper knew—this, after all was supposed to be a parley with what could incredibly turn out to be potential allies—but he was unable to explain why he had suddenly felt the urge to use it now.

A foreboding, he thought briefly, and then did his best to dismiss the thought. He

did not trust xenos, but he had his orders, and he knew that, on this mission, battle was to be avoided at all costs.

Ulanti paused at the shuttle hatch, grinning and flashing his captain a friendly salute of acknowledgement. He may not have heard Semper's words, but he had obviously guessed their meaning.

The howling scream of the shuttle engines increased in pitch even further. The very air of the launch bay throbbed with the vibration, and the atmosphere of the place was filled with the heavy chemical reek of expelled promethium. Semper turned to exit the bay, leaving only the servitors and human ground crew in their thickly-armoured protective suits to conduct the final technical checks in the almost unbearable atmosphere of the shuttle bay, just prior to the final launch moment.

As he turned, he almost collided with the black-coated figure of Koba Kyogen. Semper immediately noticed the ammo pouches and rebreather rig Kyogen was wearing, even as the Ship's Commissar offered him a stiff-armed formal salute.

"Permission to join the mission to the planet's surface, commodore. As Ship's Commissar, I believe it is my duty to oversee the actions of the crewmen you have selected for this mission, particularly since they may come into contact with xenos abominations. If this is the case, then I must be on hand to keep a close guard over the morale of our men, and to protect their minds and spirits from any signs of alien contamination. The servants of the Inquisition might be used to bargaining with the enemies of mankind, but the men of the Imperial Navy are thankfully not."

His voice was thick with undisguised scorn for the idea of this attempted parley with the alien eldar, and there was nothing but pure loathing in the way he had described them as "xenos abominations".

"Permission granted, commissar," Semper said, almost shouting over the sound of the shuttle's engines. Kyogen nodded in thanks, although both men knew that the request had been purely cosmetic, since commissars could and did do exactly what they wanted aboard an Imperial Navy vessel.

Kyogen sprinted across the deck of the launch bay, scrambling up the ramp of

one of the shuttles just as it began to retract into the underside of the shuttle's hull. He stumbled at the top of the ramp, fire traces from the shuttle's roaring belly thrusters licking at the tails of his heavy commissar's coat, and a surprised-looking Hito Ulanti, assisted by two armsmen, leaned out to haul him into the safety of the shuttle's interior, just as the airlock hatch began to slide shut.

Semper saw all this through the glasteel viewing plate set into the heavy-duty blast doors which now sealed off the launch bay from the rest of the ship. A few seconds later, and the image was gone, washed away by the torrent of flame which now filled the interior of the shuttle bay as the pilots of all three craft brought their engines up to launch thrust.

A few more seconds, and the fire was extinguished as all remaining oxygen inside the place was siphoned away and the launch bay doors rumbled open, exposing the bay to the vacuum of space. Released from their grav-lock moorings, the three shuttles lifted off and exited the *Macharius*.

Moments later, flying in triad formation, the shuttles made rendezvous with the waiting flight of Fury escorts. The Furies, a model adapted for planetary atmospheric flight, took up a protective position around the shuttles and guided them down towards their destination.

Inside the lead shuttle, Koba Kyogen settled into his seat harness, staring in sullen challenge at the figure seated across the narrow, cramped aisle. Maxim Borusa stared disinterestedly back, chewing slowly on a fresh wad of tajii root. The two men's eyes met and locked in undisguised mutual hostility.

"Good to have you with us on this little jaunt, commissar. Me and the rest of the boys feel more reassured, knowing we've got a silver skull like you along for the ride and watching our backs."

Maxim grinned, launched a thick stream of tarry tajii root juice at the decking in front of Kyogen's gleaming, black polished boots and then settled back into his seat, closing his eyes and seeming to simply will himself to sleep through the remainder of the short but violently bumpy orbital descent down towards the surface of Stabia.

When he opened his eyes again, twenty minutes later as they touched down upon the planet's rocky surface, Kyogen was sitting exactly as he had been the last time Maxim had looked at him, still staring fixedly at Maxim, the way a predator measures up its intended prey.

"We should not be doing this. They are mon-keigh, they are animals without souls. They cannot be trusted, and they should not be bargained with. Let them die at the hands of the Abomination. What do we care of the fate of them and their corpse-god emperor?"

Lileathon stood upon the bridge of the Vual'en Sho. Around her, the pictskin-projected images of the human ships swirled and spun in the incense-hazed air of the command deck.

Kariadryl sensed the bristling outrage of the Aspect Lord, Darodayos, standing beside him. Others of his bodyguard retinue also reacted with quiet yet distinct displays of disapproval at the eshairr outcast's lack of respect to craftworld An-Iolsus's most venerable farseer. The Dark Reaper called Chiron shifted in unease, the heavy plates of his carapace armour striking noisily together in less than subtle warning. Freyra, Darodayos's other Striking Scorpion lieutenant, hissed in angry indignation at this seeming display of contempt to Kariadryl and quietly assumed the ominous body language stance that signified the assumption of thyerr shu-mon: declaration of support, backed up by force of arms, if necessary, towards an insulted kinsman.

Kariadryl reached out with his mind to cast a subtle aura of calm over the proceedings, and looked towards Lileathon, gesturing to her in respectful supplication. No matter what he and the others may think of her, she was the craftmaster of this vessel, and their lives were all in her hands. Now was not the time to provoke a fight.

"An-Iolsus commands, honoured sister and craftmaster. The agents of the mon-keigh corpse-god have made known to us something of the true plans of the enemy they fight. If what they have revealed to us is true, and that is what we are here to determine, then An-Iolsus and its sister craft-worlds can no longer afford to stand by and allow the servants of the Great Abomination to achieve their victory. If a temporary pact with the mon-keigh is the price we must pay for

keeping the Talismans of Vaul out of the hands of the Great Abomination, then that is what we must do."

The old farseer's words sent a ripple of distress out amongst those gathered on the command deck. If he closed his eyes and concentrated, Kariadryl knew what manner of thoughts his keenly-attuned psychic senses would pluck from the minds of those around him.

Doubt, confusion and fear, all of them focusing in shock on the bombshell which Kariadryl had quietly allowed to drop.

The Talismans of Vaul, whispered half a hundred eldar minds on the bridge of the Vual'en Sho. Could such a terrible possibility be true, they asked themselves, in intense fear and unease? Could the followers of the Great Abomination truly have found a means to awaken and mobilize such devices and turn them to its own use?

It was a thought few eldar minds wished to entertain, and which cast a pall of apprehensive fear over all present on the command deck. As for Lileathon, Kariadryl was quietly satisfied to see that his words seemed to have had the desired effect on the troubled soul of the young firebrand commander.

"An-Iolsus commands," she acknowledged, chastened by the knowledge Kariadryl had just revealed. She stepped back, her expression reflecting the troubled nature of her thoughts. Her second-in-command, the older but more cautious Ailill, smoothly took over in her stead.

"Lord farseer, the humans have launched their shuttle craft and are beginning their descent to the planet's surface. We have received the signal indicating that they are ready to meet you there."

Kariadryl nodded, and looked at the pictskin images swimming in the air above them. He could see the small shapes of the shuttle craft and their escorts falling away from the looming bulk of the human star vessel. He studied the shape of the massive vessel for a moment, his eyes taking in the harsh, unfamiliar lines of the thing, and seeing the rows of launch bays and gun ports which studded its crenellated hull. Others of his race might profess to find the human vessel crude and primitive, a typical product of the barbaric mon-keigh, but to Kariadryl it

represented all that he found most secretly terrifying about the humans. Massive and overwhelming, brutal and threatening, it seemed solid and formidably permanent in contrast to the slender, delicate, wraithbone-formed vessels of the eldar. Kariadryl could only imagine how many teeming thousands of humans there were aboard the massive cruiser, but he was all too painfully aware of the far lesser number of eldar—barely more than a thousand—who made up the crew of the Vual'en Sho.

And the humans had—how many, he wondered—thousands or tens of thousands of such vessels, spread all through the galaxy? In stark contrast, An-Iolsus could only muster a handful of ships, most of which were held in reserve for the defence of the craftworld itself. In his darkest thoughts, Kariadryl strongly doubted that the entire eldar diaspora, scattered as it was across dozens of craftworlds all through the galaxy, could gather its collected forces together in greater numbers than even the size of the single battlefleet group which the humans used to control this sector of their far-flung empire.

We are a dying race, he mournfully reminded himself: the evidence of our decline is all around us. Each day there are less of us, and more humans. One day perhaps there shall be none of us left at all.

And who will there be then to guard the things which the elder ones have left behind, he asked himself? That was why this mission was so important, he realised, even if these others did not. The humans were savage and primitive in comparison to the eldar, but they were also the new heirs to the galaxy and its secrets, just as the elder themselves had inherited it from those races who had gone before. It must fall to the likes of Kariadryl to educate this new upstart race and teach them something of the deadly inheritance which might one day yet be theirs.

I have so little time left, lamented the ancient farseer, and still so much left to do.

Aware that he had allowed his thoughts to drift—how much he envied his brothers and sisters in the dome of the crystal seers who had all the time in the universe to let their minds drift in endless thought-dreams, and how much he looked forward to finally joining them—he turned his attention back to the present matters.

“Are the preparations ready for our own arrival on the planet?”

“They are, lord farseer,” answered Darodayos. “The temporary webway portal is open and stabilised, and I have sent scouts on ahead. They report that the surface area is secure and that there is no sign of any human deception.”

Kariadryl nodded, and bowed to Lileathon.

“Then it is time we took our leave of you, honoured craft-master. I thank you for the protection and hospitality you have offered us, and I look forward to seeing you again, sister, when we return aboard at the successful completion of our task.”

“An-Iolsus commands,” replied Lileathon, returning the bow and giving the customary blessing of farewell. “Asuryan watch over you and our brothers and sisters, and bring you safely back to us once more.”

“Squad Haller reporting. North Two perimeter secured. No sign of any hostiles.”

“Squad Hoth. Nothing out here either. Just more bloody rocks and flying dust.”

One by one, the reports came in from armsmen squads now patrolling the perimeter of the meeting point. Situated in the relative shelter of the strange alien ruins at the centre of the secure zone, Ulanti didn’t envy the armsmen their duty. The planet’s atmosphere was breathable, but endless storms swept its barren surface, and the air was filled with a flying, swirling hail of choking dust and tiny silicate fragments, making rebreather masks and goggles an absolute requirement.

The journey from the landing zone—a three-kilometre hike across open ground, leaving one armsmen squad and several of Horst’s people behind to guard the waiting shuttles—had been a rude and shocking introduction to the realities of life on Stabia. For the members of Horst’s Inquisition retinue, it had been bad enough, but for the crew of the *Macharius*, who were experiencing the usual problems associated with suddenly having to readapt to planetary environment conditions after months or even years aboard a space vessel, it had been tough going in the extreme.

Razor-edged flakes of wind-hurled silicate dust flayed at their exposed skin, dogging up the workings of weaponry and equipment, and finding a way into every crevice and joint in armour and environment suits. The ground was alternately composed of areas of jagged, uneven rock and expanses of deep and treacherously unpredictable dust bowls. Neither environment was particularly easy for booted feet more used to the firm, level decking of an Imperial warship, and twice they had had to interrupt their journey to pull people out of deep dust craters. The prospect of sudden and horrible death was a familiar companion for anyone who served aboard a vessel in His Divine Majesty's Imperial Navy, but drowning in a bottomless dust-hole on some Emperor-forsaken planet, choking to death as the dust poured into a mouth screaming wide in terror, was no way for a navy man to die, and Ulanti had ordered his people to take the utmost care in this unfamiliar terrain.

And then they had reached the meeting point co-ordinates indicated in the few brief, terse, coded transmissions they had received from the eldar command vessel, and come across this collection of strange and puzzling ruins.

It was impossible to tell how old the ruins were, although they were clearly xenos in origin, and just as impossible to determine what catastrophe might once have occurred here. Had this place been destroyed by war or natural catastrophe, or had it been merely abandoned long ago by its original creators, allowing the deprivations of the passing millennia and the caustic environment to take their steady toll?

Whatever the truth of the matter, the ruins themselves revealed little. The Imperial men had initially mistaken the buildings for natural rock formations when they had first seen them looming out of the shifting curtain of the dust storm. It was only as they drew closer that they saw there was a guiding intelligence to their lines and unusual symmetry.

Ulanti ran a hand over the stonework beside him, marvelling at the strange, melted wax look of the material. Shot through with rainbow streaks of mixed colour and with an oddly viscous quality, it was more like plastic than stonework. He took his hand away, disturbed by the faint crackling sensation which he felt, even through the material of his glove.

"Static electricity, we think," commented Horst, appearing suddenly beside him.

“It seems to repel the dust, which must be why this place wasn’t buried under the stuff long ago. How it’s generated, or how the integrity of the field has been maintained for maybe thousands of years is something none of my people have yet been able to explain.”

Ulanti snapped to attention in the inquisitor’s presence. Horst settled himself down on a nearby piece of stonework—it might have been the beginnings of a piece of oddly-formed statuary, a chair or the left-over stump of a pillar and signalled the young navy officer to relax.

“At ease, lieutenant. Your captain and Admiral Pardain aren’t here now, and I’m never one to stand on ceremony once I’m out in the field. I assume your patrols haven’t found anything?”

If Ulanti felt any discomfort in the presence of this inquisitor, who had been sent to the Gothic sector as the personal envoy of the High Lords of Terra themselves, he didn’t allow it to show.

“Nothing at all,” he replied. “I’m co-ordinating our patrol efforts with your man Stavka. If anything tries to cross any point along the joint perimeter, we’ll know about it soon enough. No word from the *Macharius*.”

The dust storm and the strange composition of the mica fragments it was composed of was making long-range comms transmissions from the planet’s surface something of a problem, not to mention the effects of the unpredictable electronic interference from this system’s binary star pulsar. They had been able to talk to the *Macharius* since their arrival on the surface of Stabia, but sometimes only intermittently, and all such communications had been an ongoing struggle against the natural forces which ruled the planet Stabia and its solar system.

“I was able to speak briefly to your captain some minutes ago. They’re maintaining a careful watch on the eldar command ship, but so far there’s no sign of them launching any kind of shuttle craft.”

Ulanti looked at Horst, both men wondering the same thing. “Which rather begs the question, sir, if they didn’t get here before us and they don’t seem to be in too much of a hurry to get down here by shuttle, then how exactly do they plan to

put in an appearance at this rendezvous?”

Horst nodded. “Tell me the truth, lieutenant, what do you really think of this mission? Don’t be afraid to speak your mind.”

Ulanti paused, considering his reply carefully before offering it to the inquisitor.

“As I said to Captain Semper, sir, if I were seeking to lure an enemy into a trap then this system would be perfect for my purposes. And now here we are on a planet within that system, on unfamiliar terrain, bogged down by unfavourable atmospheric conditions, with unreliable communications and waiting for someone who doesn’t seem in too much of a hurry to present himself.” Ulanti broke off, hesitating for a moment, and then looked directly at Horst.

“If you ask me, inquisitor, this entire mission is just one big ambush waiting to happen.”

Horst uttered a sharp, barking laugh, and dapped a hand on Ulanti’s shoulder, leaning on him as he hauled himself to his feet again. “Hah, perhaps you should talk more with Stavka, lieutenant, since he’s very much of the same opinion. Well spoken, Hito. The Emperor needs more servants who aren’t afraid to tell a senior inquisitor that he’s most likely walked straight into an obvious trap. If you ever tire of service in the navy, I could always use a man like you in my own organisation.”

Ulanti opened his mouth to answer, intending to politely decline the inquisitor’s tentative but apparently serious offer, but was abruptly cut off by a strange, hissing scream which came from somewhere close amongst the ruins. The very molecules of the air seemed to vibrate with the force of the thing, and, at the same time, the swirling maelstrom of the dust storm was lit up by a eye-searing flash of light.

“An explosion!” shouted Ulanti, drawing his laspistol and placing himself protectively in front of Horst. “An orbital strike, possibly. We’re under attack!”

“More like a teleportation Shockwave,” answered Horst, knowing that even this was not strictly true. Teleportation technology was rare enough—amongst the forces of the Imperium, only the Space Marines of the Adeptus Astartes were

equipped to withstand its potentially lethal rigours and he had found no recorded evidence of its use amongst the eldar. Nevertheless, piecing together many fragmented dues and suppositions, there was plenty of evidence to suggest that the eldar race possessed some advanced form of transportation technology unknown to the Imperium, since there were so many reports of eldar raiders appearing suddenly on a planet's surface after somehow having been able to completely bypass and elude any orbital or planetary system defences which might have been in place. Indeed, despite the numerous encounters between eldar and Imperium naval forces, and the confirmed sightings of the same eldar ship at points many light years apart from each other, there was a great body of evidence to suggest that the eldar ships were not even equipped with warp drive technology. If they did not have warp engines, how then were they able to travel the distances between the stars?

There is still so much we do not know or understand about them, Horst thought to himself, drawing his weapon and moving towards the source of the unknown phenomenon. Perhaps I am a fool, then, to have trusted such creatures and to have put myself and these other loyal servants of the Emperor in such jeopardy?

They were outside now, in a clearing in the centre of the ruins. The figures of armsmen and Horst's bodyguards appeared from amidst the swirling dust screen, drawing protectively towards Horst and Ulanti. All of them had their weapons drawn.

On the vox-channels, there was a babble of excited, panicked voices sounding over the crackling hiss of the storm. One of Stavka's men struggled with the settings of an auspex device, receiving back from it only a static scream which was a lesser echo of the larger sound which still filled the air all around them.

"Switch that thing off," ordered Stavka, angrily, striding forward out of the dusty murk, wielding a combat shotgun and issuing commands to those around him. "Use your infra-red filters. Advance in three-man squads. Keep in touch with the squads around you. Find whatever the hell that blast came from, and be prepared to fire upon hostiles."

"No! No firing unless you're fired upon first," bellowed Horst, countermanding his second-in-command's order. "I repeat—hold your fire. Whatever comes out of this dust, the first man who fires upon it without provocation will be

summarily executed. I speak in the name of the Emperor's Inquisition!"

There was a light glowing through the swirling dust ahead of them. From their initial reconnoitre of the ruins, Ulanti estimated it to be coming from an area containing a wide circle of unusual, free-standing monolith structures. The area and the structures had been investigated by Horst's people, but, as with so much else here, little had been determined about them, including for what purpose they might have originally been constructed. Taking a firmer hold of his laspistol, Ulanti had a distinct feeling that they were perhaps about to find out.

He felt a presence beside him, and heard a surprisingly familiar voice whispering the words of an Ecclesiarchy-approved catechism of blessed protection. The voice may have been familiar, but the tone of nervous fear in it was not. Ulanti turned in surprise, seeing Commissar Kyogen at his shoulder. The big Ship's Commissar gripped the handle of his chainsword tightly, staring into the concealing curtain of the dust storm, a look of glassy fear in his eyes.

Ulanti did not like the cold and detached Kyogen—as far as he was aware, no one aboard the *Macharius* had ever warmed to the man—but he did not doubt the commissar's courage or ability. Now, for the first time, he saw fear in the man, and Kyogen's secret weakness was exposed to him.

Aliens, thought Ulanti, knowing the fear and horror which Imperial anti-alien propaganda had successfully installed into so many of the Emperor's subjects. He's afraid of anything xenos-bred.

The light was dimming now, fading away along with that hellish sound, and an uneasy stillness fell over the scene. For a few moments, nothing happened, and then they appeared out of the swirling murk of the dust storm.

One second they were not there, and the next they were. From seemingly nowhere they appeared, tall and graceful figures, long and lithe of limb, clad in armour which, in stark contrast to the functional armour worn by the servants of the Imperium, had been constructed with artistry as much in mind as practicality. They carried weapons whose unfamiliar, elegant lines did not disguise their clearly lethal intent.

The advance line of eldar warriors stopped, aggressively sweeping the barrels of

their weapons in arcs back and forth along the line of human troops. Nervous fingers hovered over gun triggers and firing studs. Mutual suspicion and animosity crackled in the air between the two groups.

An eldar warrior, taller and more magnificently armoured than the others, stepped forward, taking in the vista of nervous, afraid human faces with one sweeping, arrogant glance. His gaze settled for a moment on Ulanti, and the young navy lieutenant had to restrain the urge to protectively bring his weapon up to bear as he felt the alien's keen and frigid intellect focussing briefly upon him. A cold, mocking smile flickered across the creature's delicate, almost albino features, and then it suddenly stepped back. It neither gestured nor said anything to its companions, but Ulanti was left with the distinct impression that some kind of secret communication had just taken place.

The advance line of eldar opened up in its centre, and another, smaller group of aliens advanced towards the watching humans. Most of them were in armour, clustering protectively around a figure in their centre, and then, at a gestured command from that figure, the rest of the group stopped and grudgingly allowed the figure to advance toward the humans on its own.

This second eldar carried an aura which drew every human eye upon him. He looked more frail and slow than the others, and, even though Ulanti had never seen an eldar before and had no means of judging such things in their terms, there was an unmistakable sense of venerable age about him.

And great wisdom, too, held in those almond eyes. The eldar scanned the ranks of the humans, that unsettling, inscrutable gaze quickly coming to rest on Inquisitor Horst.

The eldar took several more steps forward, until it stood before Horst. The two beings, human and eldar, regarded each other for a moment, the tall, slim eldar towering almost half a metre above Horst, then the alien gracefully inclined its head and executed what might have been a respectful bow.

"Welcome, human-called-Horst," it said in perfectly-spoken but strangely enunciated High Gothic. "This one you would term 'I' is kin-called Kariadryl, second-born of the union of Ky-Danae and Darandera, and honoured to be the farseeing one of the craftworld An-Iolsus. You called into the void, brother, and I

have answered, and now we have much to discuss.”

THIRTEEN

On the surface of Stabia, the parley had begun. Out in space, on the fringes of the Stabia system, the battle was also beginning.

The Sword-class frigate Volpone was patrolling the system's perimeter and maintaining a close watch on the eldar vessel doing likewise. Or at least, thought the vessel's angry and frustrated captain, Vanyan Karasev, that was what they were supposed to be doing.

Karasev was that rarity in Battlefleet Gothic, a ship's captain who did not belong to the traditional and sprawling naval aristocracy class of Cypra Mundian nobility which had produced officers and captains for every battlefleet in the Segmentum Obscuras since time immemorial. Karasev had achieved his rank purely through his own drive and ability, and, secretly amongst the upper cadre of Battlefleet Command, great things were expected of him. The captaincy of a capital-class vessel would one day be his, although Karasev himself suspected that, had he been one of the Cypra Mundian elite, he would probably already be standing on the bridge of a Lunar or Gothic-class cruiser somewhere, directing the wrath of the Emperor directly upon the enemies of mankind.

Not that he took his current command or mission less seriously, but, at that moment, his fiery Stranivarite temper was up, as, for the fourth time in as many hours, his surveyor officers had once again allowed the eldar vessel ahead of them to slip out of the reach of his vessel's scanners.

In truth, he knew it was not his crew's fault. The eldar vessel had been arrogantly showing off, almost taunting them, as it executed a bewildering series of complex manoeuvres, shocking them with its sudden turns of speed and confounding the abilities of their surveyor systems by modulating the density and frequency of its energy signature, alternatively fading away completely from their augur screens and then appearing elsewhere from its last reported or estimated position in a sudden flare of energy signal.

And now it was gone again, disappearing from their surveyor screens after executing a rapid turn sunwards and vanishing without trace.

Like many ambitious men, Karasev was neither patient nor understanding, and the mood on the command deck of the Volpone was tense as his crew endeavoured to re-establish surveyor contact with the alien ship as their commander hovered ominously over them.

“Surveyor contact, two AUs to starboard, and closing!” declared a surveyor officer almost triumphantly.

“Clarify,” barked Karasev, already troubled by this latest development. A shared look with his second-in-command confirmed the same thought. At its last recorded position, the eldar ship was ahead of them and pulling away from them at speed. Now it had somehow slipped round their starboard flank and was closing on them instead, appearing from out of nowhere and at an alarmingly close distance.

“Definitely closing,” confirmed the ship’s chief surveyor officer, reading the data from his control lectern screen. “Energy signature is completely changed from the last time we acquired it. It’s—” The officer suddenly broke off, and looked at his captain in confusion. “According to these readings, it’s an Imperial ship. A Praetor-class frigate!”

Karasev and his second-in-command exchanged surprised looks. “Someone’s a long way from home,” noted the second-in-command, dryly. The Praetor-class vessel was in service amongst many of the local Imperium battlefleets of the Ultima Segmentum, but, as far as Karasev was aware, it had never been used within the Segmentum Obscuras, and certainly not by Battlefleet Gothic.

“More to the point, why weren’t we told there were other Imperium forces in the area?” said Karasev, trying to conceal the uncertainty he was feeling. Everything about this mission had been unorthodox so far, to say the least. Could it be possible that there was indeed another, more secret, Imperium force in the system, sent along to provide additional, security for Semper’s battle squadron?

“I want to see this thing on vidpict, and I want more information on it. Open hailing frequencies, and identify its transponder codes or energy signature. I want to know exactly what vessel it is.”

The bridge crew went to work carrying out their captain's orders. The main augur screen crackled into life, displaying the hazy, reconstructed image being picked up by the ship's augur systems. Seeing the image on the screen, Karasev allowed himself to relax a little as he recognised the unmistakable and reassuring hull shape of an Imperium warship. Still, the outline of the ship seemed to oddly waver and flicker. Karasev looked in silent question towards his Chief of Surveyors.

"Probably vidpict interference from the pulsar," commented the officer. "This whole system's just one damn big electromagnetic swamp."

It was a reasonable enough explanation, Karasev knew—Emperor knew they had had enough trouble with the surveyor systems since the moment they had arrived in this blighted excuse of a star system—but something deeply worried him about the situation. Something was wrong here, he knew, but he just could not see what. The reports from his bridge crew did little to dispel his unease.

"Comm channels are garbled. Could be spill from the pulsar, but we're getting nothing on the hailing frequencies, and we can't pick up any transponder coding from the vessel."

Vessel drawing closer. "Nothing in the registry to identify it."

Karasev looked at the screen, seeing the ship continue its silent, steady approach. The feeling of unease worsened. He was just about to order a course change away from the ship, and for the Volpone's gun batteries to be run out and readied to fire, when the image on the screen suddenly warped for a second.

At first he thought that it was just more vidpict interference, but then he told himself that, no, it had definitely been the image of the ship itself which had changed, while the starfield behind it remained in clear focus. For a moment—just the briefest of moments—the image of the frigate had flickered off, revealing the merest, snatched glimpse of… something else behind or beyond the facade of that image.

Another ship, Karasev told himself irrationally, unable to deny what he had just seen with his own eyes. It's a projection concealing a completely different ship!

“Battle stations! All power to defence shields!”

The order was only half out of his mouth when he saw the second impossible thing happening on the augur screen before him. Torpedoes fired from a prow which had no torpedo tubes. Suddenly there were torpedoes streaking through space towards his vessel, travelling at a velocity no Imperium-made torpedo could match.

Karasev stared sickly at the data on his command lectern, seeing the torpedoes eat up the distance between them and his vessel, and knowing that he had made the greatest and final mistake of his career. A caustic Stranivarite oath which could never have come from any Cypra Mundian aristocrat escaped from his lips.

“Signal the *Macharius*,” he ordered, determined to at least give some useful purpose to his final moments. “Tell them we have been betrayed and are under attack from the eldar!”

Moments later, the torpedoes struck home. The Volpone, its eight hundred crew and Captain Vanyan Karasev and his highly promising career disappeared together in an abrupt and fiery conclusion.

The Volpone’s killer cruised forward, slipping harmlessly past the expanding cloud of wreckage of the destroyed Imperial frigate, effortlessly shrugging off the false ship image projected by its mimic engines. The image of the Praetor-class frigate wavered and faded away. In its place was the sinister and predatory shape of a dark eldar cruiser, the strange black material of its smooth, featureless and shell-like hull seeming to draw in the light from the starfield around it.

On board the vessel’s bridge, the dark eldar commander savoured the thrill of the kill, while lamenting the necessity of having to completely destroy the human vessel without being allowed to take prisoners. Slaves, whether intended for use as sacrifices, torture fodder, cruel and terrible haemonculi experimentation or merely forced labour, were the currency of her kind, and a ship’s captain who returned from a raiding mission with their slave holds full of fresh, valuable new flesh could expect to receive the favour of their kabal lord.

This, however, was no mere raiding mission, and there were greater prizes at stake here than the opportunity to take a few hundred human slaves. The Kabal of the Poison Heart had lost much prestige and status in the recent Wych cult schism which had convulsed Commorragh society, and the kabal's fortunes had waned as those of its enemies had risen. Shorn of many of its traditional allies, most of whom had been all too happy to abandon pacts made more out of fear than respect or loyalty and go over to the side of their enemies, the kabal had been left isolated and facing extinction. In the deadly, ever-shifting pattern of brutal intrigue, assassinations and constant internecine warfare that passed for politics in Commorragh, the Kabal of the Poison Heart would not be the first ancient clan to be wiped out without trace or subsumed completely into the ranks of a more powerful rival, and it would certainly not be the last.

Archon Satikus however, could not have maintained his position as kabal lord of the Poison Heart for these last few thousand years, ruthlessly despatching countless claimants and pretenders to the title, without possessing some measure of cunning and guile. This secret alliance with the creature known as Abaddon the Despoiler would, if it were to become known to the rest of their kind, be enough to ensure the Poison Heart's swift and certain destruction by the combined might of all the kabals in Commorragh, but, as there were great risks in this venture, so too were there potentially great rewards.

To arrive back in Commorragh with holds full of thousands of human slaves; not mere sub-standard civilian chattel gathered in plunder raids on isolated settlements and colonies, but the finest specimens from the crews of the humans' warships. Strong bodies and more resistant flesh, capable of withstanding greater and crueller abominations than their weaker brethren.

But there was better than that.

To arrive back in Commorragh with a prize greater than more mere mon-keigh slaves. To display before the other kabals hundreds or perhaps even thousands of those who were once their kin, but who long ago abandoned the inhabitants of Commorragh to their fate at the hands of the Great Devourer, and who denied them a place of safety amongst their own ranks. Yes, what tortures, what exquisite, long-lasting suffering wouldn't any of her kind wish to see visited upon those most hated of their former brothers, the eldar of the craftworlds?

But, oh yes, there was even better than that.

To arrive back in Commorragh with a prize greater even than so many craftworld eldar. A prize great enough to make Lord Satikus risk all to capture it, even the complete destruction of his kabal. What Archon in what other kabal wouldn't want to acquire such a prize for himself? What price might such a prize attain at exclusive auction amongst the highest kabal lords? How much of its former power and prestige would the Poison Heart recover when Lord Satikus paraded his rare, precious prize before his peers?

Yes, how much power and glory would be theirs, when they offered up the soul of a farseer to the One Who Thirsts?

The cruiser commander smiled at the thought, and turned her attention back to the business of the hunt.

The dark eldar cruiser sped on silently through the void, bearing down swiftly on its next chosen target.

Elsewhere in the Stabia system, the Volpone's destruction would have registered as a sudden, tell-tale energy burst on the pictskin sensor screens of any nearby eldar craft. As it was, the craftmaster and crew of the nearest eldar vessel, the Aconite-class frigate Medhbh's Shield, were too occupied with other, more pressing, matters to notice the incident.

Their attacker had appeared from literally empty space, it had seemed to Craftmaster Hora Kyrrl. It was almost as if it had unfolded from the blackness of space itself. Kyrrl was young as his race judged such matters, and, relatively unversed in the deeper, darker secrets of the history of the eldar, and at first he had not recognised the attackers for what they truly were. The ambush had been swift and sudden, and it was only after the enemy cruiser had launched torpedoes, only after the Medhbh's Shield had been struck amidships by two of them and suffered a catastrophic energy drain which had left it floating powerless and defenceless in space, only after the enemy ship had come alongside and launched a boarding assault on their victim, that Kyrrl's worst fears had been confirmed.

“The Dark Ones,” breathed one of his thought-talkers at the first, terrible sight of their attackers in the flesh. The thought-talker was old, and perhaps had previous, firsthand experience of such things, things which went unspoken amongst the eldar, but, for the younger eldar such as Kyrrl, it was as if part of their race’s darkest, most sinister legends had come to life. At first, he wondered —hoped even—that all this was just some particularly vivid kind of ashytii, a nightmare dream from his unconscious mind, born out of the eldar’s shared race memory of all their kind had endured and suffered since the terrible time of the Fall, but that notion was quickly dispelled as the thought-talker next to him fell screaming and gurgling to the ground, his torso shredded apart by a hit from one of the enemy’s weapons.

The dark eldar swarmed aboard, entering the ship from both sides of its hull and on most of its decks. Kyrrl’s thought-talkers were either dead or were unable to penetrate the psychic cloud of darkness which had enveloped the ship, shutting it off from contact with the other eldar vessels in the system. From the moment the first dark eldar warrior stepped through the breach in its hull, the survival of the Medhbh’s Shield could be measured in mere minutes.

Kyrrl’s helmet communicator was filled with the screams of his crew as they died under the Accursed Ones’ blades and weapons, and, far worse, his mind was filled with the babbling pleas and cries of those crew unlucky enough to fall alive into the hands of their shadow brethren.

Hails of shuriken pistol fire and the strange but deadly splinters of crystal material produced by the weapons of the enemy filled the passageway, striking the smooth, bone-like material of its walls and tearing long, jagged scars. The infinity circuit mind of the ship screamed in silent, psychic agony at the violations being done to it, at the tainting presence of the abominations now forcing their way aboard it. Kyrrl and the remains of his Guardian squad retreated up the passageway, heading towards the sacred wraithbone core which housed the ship’s precious infinity circuit mind. They left their dead and injured where they fell. The dark eldar pursued them relentlessly, firing as they came.

The Guardian in front of Kyrrl suddenly spun and fell, his arm sheared away at the shoulder by a hit from a splinter rifle. Kyrrl turned and fired, decapitating the Guardian’s attacker as a volley of razor-sharp shards of metal from Kyrrl’s shuriken pistol, propelled at enormous speed by the gravitic forces inside the

pistol’s firing chamber, tore through the dark eldar warrior’s throat and embedded themselves in the chest of a second warrior following close behind.

The dark eldar fell back, and, for just a moment, Kyrrl allowed himself the tempting fantasy that perhaps they were retreating back to their vessel. The illusion was shattered in another hail of splinter weapon fire, striking down two more of the defenders, and pinning the others down as a trio of grotesque figures broke away from the ranks of the dark eldar and charged towards Kyrrl and the others.

“Asuryan preserve us,” gasped Melishya, a female steersman, staring in revulsion at the creatures dancing and capering up the passageway towards them. “What are those things?”

Kyrrl shared his crewman’s reaction of repulsed shock, but did not hesitate as he sent a first and then a second hail of shuriken fire into the body of one of the creatures. It staggered, almost falling as the razor-edged, tiny spinning discs of shining metal ripped bloody holes through its body. Seconds later, though, and as Kyrrl watched in complete disbelief, it was on the move again, dancing and capering up the passageway towards them as it raced to catch up with its companions.

Looking at the things, Kyrrl could only guess what kind of creatures they may once have been. Their bodies had been wracked and distorted out of shape by the most terrible tortures or surgical alterations. They were naked save for leather harnesses which held their torture-ravaged bodies into some semblance of normal form, and their flesh was pierced in dozens of places with barbed hooks and pins, holding open the mouths of unhealed wounds or surgical excavations and revealing gleaming bone and pulsing, blood-slicked organs within.

Repulsed, sickened and filled with an awful dread of the grotesque creatures, Kyrrl and those around him opened fire as one. The creatures screeched in vile, ecstatic pleasure as the shuriken fire tore into them, chopping through limbs and slicing clean through flesh and bone. Kyrrl saw one of the things, a shuriken shot carrying off a good third of its malformed head, continue on towards them, gibbering madly to itself. Another one, flayed by round after round of repeated shuriken hits, only succumbed after all its limbs had been shot away. Its limbless torso, pierced in a dozen places, flopped to the ground, where it wriggled in a

spreading pool of its own fluids.

And then the creatures were amongst them, and upon them.

The claws of one creature took away the face of a Guardian who Kyrrl remembered had had the makings of a skilled apprentice bonesinger. A second creature fell upon Melishya, ravaging her with black-stained adamantium teeth and claws. She shrieked in pain and terror, her blood splashing against the armour of Kyrrl's breastplate. Kyrrl dropped his pistol, its disc supply now spent, and reached for his chainsword.

There was a flash of sudden hot pain in his sword arm as he drew the weapon. For a moment, he wondered what had happened, wondered why his sword could still be in its finely-decorated leather sheath when it was also still grasped in his hand, and then he saw the creature with the knife in its hand, and felt the hot streaks of blood pumping out of the stump of his wrist. The creature slashed at him again, opening up his body from midriff to shoulder, and Kyrrl fell to the ground, the strength spilling out of him in a torrent of red.

The creature stooped down towards him, the knife ready to strike again, when a voice, harsh and commanding, sounded from behind it. The creature cringed back in fearful, animal-like abeyance, and another figure stood over the mortally-injured craftmaster. Cruel, pitiless, green-coloured eyes set into a pale face of exquisitely-refined beauty stared down at him. A hand sheathed in a delicately-crafted armoured gauntlet, the fingers tipped with tiny, fine-edged cutting blades, reached down towards him. Kyrrl felt a brief, searing, pain in his forehead, and then the hand came away, holding the blood-smeared spirit stone which had been embedded in the flesh there.

Despair like nothing he had ever felt before filled Kyrrl, and he knew his very soul was forfeit to a force too terrible to be openly contemplated by the eldar mind. The dark eldar warrior smiled, brandishing its shining prize.

"Fear not, 'brother'," it cooed to him. "I won't let you die, at least not yet. My surgeons are skilled, and eager for new flesh to work upon. They'll be upset at the loss of one of their pets. I think they'll be glad of the opportunity to fashion themselves a new replacement for the one you helped destroy."

“Zane, what are you doing here? You’re not scheduled to be running any patrol missions for another two duty shifts.”

They were on the cavernous flight deck within the *Macharius* which was home to both Storm and Hornet squadrons. Kaether had been making the final adjustments to his flight suit, ensuring that the plug-in nodes of his helmet were clear and that his suit’s emergency oxygen supply was unobstructed, when Zane had appeared, also dressed in full flight suit. He had his helmet off, and Kaether forced himself to look the pilot in the eye, reminding himself that Zane was still the best Fury pilot in his squadron. The fact that the man’s face, like much of the rest of his body, was a nightmare of scarred and surgically-rebuilt horror should have had no bearing on the respect due to him as the top-scoring fighter ace aboard ship.

“My apologies, commander,” said Zane, in that disquieting electronic monotone voice which was all the tech-priest surgeons’ efforts had left him with. “I request permission to join your flight patrol. I was praying in my quarters when the thought came upon me that you and the Emperor might have need of me today.”

Some of the other pilots shuffled nervously upon hearing this. It was undisputable that Zane’s solo actions in combat against a daemon creature had possibly saved the entire ship during the evacuation of Belatis some years ago, but no one was truly willing to speculate as to the cause of the circumstances which had allowed him alone to know of the creature’s presence aboard ship and to have been able to hunt it down and destroy it. Some claimed that it was as Zane said, and that he had been an instrument of divine intervention. Others thought that he was simply mad, and had simply been in the right place at the right time.

Kaether was not sure what to believe. He believed in the power of the Emperor, even if that power was located on remote and far distant Terra, and he believed in the divine righteousness of the need to protect mankind from its many enemies, but he was in essence a practical, pragmatic man and, day to day, mainly put his faith in his own abilities and those of his pilots. The promise of divine protection was all very well, but Kaether preferred the more solid assurance of a Fury interceptor, fully checked-out and fuelled and armed, and a pair of trustworthy wingmen on each side of him.

Zane waited patiently while Kaether considered the request. There was an uneasy mood aboard the ship, Kaether knew: pilots and crewmen whose training and combat experience had taught them that all aliens were the enemies of mankind were now disturbed by the uncomfortably close presence of the eldar vessel nearby, and the idea that Zealot Zane had received some kind of divine premonition would do little to dispel that unease.

Still, thought Kaether, no matter how uncomfortable Zane made him feel, there was something about the man which compelled attention. He turned to the tech-priest in charge of the launch preparations. “Prep Storm Four for immediate launch.”

Zane nodded in curt thanks. “What the hell,” Kaether told him, “six Furies are better than five, I suppose, and the extra show of strength won’t go amiss as far as putting on a show for our new eldar friends goes.”

Climbing into the cockpit of his command Fury and allowing the ground crew technicians to strap him into the flight harness, Kaether, still unsure why exactly he had acceded to Zane’s request, was struck in answer by a sudden thought, and laughed softly to himself. Manetho, undergoing the same process in his customary navigator’s position in the rear cockpit space, picked up the sound over his helmet comm-channel.

“Something funny, commander?”

Kaether laughed again. “I think we may be in luck on this mission, Manetho. Don’t tell anyone yet, but I think I may be coming down with a touch of divine inspiration myself. That’ll make two holy madmen in the squadron, so the Emperor can’t fail to be watching over us now.”

Manetho’s caustic and jesting, and also highly blasphemous, reply was thankfully lost in the shattering scream of a Fury engine powering up as the flight prepared for take-off.

In space, in the void between the *Macharius* and the Vual’en Sho, a flight of Eagle bombers with a small, accompanying escort made long, looping patterns across their designated patrol circuit. They had received stern commands to

remain a strict distance from the human ship, but, at several points in the course of the patrol, the bomber flight's commander had allowed his formation to 'accidentally' wander across the invisible border line between the human and eldar ships.

In the command blister of the lead Eagle, Kornous smiled at the thought of the alarm aboard the mon-keigh vessel, the stupid, ape-like human creatures gibbering words of anxiety at each other in the crude, barbaric sounds that passed for mon-keigh language. Perhaps he would be censured for such a breach of orders when he returned to the Vual'en Sho, although he doubted it. Craftmaster Lileathon was his life-mate, but, more than that, she was also a fellow survivor of the destruction of their original craftworld Bel-Shammon, and Kornous knew that she hated the mon-keigh with the same bright, terrible passion as he did himself.

No, she might berate him before the eldar of their adopted craftworld of An-Iolsus, but alone, in their quarters, clinging naked to each other and whispering between themselves words spoken only in the dialect of their extinct home, she would say other, far different things to him.

Theirs was a love born of hate and bitterness: two desperate, lonely exiles, cast adrift amidst an entire race of lonely exiles. The hate of each of them fed and fuelled the hate of the other, and soon, though neither knew it, that hate would bear deadly and violent fruit.

Kornous thought-signalled his steersman to bring the Eagle around towards the human ship again. The mon-keigh vessel loomed large before him, its image magnified a hundredfold by the wraithbone-infused crystal material of the cockpit blister. He studied the shape and form of the enemy vessel, his keen eye picking out possible avenues of attack through the overlapping fields of fire of its defence turrets and then seeking and finding vulnerable points of weakness across the surface of its armoured hull.

His hands twitched in frustrated, unfulfilled eagerness to pass across the crystal control nodes on the instrumentation panel in front of him, the pattern of their movements, combined with a simple thought-command from Kornous, enough to launch the Eagle's lethal cargo of missiles.

In his mind's eye, Kornous saw the missiles of his bomber and those around it streak away towards their target. In his mind's eye, he saw the wave of missiles strike the mon-keigh ship. Many of them smashed themselves to pieces against the mon-keigh ship's dense armour, but enough penetrated through to accomplish their task.

In his mind's eye, he saw the missiles detonate in sequence within the body of their target, saw the shape of the human cruiser heave and convulse as its metal innards were pulverised under the hammer blow impacts of the missiles' sonic warheads; saw, moments later, the target begin to break apart, its shattered internal structure no longer able to hold it together.

Saw, a few scant moments later, the enemy vessel consumed in a white flash as primitive mon-keigh plasma reactors catastrophically ruptured apart.

All this he saw in his mind's eye, and all this he desired with all his life-force.

With a mental sigh, Kornous signalled the steersman to change course again, taking them away from the human ship. He watched as the image of the ship slid away out of view. It didn't matter, of course, for he had already committed the details of all its potential vulnerabilities to memory.

"Mael dannan," he whispered to himself, in mocking farewell salute to the mon-keigh ship.

Mael dannan. Words from the warrior-cant language of his original home craftworld.

Total and merciless extermination.

"They're looping away again, sir, same as they did the last few times."

Semper studied the icons on the surveyor screen, confirming for himself the information relayed to him by one of his junior officers. The eldar attack craft formation was indeed moving away from the outer periphery of the *Macharius*'s defensive range.

"Typical attack pilot grandstanding, perhaps, A show of bravado. Maybe their

bomber and fighter crews aren't that much different from ours after all," mused Semper, only half-seriously.

"Or perhaps they're testing us," suggested Nyder, gruffly. "Practising attack runs and testing the range of our defence turrets and the reaction times of our fighter patrols. Or goading us even, maybe. Trying to find out how far they can push us before we'll react."

Semper grunted in reply, acknowledging the potential truth of Nyder's comment, even if it was not exactly what he wanted to hear at this moment in time. He looked towards his communications crew.

"No word yet from the Mosca?"

"Nothing yet, sir," saluted an officer. "Same with the Volpone. Damned pulsar interference is still playing merry hell with our comm-channels."

"Any word on the last transmission we heard from the Volpone?" Their last contact with the patrol frigate had been over an hour ago, but it had been garbled and indistinct, almost obliterated by pulsar-created static.

"Nothing yet, sir. We've given it to Magos Castaboras to play with. He's running it through the logic engines to see if he can filter out any of the interference and make some sense of what the Volpone was saying. We should have something from him soon."

Semper grunted again in acknowledgement, a sure sign that he was troubled or irritated. He considered things for a moment, then gave his waiting officers their orders.

"Mister Nyder—put out extra fighter screen patrols and have all your attack craft squadrons put on standby, ready for emergency launch. Tell your pilots to see off any more incursions into our defence zone from any of the alien craft. Let's see how they react when we hang the 'no entry' sign up on the door. Comms—signal the Graf Orlok and tell them to proceed at speed to the last known position of the Mosca. If we can't raise them, maybe Graf Orlok can. And signal Drachenfels to do likewise with the Volpone. Tell that old rogue Ramas that—"

He was abruptly cut off by the urgent voice of a communications officer.

“Sir, flash-comm signal coming through from the Drachenfels. They’re in combat with hostiles. They’re reporting they’re under attack by at least one eldar vessel!”

The words were barely out of the man’s mouth before a second shout from a surveyor officer. “Eldar cruiser is coming about. Strong energy surge detected—it’s powering up weapons and defence systems!”

A glance at the augur screens confirmed everything the surveyor officer said, and instantly brought to life all Semper’s worst fears about this mission and the true, treacherous intentions of the alien eldar.

“Battle stations!” he bellowed. “We’re about to come under enemy attack!”

Down on the surface of Stabia, the dust storm seemed, if anything, to have worsened in intensity. Ulanti and Kyogen sheltered in what they had laughably termed the Imperial forces’ command point, even if it was little more than a half-roofed ruin. The eldar were encamped in the ruins on the other side of what appeared to have once been some kind of central plaza or square. Horst and the eldar’s apparent commander—Ulanti was unsure what exactly the alien’s status was: some kind of high priest was the nearest he could judge—were sequestered in a temple-like building in the centre of the open area, talking over whatever urgent and covert matter it was that had caused them to arrange this parlay in the first place.

The building the meeting was taking place within appeared to be the only intact structure in the entire area. Stavka and a handpicked guard of the inquisitor’s senior armsmen were hunkered in the ruins nearby, staring through the swirling dust in sullen, suspicious hostility at the similar eldar retinue stationed likewise nearby on the aliens’ half of the area. The eldar commander’s chief henchman or champion warrior, the same one who had been first to appear and who had regarded Ulanti and the others with such detached contempt, stood there fixed and immobile, a figure of awe and fear in his unfamiliar, peacock-hued armour, his alien weapons held at the ready. If the eldar warrior even noticed the dust storm raging around it, then it certainly gave no indication.

“Arrogant alien bastard,” growled Kyogen, studying the figure of the eldar through an infra-red augmented auspex scope, a piece of equipment borrowed from one of Horst’s retinue, and just about the only thing they had which could pierce the veil of swirling dust. “Look at it, standing there like it owns the whole galaxy. How much longer do you think this is going to take? The sooner we’re done with this and away from these xenos scum, the better.”

Ulanti didn’t much care for the commissar’s comments, just as he found increasingly unnerving the way Kyogen kept flipping the activation stud of his chainsword on and off, setting the weapon’s monomolecular cutting blade in brief but noisy whirring motion, or the way in which his hand constantly strayed towards the holstered bolt pistol at his side, playing with the holster’s brass clasp. The man was clearly rattled by being in such close proximity to the eldar, and Ulanti seriously, if silently, questioned his fitness for a mission such as this.

There were, however, matters which were troubling him even more urgently: their inability to make contact with the shuttles still waiting at the landing zone, for instance. The shuttles, with their powerful onboard comms equipment, were their main link with the orbiting *Macharius*, and Ulanti and the others had heard nothing either from the shuttles or the *Macharius* in the last hour. He had despatched a squad of armsmen, led by Borusa, back to the landing zone to investigate. So far, they had heard nothing. Hedging his bets, and suspecting that there was some undetected aspect of the alien ruins which might be hindering normal communications above and beyond the effects of the dust storm, Ulanti had also sent a second and smaller armsmen squad to accompany a comms officer equipped with a backpack vox set to search for a clearer transmission zone beyond the area of the ruins.

“Ravensburg,” came a shout from the area of the perimeter guard, a panicked-sounding voice giving the codeword which would tell the nervous armsmen sentries to hold their fire. A few moments later, one of the armsmen Ulanti had sent to accompany the comms officer came scrambling into the ruin. Red-faced with exhaustion, he tore off his rebreather mask, gasping for breath in the dust-choked air. Ulanti noticed that the man was stripped of weapons and all other non-essential equipment. A messenger runner, sent back ahead of the rest of his comrades and bearing news which could not wait for the arrival of the comms officer.

“Beg to report, sir,” gasped the man, still managing to present a passable salute to Ulanti and Kyogen. “We made contact with the Mach, although it didn’t last long. They’re under attack, sir. They’re in battle with the alien ship!”

Ulanti’s laspistol and Kyogen’s bolt pistol were in their hands instantly, even before the first sounds penetrated through the blanket of the dust storm from the events now unfolding on the edge of the ruins. Gunfire, the familiar, barking roar of navy shotcannons mixed with the hissing crack of alien weaponry. And, following soon afterwards, human-voiced sounds of alarm and the screams of human pain.

“Ulanti to all units,” he shouted into his comm-unit, not knowing how many of his men could hear him amidst the confusion of the storm and the sudden alien assault. “It’s a trap. The eldar have betrayed us! We’re under attack!”

FOURTEEN

The first Kaether and his squadron knew of the emergency was when an entire series of amber and red warning runes flashed into life across his control console, as his helmet's comm system was filled with screaming static, and his craft was violently buffeted by invisible waves of energy.

His veteran pilot's instincts immediately knew the cause of the power surge interference which was currently threatening to overwhelm his Fury's control systems, but his conscious mind took several vital more seconds to realise what was happening.

"Evasive manoeuvres! The *Macharius* is raising its shields," confirmed Manetho, from the cockpit space behind him. "We're too close! We're caught in the flux of the energy backwash!"

Kaether fought with the controls, powering the Fury out of the grip of the invisible force which was threatening to destroy it. He fed more power to the engines, seeking to put as much distance as possible between himself and the *Macharius*, and the energy force it was now throwing out. As the Fury turned and looped in a safe course away from the massive shadow of its mothership, he caught a brief glimpse of the Dictator-class cruiser as it swung across the portside view from his cockpit.

It was moving, engaging the main drive engines, the telltale plumes of plasma fire along the sides of its hull showing that it was firing up its manoeuvring thrusters. Slowly, ponderously, the three kilometre-long bulk of the warship was swinging round in space.

"They're making evasive manoeuvres," Kaether realised, almost shouting into the squadron comm-net. "They're under attack!"

Even as he looked, he saw the eldar cruiser swing round towards the *Macharius*. In comparison with the Imperium vessel, the movements of the alien craft were lithe and graceful; it seemed almost to turn on its own axis without the visible aid of any manoeuvring thrusters. Despite the seductive grace of the manoeuvre,

despite the way in which the strange craft's giant, almost sail-like appendages spread out, their delicate crystalline veins and surfaces scintillating as they caught the sunlight from Stabia's two stars, Kaether recognised the manoeuvre for exactly what it was.

An attack.

Now he knew he and his squadron were in even greater danger. Tiny as the Furies were in comparison to the leviathans of the *Macharius* and the eldar ship, it was highly unlikely that any of his squadron would actually be hit by the incoming weapons fire from the eldar ship, but that was not what worried Kaether.

The *Macharius* had its shields up now, probably at full strength, judging by the amount of feedback wash which was still cutting into the Fury's own onboard systems. The shields would bear the brunt of the enemy's initial attack, protecting the ship from serious harm, but the impact of the enemy weapons fire against the powerful void shield barrier would unleash an energy burst of ferocious strength, more than capable of annihilating any attack craft caught in its reach.

Kaether opened up with the Fury's afterburners, punching the space fighter at speed away from the *Macharius* and out of the danger zone. The rest of the pilots in the patrol flight followed suit, just as the eldar ship opened fire.

Kaether saw a brilliant, stuttering stream of lance fire burst from the alien ship's prow. His cockpit surveyor screen flared brilliant red, overloaded by the readings it was receiving back as the energy beams cut through space around his flight. Despite conventional wisdom, he had to jink his Fury out of harm's way, as one burst of energy bolts passed lethally close to his fighter.

The long, stuttering line of energy fire struck the *Macharius* square on, hammering against the invisible barrier of its void shields. The eldar ship kept up the punishing torrent of fire for far longer than Kaether would have believed possible, certainly for far longer than the recharge capacity of any Imperium-built lance battery could have managed. Exhausted by the relentless battering they were being subjected to, the *Macharius*'s void shields collapsed in an implosion of energy. The remainder of the eldar lance fire slashed across the

Imperial cruiser's hull, laying open its armoured flanks and blowing apart launch bays and shuttle docks.

Wounded, violated, the *Macharius* still swung ponderously round in space, completing the rest of its manoeuvre.

The blast wave thrown out by the collapsing void shields sped out in pursuit of the escaping Fury flight, crackling bursts of electromagnetic energy and fiery plasma squalls snapping angrily at the fighters' tails. At the head of the scattered formation, Kaether rode out the effects of the Shockwave, gripping the flight controls tightly and mumbling the words of half-remembered prayers as he felt his fighter shake violently around him.

Only after the dissipating Shockwave had passed, only after the flashing runes on the instrumentation panel in front of him returned to something resembling normalcy, only after the feedback scream had faded away to be replaced by an excited babble of voices from the flight controller officers aboard the *Macharius*, did Kaether allow himself to look at the panel showing the squadron status runes. Four runes were still lit; two were not.

Two Furies gone, destroyed by the energy wave from the collapsing void shields. Lerovo and Selle. Two good pilots. Two men who had been with Kaether and Storm squadron since almost the start of the Gothic War.

Finally, through the babble of comm-net voices and the communications-disrupting after-effects of the Shockwave, Kaether was able to make contact with the *Macharius*. The orders he received were exactly what he had expected.

"*Macharius* to Storm Leader. We are under attack. Engage nearest enemy targets at once."

Kaether smiled. He didn't have to check with Manetho to find out what those nearest targets might be.

Kornous's mind was a storm of cold, fierce fury. They had received word from the Vual'en Sho. The mon-keigh had betrayed them yet again. One of the mon-keigh ships had attacked and destroyed the Lament of Elshor, and they had lost contact with Medhbh's Shield and could only presume that it too had been

destroyed. The killers of these two craft were on the loose elsewhere in the system, beyond Kornous's reach, but the human flagship was right here in front of him, already under vengeful attack from the Vual'en Sho, and Kornous was determined that it would not escape unpunished.

With a single, powerful thought-command, communicated in a way which offered no opportunity for question, he directed the flight of Eagle bombers towards their target. Forewarned of the mon-keighs' treachery, the Vual'en Sho had struck first, but, for all its barbaric crudeness, the mon-keigh vessel was larger and more powerful, and Lileathon's vessel would stand little chance against it in a straight duel. Both vessels were carriers and both would now be scrambling to launch their fighter and bomber squadrons. Whichever vessel got its attack craft into space first would almost certainly win the battle. A successful bombing attack now on the mon-keigh ship's launch bays, with its flight decks crammed with fuel-and-munitions-laden attack craft, would leave it crippled and at the mercy of the Vual'en Sho's other bomber wings.

Kornous was determined to land that knock-out blow, and punish the mon-keigh for their endless deceit and upstart arrogance.

A flicker of doubt—a mind-thought warning from Kelmon, commanding the Eagle craft on his far starboard, passed through Kornous's consciousness. Kelmon had detected a wing of human fighter craft speeding towards them on an intercept course. Kornous surveyed the sensor information fed to him through the bomber's infinity circuit matrix, and then dismissed his wingman's warning with a contemptuous mental shrug.

A mere four craft, he almost laughed to himself. What could such things—rudely built, powerfully but crudely armed, piloted by soulless mon-keigh animals—achieve against his own craft and crew?

The answer was not long in coming.

Suddenly, shockingly, the Eagle on Kornous's near port-side exploded apart, struck by a hail of lascannon fire at a range and accuracy which the eldar commander did not think possible of mere mon-keigh gunnery skills.

The Eagle squadron split apart at his command, offering their enemies a spread

of fluid, fast-moving targets, forcing them to break their own formation in response. The human fighters split into two sets of pairs, closing in on their designated targets.

At Kornous's mind-thought command, one of those targets, Marnwroth's craft on the far starboard, peeled away from the others, abandoning its bombing run but drawing off the two enemy fighters from the main battle, leaving just two of them still in the fight.

The eldar craft opened fire with their forward turrets, infinity circuit-linked scatter lasers filling the space around the human fighters with bright-splashing las-fire. To Kornous's almost incredulous consternation, the two mon-keigh craft weaved a skilful—or perhaps merely just fortunate, he thought to himself—path through the twisting maze of weapons fire.

The two Furies opened fire in return, the accuracy of their fire proving that their survival so far had not been a matter of mere good fortune.

The Eagle on Kornous's portside spun away as missiles blew off one of its wings and shredded its tail. From the craft behind him came a collective mental death-scream as a volley of lascannon fire from the other human fighter blew apart its cockpit section.

The fighters flew in tandem through the midst of the dispersed Eagle formation, their rear gun turrets spitting out fire at the eldar bomber craft. Seething with fury—how could two mere mon-keigh craft wreak such havoc?—Kornous linked into his craft's infinity circuit systems, using his own consciousness to boost the efforts of his craft's defensive turret fire.

Massed fire from linked series of shuriken cannon gored the belly of one of the fighters, flaying through plasteel armour. Fire from another of the Eagles struck the other human fighter, blowing out one of its wing-mounted engines, but the Eagles did not escape the exchange unscathed. Combined autocannon fire from the two Furies riddled the hull of another Eagle, crippling it and causing multiple casualties amongst its crew.

Even through the protective firewall installed in his craft's mind-link communications systems, Kornous could easily sense the pain in the mind-voice

of the co-pilot of the damaged Eagle. Her pilot commander was dead, blown apart by human auto-cannon shells, the bomber's hull was punctured in dozens of places and she herself was badly injured, struck by shrapnel from an exploding control console. Despite her wounds and the damage to her craft, the young eldar pilot was requesting permission to carry on towards the target.

Kornous ordered her to return to the Vual'en Sho, with a single angry command. Eldar blood was too rare and precious to be wasted in noble but futilely suicidal gestures.

Inwardly, he cursed to himself. Five of his Eagles were gone, leaving just two of them to continue the bombing run. The mon-keigh had been lucky so far, but, as they closed in on the target, the favour of Asuryan would be with them now, Kornous knew.

One of their pursuers, the one with the crippled engine, fell back, reluctantly abandoning the chase. The other one, with the shredded fuselage, wheeled and gave pursuit, its pilot pushing his damaged craft hard to make up the lost ground between him and his targets. Had it been any other kind of being, Kornous would have been grudgingly impressed at the pilot's furious bravery and single-minded dedication to the chase. As it was nothing more than a mon-keigh, Kornous knew all the pilot was really doing was brutishly obeying its basest animal instincts to keep on fighting, even at the cost of its own life. At the speed he was pushing his crippled fighter, the foolish mon-keigh pilot would soon realise the error of his ways when the thing simply tore itself apart around him.

They were close now. The shape of the target loomed up ahead of them. Defence fire flashed out from it, but the two Eagles skipped effortlessly past and through, Kornous almost laughing at the predictable patterns of the humans' gunnery abilities.

Two of the cavernous launch bays buried into the hull of the vessel flared into angry life, and two separate swarms of fighters buzzed out of them. Hurriedly launched, and seeking targets already dangerously close to their mothership, it would take several seconds—several vital, precious seconds—for the fighters to organise and acquire their targets. Kornous denied them that vital leeway, diving into the midst of one of the groups and commanding his craft's gunners to open fire.

Two of the Furies exploded apart, caught in the streams of shuriken and pulse-laser fire. Another few seconds, another relentless and close-range burst of pulse-laser fire, and another human fighter was gone. The rest scattered in panic, inadvertently opening up a path towards the target. By the time they regrouped and gave pursuit, Kornous would already have launched his missiles and be on his way back to the Vual'en Sho.

The other Eagle was gone, fallen prey to the other swarm of human fighters. That made Kornous, and the clusters of sonic warhead missiles carried by his Eagle, all the more precious. He would have to pick his target carefully.

As if in answer, light flared within another launch bay, signalling more attack craft firing up for imminent launch. This was the moment when attack craft were at their most vulnerable. A successful hit on that launch bay would probably destroy an entire squadron of craft, the chain reaction explosion blowing back into the flight deck hangars beyond, destroying even more of the human ship's complement of attack craft and crippling its ability to launch any more.

Kornous smiled, seeing the gaping mouth of the target launch bay open in front of him. "Mael dannan," he whispered to himself, thought-triggering the missile firing systems.

A split-second later, his Eagle shuddered violently. It was too soon and too violent to be the after-effects of the missile launch, Kornous knew, with a sudden sick realisation. In the remaining split-second which remained of his life, he looked into his sensor systems and saw the impossible.

The damaged Fury, the one which should have torn itself apart long ago, was sitting on his tail and blowing his craft apart with tight, concentrated bursts of lascannon fire. Kornous's scream of rage at his unjust fate was lost in the conflagration as a lascannon shot hit one of his missile warheads, detonating it and utterly vaporising Kornous and his craft.

Of the missiles which he had managed to launch, most spiralled off into space. A few, unguided and unaimed, smashed harmlessly into the densely-armoured sides of the *Macharius*.

Zane throttled back on his Fury's power systems, avoiding the expanding debris cloud which was all that remained of his target. As damaged as it was, his Fury would need little more encouragement to explode apart around him from an impact with even the smallest fragment of spinning debris. Other than the hissing of escaping air from his Fury's oxygen supply, there was no other sound in the cockpit. Certainly nothing from the space behind him, where the junked, bleeding remains of his servitor navigator still sat in place, killed by the strange razor shards of enemy fire which had penetrated the craft in their pass right through the middle of the enemy formation.

Zane permitted himself a small moment of human pleasure, offering up a prayer of thanks to the Emperor who had guided his hand in those last few moments. Machine mind had told him that what he was trying to do was impossible, that it was almost certainly a pointless, futile gesture which would lead to the destruction of him and his craft, but Zane had not listened. Human spirit and human hands, guided by the greater hand of the Divine Emperor, had carried him through.

"Storm Leader to Storm Six. Fine shooting, Zane. Return to the *Macharius* before that crate falls apart around you. I'll follow you in."

It was the voice of Kaether, trailing far behind in his own crippled Fury and carefully nursing an engine thruster which was threatening to explode apart on him any moment. Together, the two of them had almost single-handedly seen off an attack which would have left the *Macharius* almost defenceless against the enemy's own attack craft. Assuming they survived the battle which was still only just beginning, another piece of *Macharius* legend had just been created.

"Understood, commander. Returning to base," was Zane's only reaction to his place in this legend.

Standing at her position on the command deck of the Vual'en Sho, Craftmaster Lileathon suddenly cried out and reeled back, gripping onto her control lectern for support. Ailill and several nearby crew members rushed to her aid. She raised her head and glared at them in fury, stopping them in their tracks with a single thought-command.

“Back.”

Ailill knew what that look meant, and what had made his craftmaster cry out in the way she had. Standing near her, he had caught something of the psychic echo of it himself. Kornous, her soul-mate and one of the few remaining survivors of craftworld Bel-Shammon, was dead. Even his spirit gem, that part of him which would protect his soul from the abomination of the Great Enemy was gone, vaporised along with the rest of Kornous’s craft, or drifting lost and unrecoverable somewhere out there in the void. Kornous, and all he had been, was lost forever to the eldar race, and to his still-living soul-mate.

Up until now, Ailill had still hoped some kind of ceasefire could be arranged with the human force. Details of what had happened to the other eldar ships in the Stabia system were still vague and confused. Medhbh’s Shield had disappeared without trace, and was presumed lost. It was assumed that it had been attacked and destroyed by one of the human vessels, although Ailill was unsure how the swifter-moving eldar frigate, with its superior communications and detection capabilities, could have been taken by surprise by any lumbering human warship without managing to get a warning out first.

Its sister ship Lament of Elshor had definitely been attacked by one of the human ships, and had been able to communicate this fact to the Vual’en Sho before its destruction by the human cruiser’s fearsome arsenal of lance batteries, but even this dire situation was not as clear as it seemed. According to communications signals intercepted from the human craft, the human ship claimed to have come under attack first, from another as yet unidentified eldar vessel. Unable to track down its elusive attacker, it had instead turned its guns on the Lament of Elshor. Other human communications intercepts also suggested that the humans had lost two of their own patrol vessels. A partial signal from the Lament of Elshor, sent just before its destruction and as it desperately tried to disengage from battle with the larger and far more powerful human ship, suggested that it too had detected the presence of an unidentified ship in the area.

Too many unknown elements were at work, Ailill thought. Too many anomalies and strange variables. There was something deeply wrong here, he felt. Deep down in his soul, something screamed at him in warning. As second-in-command, as the vessel’s Lann Caihe, or water bringer, it was his duty to bring such doubts to the attention of his craft-master. She was the fire which he was

required to quench with water, bringing harmony to the command of the Vual'en Sho. But Ailill knew that the moment for such action was past, that whatever reason he might have tried to have brought to the mind of his impetuous commander would be nothing compared to the savage, vengeful emotions now sweeping through her mind. One glance at the set of her hate-filled features, one psychic brush with the maelstrom of her grieving, rage-possessed mind confirmed that everything now was lost.

"Attack," she commanded, in a tone which dared any to try and argue otherwise. "Send them all to their precious corpse-god. We'll stack them in cairns a hundred high before that living abomination they call an emperor, and it still it won't be enough to make up for the loss of Kornous and the others."

In the depths of the warp, the shadow point opened wider. Darkness, vivid and crawling, spilled out of it, threatening to engulf all.

Somewhere near the edge of the Stabia system, Titus von Blucher, captain of the Lunar-class cruiser Graf Orlok, prepared to end his life in a manner very different from the way in which he had lived it.

Blucher was not a particularly brave man, but nor was he a coward. The fact was, he had never been required to exhibit any of the greater qualities associated with a captain in the Imperial Navy at any time during his ascent through the ranks of Battlefleet Gothic. Family connections, blueblood string-pulling and no small element of good fortune had conspired to assure his swift and reasonably effortless rise to the position of cruiser captain, a fact which had greatly rankled many within the battlefleet, most especially those officers of arguably greater, or at least equal, ability but who also lacked von Blucher's shared aristocratic family heritage with Lord Admiral Ravensburg.

The outbreak of the Gothic War, which could easily have been the breaking of the man, had in fact been something of the making of him. His command skills had proven to be competent enough, and, while better captains and more illustrious vessels had fallen prey to the war's voraciously endless appetite for carnage and destruction, von Blucher and the Graf Orlok had survived, achieving enough to earn the grudging respect of many within Battlefleet Gothic.

Some doubters still remained, but, if they could see him as he was now, seated on the command deck of his ship and preparing to face his vessel's almost certain destruction, their doubts would finally have been silenced.

"Twelve thousand kilometres, and closing," counted off a surveyor officer, as they watched the enemy target icons on the augur screen advance relentlessly towards them.

The three Chaos vessels—one Carnage-class cruiser, identified by its energy signature as the Despicable, a vessel which had erroneously been reported as presumed destroyed during a skirmish in the Lysades sub-sector eight months ago, and two Infidel-class escorts—had appeared on the surveyor screens over an hour ago, following a possible warp exit energy burst some time before. Moving to investigate, and still searching for the missing frigate Mosca, the Graf Orlok had encountered the three Chaos vessels on a course heading in-system towards the *Macharius*.

Damn this pulsar interference, thought von Blucher, staring at the closing enemy target icons. If it wasn't for the random electronic noise being thrown off by the warp-damned thing, they'd have been able long ago to detect the enemy squadron's approach and get a warning signal out to the *Macharius* and the Drachenfels.

As it was, they were condemned to fight an almost suicidal holding action, unable to outrun their faster enemies, desperately trying to buy time to make contact with the other ships and warn them of this new threat.

Von Blucher's strategy so far had been simple, but relatively effective. Spreads of multiple torpedo fire had succeeded in scattering the formation of Chaos ships, even managing, at an impressively extended range, to land one successful hit on the cruiser. After that, he had put up a fighting retreat, deliberately leading the Chaos ships on a tangent course away from the other Imperial ships' locations, while turning every so often to fire off broadsides at his pursuers. So far, this tactic had paid off, succeeding in damaging one of the escorts and stripping the shields several times from the cruiser vessel. Now, however, that game was almost played out, and the enemy had closed to lethal range, bringing its deadly prow-mounted lance armaments to bear.

For some minutes, turning to starboard and presenting its broadside flank to the enemy, the Graf Orlok was able to trade blows with the Chaos ships. A well-aimed lance strike exploded the prow of one of the escorts, possibly crippling it. Broadsides of massed turbo-laser and macro-cannon fire stripped the Carnage-class once more of its shields, landing hits across its sloped topside and opening up several breaches in its hull.

But, outgunned and outnumbered, for every hit the Graf Orlok inflicted on its opponents, it received many more in return.

Expert weapons fire from the Carnage picked off the Graf Orlok's two starboard side lance batteries. A torpedo strike from the undamaged Infidel penetrated through to the enginarium section, knocking out two of the Lunar-class cruiser's plasma reactors and causing a crippling power loss just when it needed power most. The Chaos ships showed no mercy on their stricken target, relentlessly pummelling it with volleys of broadside fire.

Explosions wracked the Graf Orlok from prow to stern. A wave of macro-cannon impacts gutted two entire decks of gun batteries on the starboard side, and detonated one of the secondary magazines. Hundreds died in the initial explosion, thousands more in the resulting conflagration as firestorms swept through decks and galleries, consuming everything in their path. Fires burned out of control throughout the forward section of the ship, isolating more than a thousand desperate crew in the torpedo rooms. Trapped, they faced a choice between asphyxiating to death as the fires consumed the remaining oxygen in that part of the ship, or, perhaps more mercifully, dying in a sudden explosive holocaust when the advancing fires ignited either the torpedo warheads or the missiles' fuel mix.

On the bridge of the disintegrating ship, Titus von Blucher issued his last order as master of the Graf Orlok. "Boost all remaining power to communications arrays. The other ships must be warned!"

Seconds later, several direct hits on the command tower brought the roof of the command deck crashing in. Trapped beneath a gargoyle-carved support column, bleeding out onto the cracked marble floor, his legs and spine crushed, von Blucher could only watch in disbelief as a flickering, fading surveyor screen showed the enemy ships turning and moving away, disdainfully passing up the

chance to deliver the final killing blow to the helpless Imperial ship.

Battlefleet Gothic records and the proud family history of the Ravensburg von Blucher clan would later attest that Captain Titus von Blucher died as he should have, giving his life valiantly in battle against the enemies of the Emperor and dying at the helm of his vessel. What such histories could not know was the true terrible truth of the situation. Von Blucher would die, but not at the helm of his ship, and not for many long, agonising months after the destruction of the Graf Orlok, and in a place and manner which could not be easily imagined by those who compiled such noble and glory-strewn histories.

Out in space, and as arranged, the dark eldar cruiser emerged from its hidden lurking place and bore silently and swiftly down on the dying Imperial cruiser. Even after the pillage of Medhbh's Shield, there was still plenty of room in its slave holds for the remnants of the crew of the Graf Orlok, and it was all too happy to claim the prize left to it by the Chaos ships. Mon-keigh flesh was a less precious and valuable commodity than the craftworld eldar captured earlier, but there was always plenty of demand for such slave stock and torture fodder back in Commorragh.

"Signal from the Graf Orlok, captain. They report they're under attack from enemy vessels. A Carnage-class cruiser and two escorts."

"And?"

The question hung in the air of the *Macharius*'s command deck for a moment. The communications officer who was reporting to Semper shifted nervously, before hesitantly answering his captain. "And that's all, sir. It's just a partial signal—all communications were then cut off, and we haven't been able to establish contact with the Graf Orlok since."

Semper cursed, a vicious, voluble oath which caused several nearby officers to blanch at the sound of language more fitting to deep below-decks than the bridge of an Imperial warship. He turned, looking towards the two figures standing nearby.

"A two-pronged attack, the eldar in alliance with the Despoiler? Admiral

Pardain, could such a thing be possible?”

Pardain opened his mouth to answer, but it was the other figure standing beside him, that of Horst’s man, who replied first.

“In my opinion, no, commodore,” said Monomachus, with clinical Adeptus Mechanicus efficiency. “While the eldar are known to be a piratical race, and while many of the human pirate fleets have gone over to the enemy’s side, or at least sworn oaths of fealty to the Despoiler since the outset of the war, there are no reported incidences of eldar pirates directly aiding the enemy at any point. Indeed, Inquisition records show many confirmed incidents throughout Imperium history where eldar forces have, for whatever reasons, actually aided Imperium forces against the servants of the Powers of the Warp. There are also many recorded accounts to suggest that the eldar are also not above taking direct action themselves against the servants of Chaos, independent of any Imperium involvement.”

“Yes,” burst out Pardain, “and for every one of these ‘reported instances’, I can give you a dozen more proven examples of eldar treachery. You know well enough what they’re capable of, Semper. Colonies wiped out, convoys attacked, garrisons assaulted and warships ambushed. The aliens may not be in league with the Despoiler, but they’ve proven here yet again that they can never be trusted. I had my doubts about this endeavour, and so did Ravensburg, and now we’ve seen who was right all along. Horst’s notion of an alliance with such a race was a brave one, but also a foolish one, as we now plainly see.”

“There is no one single eldar race,” countered Monomachus, smoothly and calmly. “Rather, our studies have revealed there are many different factions or clan-like groupings, each one with its own distinct perspective and methods. It is a mistake to assume that the proven hostile actions of one group of eldar reflect on the likely behaviour of another. Indeed, internecine warfare between different groups of eldar is not unknown, and there is evidence, much of it Inquisition-sealed, to suggest that the worst atrocities ascribed to the race in general may in fact be the work of some kind of renegade faction or pariah offshoot which is itself extremely hostile to the rest of the eldar race.”

“Could we be dealing with just such a group here? Could Inquisitor Horst have inadvertently made contact with these pariahs? Would that explain why they

have attacked our vessels?”

The tech-priest paused before answering Semper’s questions. “I think not, commodore. The inquisitor’s methods in making initial contact with the aliens were, by necessity, circumspect and confidential, but he has a thorough working knowledge of xenos matters, and I do not believe he would be so easily duped. The eldar we have seen here are the ones he set out to make contact with in the first place.”

Yes, Horst, Semper thought. He got us into this mess, but where was he now? He looked towards his communications section.

“Still no word from Ulanti or anyone else on the planet’s surface? Or from the Drachenfels?”

Unhappy shakes of head from several communications officers gave him the answers he feared. They were on their own in orbit around this blighted world, facing an enemy in front of them and now more in the system beyond. They had launched several ineffectual broadsides at the eldar cruiser, watching in helpless anger as it effortlessly eluded each of them, its speed and manoeuvrability taking it out of reach of the *Macharius*’s weapons batteries, where it hovered now, proud and mocking. The initial bomber attack on the ship had been successfully repelled, and now a dense screen of fighters surrounded it, protecting it from any further ordnance attacks. The *Macharius*’s full complement of Starhawk bomber squadrons sat stacked in their launch bays, patiently waiting for the word to launch in a mass assault on the eldar ship.

So what where they waiting for, wondered Semper? Did his eldar counterpart, like he himself, have doubts about what was truly going on here? It was undeniably true that the eldar ship had fired upon them first, but hadn’t he been preparing to do the same and had merely been beaten to the draw by a faster opponent? What had happened to the Mosca and the Volpone? Where were the eldar cruiser’s own escort vessels? Why were they not coming to offer it support against the *Macharius*? Did the eldar ship know of the presence of Chaos ships in the system? Were they truly, as Pardain suggested, in league with the Despoiler?

There is still so much we don’t understand about them, Semper thought to

himself, unknowingly echoing the earlier thoughts of Horst. That's where the danger lies: in our own ignorance.

"Communications—we still have those open comm-net frequencies to the eldar ship?"

Hard-bitten, veteran navy officers, Admiral Pardain amongst them, gawped at him in surprise. "Yes, sir," an astonished communications officer managed to reply.

Despite the seriousness of the situation, Semper almost smiled. If Commissar Kyogen was here, he would surely already be lining up his aim to put a swift bolter round through the skull of the *Macharius*'s captain.

"Open up hailing frequencies," he ordered. "Tell them I want to speak captain to captain to their vessel commander."

"A brave idea, but a foolish one." That was how Pardain had characterised Horst's gambit in initiating this whole rendezvous. In light of what happened next, barely before the words were even out of his mouth, it might equally have described the desperate and highly unorthodox strategy Semper had just tried to set in motion.

"Energy surge from the enemy ship's launch bays," shouted a surveyor officer. "It's launching bombers, waves of them."

FIFTEEN

The world known to the Imperium as Stabia had known violence before. The ancient races which had come long before the humans had fought their wars amongst themselves, and between each other, and those wars had on occasion touched this world. After those ancient ones, following purposefully in their footsteps, had come the eldar. The eldar did not wage war amongst themselves, it was widely believed, although their earliest legends and most dimly-recalled and secretly-held histories contained much evidence to suggest otherwise. Such ancient, fratricidal conflicts had not reached Stabia, and the world had remained at peace until the cataclysm of the Fall, when the eldar race turned on itself in one terrible, orgiastic moment of self-destruction.

Stabia had remained undisturbed since then, but the dust that covered its surface knew the taste of blood, and the remnants of those long-vanquished civilisations, dotted across the face of the planet, knew well enough the sounds of screams and conflict echoing amongst their ruined palaces and thoroughfares.

Now, after long millennia of silence, death had come once more to Stabia.

Ulanti ran forward at a crouch, aware of the sounds of death from all around him: screams and shouts, mostly human, mixed with the dry crack of las-fire, the solid, angry roar of shotcannons and the unfamiliar sound of the eldar weapons fire—a strange, high-pitched sibilant hiss. Even over the dull, smothering growl of the dust storm, Ulanti could still hear the loud insect whine of deadly projectile objects passing close by at supersonic speed. It wasn’t until a senior armsman close beside him screamed and crumpled to the ground, clutching at his face, that Ulanti, who even with his goggles on could only see a few metres in front of him through the swirling dust, realised that these were no random shots; the enemy was close, and actively firing at him.

He rolled to the ground, landing beside the twitching corpse of the armsman. The man’s face was gone, torn away by the impact of whatever had struck him. In amongst the oozing ruin of where his face had been, Ulanti could see jagged shards of some kind of crystalline substance buried into the pulped flesh and

bone of the man's skull. Smoke, or possibly poisonous vapour, arose from the terrible wound, and Ulanti could actually see the acidic substance of the shards dissolving as they ate a deeper path into their victim's body. The acid or venom, seeping into the corpse's bloodstream and nervous system, caused it to spasm and twitch violently, giving it the horrid illusion of life.

In spite of himself, Ulanti shuddered. Weapons were designed to kill, yes, but whatever manner of arms the aliens were using was also designed to inflict the worst kind of suffering on anyone merely wounded or maimed by a hit from such a weapon. Cold and aloof, that was his initial impression of the eldar. To that list he had now happily added deceitful, but what kind of cruel and malignant being would purposefully use a weapon like that?

Almost in answer, from out of the dust storm there came a banshee shriek of malevolent pleasure, and a shape came hurtling towards him. He saw a dark silhouette, moving fast and with inhuman agility, its body seemingly and confusingly made up of a series of whirling jagged blade-shapes.

There were blade-shapes in its hands too, although one of them might have been a pistol of some sort, although Ulanti was unsure if they were actually weapons or merely extensions of its blade-constructed body.

All this he saw and tried to take in during one confused and terrified second, and then a heavy booted foot painfully trampled him into the dust.

"Watch yourself, sir. I'll see to this pointy-eared bastard!" called Borusa, stamping over his commanding officer's body as he rushed towards Ulanti's attacker. Inhuman speed and agility met all-too-human brutality and pragmatism.

Borusa put a studded boot into the eldar's stomach, bringing its charge to a bone-crunching halt. He ducked the first, lightning-fast blade that came at him, but the weapon in the alien's other hand cut through the meat of his forearm to the bone. Even before Borusa had registered the pain from the strange, cold metal of the alien blade, he had already dealt the creature a crushing blow with the stock of his heavy bolter, smashing the weapon down upon the creature's skull.

The eldar crumpled to the ground. Roaring in anger, blood spurting from his wounded arm, Borusa planted a foot on the eldar's chest, pinning it to the

ground, and blew its head apart with a single heavy bolter round.

Getting up, Ulanti saw the source of his earlier, momentary confusion. The eldar's armour and weapons were studded with long, scythe-like blade attachments. Even the long, crescent shape of its helmet was fashioned into a cruel-edged blade. The alien's armour was mixed, muted shades of black and red. Everything about the alien and its appearance signified a dark and twisted malignity. It was also quite unlike any of the eldar Ulanti had seen so far here, sharing none of the bright peacock colours and delicately flamboyant design that he had seen in their weapons and armour, but he would be the first to admit that he was no damned Inquisition expert on xenos-related matters. However it might be different from the others the thing lying in the dust in front of him was unmistakably still an eldar.

They had come here to cautiously rendezvous and parley with the eldar, a race with a long and bloody history of attacks on Imperium forces, now they had come under attack from eldar. You didn't have to be some damned Adeptus Mechanicus construct to work out what was happening here, Ulanti thought to himself.

It was left to Borusa, cursing and grinning savagely as he applied a hasty battlefield dressing to his wounded arm, to unsubtly set the situation in context.

"Alien or no alien," he grinned, gesturing to the corpse at his feet, "the bastards still bleed good enough, sir. As long as I know they can bleed, then I know I ain't going to have too much problem killing them."

He took up the heavy bolter again, sending a long, chattering stream of bolter shells into the dust storm in the direction the eldar had come from, dissuading any others that might still be lurking out there from trying the same thing. Then, grabbing Ulanti, he ran off into the storm, probing out a path ahead of them with short, menacing bursts of bolter fire.

Stumbling through the confusion of the dust storm, with the muffled sounds of battle coming from all around them, they soon came across other corpses, mostly crewmen from the *Macharius*, but with the lifeless forms of Horst's Inquisition retinue and also several eldar warriors mixed amongst them. Passing the corpse

of one of the eldar, Ulanti could not help but notice that it was twitching and jerking in a way identical to the body of the armsman just moments ago, and that there were several identical smoking puncture wounds in its torso.

A victim of alien friendly fire, Ulanti wondered, cut down in the crossfire from one of his brother eldar? In the confusion of battle, in the urgency of the moment, there was no way of stopping to wonder what might have happened.

And there were other survivors too. Looming out of the murk, appearing so quickly that Ulanti almost sent a brace of las-shots into them, came Horst's man Stavka, accompanied by several of his group. Following them came Commissar Kyogen with half a squad of naval armsmen. There were casualties amongst both groups of Imperial servants, one of Stavka's men nursing the hastily-cauterised stump of an arm severed just below the elbow. There was the tell-tale glazed look of heavy doses of kalma in the man's eyes, inuring him from the immediate pain and shock of his wound.

"They took us by surprise, coming at us from all sides," said Stavka. There was blood smeared across the Inquisition man's face—not his own, apparently, since he showed no sign of injury—and a look of fierce determination in his eyes. He gripped his weapon, an expensive and rare forge world-manufactured plasma pistol/bolt pistol combi-weapon, tightly. The plasma pistol element of the weapon emitted a faint whining noise as it recharged, and the barrel gave off an acrid-smelling vapour as its internal cooling element fought to combat the potentially disastrous effects of the weapon overheating. The gun had been fired recently and repeatedly.

"Are there any more of you?" asked Stavka, looking at the two naval men.

"Perhaps, but I can't raise any of them on the comm. I sent a squad to check on the shuttles, but my chief petty officer here is the only one who made it back."

Stavka swore in the Low Gothic dialect of his homeworld. "Alright, then we assume they're all dead and what you see here is all we've got left. They've hit us hard and fast, but there's still enough of us left to do them some damage. First thing we've got to do now is find the inquisitor and get him out of here."

Ulanti nodded his assent. Stavka clapped him on the shoulder, grinned a

humourless grin and then led them at a sprint towards the building where Horst had been meeting with the eldar leader. The sound of weapons fire was heaviest from that direction, although all that could be heard was the strange, mixed sounds of the aliens' guns. Briefly, Ulanti wondered if, in the confusion of battle and the dust storm, the eldar had mistakenly opened fire on each other. If that were truly the case, he mused, then all the better for their own chances of survival, perhaps showing that the Emperor's favour was with them.

One of Stavka's retinue, a female with a powerful physique and primitive warrior tattoos carved into her disfigured face, gave a shout of alarm. She was equipped with augmetic eyes, which could apparently see further into the murk of the storm than normal human vision, and she had clearly spotted some imminent threat. Raising her bulky grenade launcher, she sent a brace of frag grenades flying out into the dust.

The action was answered seconds later by a series of explosions and the sound of alien screams as lethal hails of razor-edged shrapnel sprayed out amongst the eldar. The warrior woman grinned in triumph and raised the weapon to fire again, but was abruptly cut down by a volley of spinning razor disc projectiles which cut through flesh and bone seemingly just as easily as they cut through the dust-filled air of the storm. Struck by several of the missiles, the woman tumbled to the ground in pieces.

Stavka gave a yell of anger and charged off into the dust clouds. Ulanti followed suite, snapping off shots with his laspistol. From out of the dusty gloom, the distinctive shapes of the eldar began to emerge.

The attack from their rear had apparently caught them by surprise, but they were reacting with bewildering speed, turning from behind the low walls and tumbled ruins they had sought cover amongst to confront their human attackers. Ulanti saw an alien warrior in brightly-patterned armour turn the long, slender barrel of his unfamiliar-looking weapon towards them. The weapon spewed out a thin, arcing stream of fire, revealing itself to be some kind of alien flamer device. The weapon's reach was longer and more deadly than its bulkier human equivalent; the alien's aim even deadlier still.

The fireball consumed two of the men from the *Macharius*, and one of Stavka's lieutenants, a dark-skinned mutant wearing the glowing snake crest skin-

markings of one of the infamous bounty hunter clans of the feral world of Wagner's Landing. Two of the victims, immolated almost completely by the potent chemical mix of the alien weapon, were ashes almost before they hit the ground. The third, one of the *Macharius* men, ran onwards blind and screaming as the fire ate hungrily away at him. One of the eldar disc projectiles, whether mercifully intended or not, struck him and brought his agony to an abrupt end.

The wave of fire rolled towards Ulanti, the heat of it igniting the dust in the air, as the alien continued to direct the weapon's deadly reach towards more of his intended targets. Panicking, Ulanti snapped off several las-shots at the alien, seeing the eldar stagger slightly as at least one of them impacted against its armour. Before it could recover and readjust its aim, there was a distinctive screaming-roaring noise from somewhere close to Ulanti's right, and the eldar was struck square on by an angry ball of white-hot stellar energy, killing it instantly and igniting the fuel of its flamer weapon. The eldar and the area around it disappeared in a fiery roar, the flames from the explosion and its scattered debris casting an incandescent glow over the battlefield.

Panicked by the explosion, the other eldar pulled back to another line of ruins. Stavka crouched on the ground and fired his combi-weapon at them in an expert two-handed stance, picking off at least one more of them with short, carefully controlled bursts of bolter shells. Even amongst the loud bark of the bolter fire, the complaining whine of the plasma pistol element of the weapon could clearly be heard as it recharged once more, getting ready to unleash more catastrophe into the ranks of the aliens.

"We've got them on the run now," shouted the ex-Arbites officer, the gruff authority in his voice evident even over the sound of gunfire and the ever-rising howl of the storm. "Don't let them regroup or try to slip around us under cover of the storm!"

He was moving again, Ulanti and the others quickly following him. Ulanti had his laspistol in one hand and his master-crafted naval officer's sabre in the other. The shapes of two eldar reared up at him. A solid blast of heavy bolter fire scattered one of them in pieces back into the gloom where it had come from; clear evidence that Borusa was still with him and watching his back. The other, too close for Ulanti's hiveworld cutthroat guardian angel to risk a shot at, was upon the navy officer in an instant.

Ulanti and the eldar traded blows fast and furiously, the metal-working skills of the long dead craftsmen who had fabricated the sabre Ulanti wielded sorely tested by the impacts from the strange bone-like material of the alien's own sword. Remorselessly, he found himself losing ground to his opponent, forced to take the defensive by the alien's relentless and unorthodox fighting style. He looked into his opponent's eyes, the eldar's face at times only a hand's breadth away from his own. In previous duels, he had been used to seeing various emotions in his enemy's visage: hate, fear, desperation, determination. Even the faces of the most inhuman or warp-mutated servants of the Dark Powers showed some kind of emotion, even if it was often some kind of twisted glee at the thought of death, even their own. The face of the eldar betrayed nothing. Its graceful, alien features were set in an expression unreadable to Ulanti's merely human experience. Its eyes, dark and wide, reflected back only Ulanti's own face, and in it Ulanti saw the same expression he had seen in so many of his own opponents in the past: fear and desperation, and a growing realisation of death at the hands of a superior opponent.

He felt rather than saw Borusa's closing presence nearby, but shouted out an angry command forbidding the big hive-worlder bodyguard to interfere. Parrying a sudden thrust of the eldar's blade and barely managing to sidestep the alien's lightning-quick follow-through attack, Ulanti stepped unexpectedly into the alien's guard. Too close to use his own blade, and moving before the alien could dance out of reach again and bring its own blade to bear, he used a move which owed considerably more to the vicious tenets of combat during brutal, no-holds-barred boarding actions than it did to the stylised if lethal etiquette of the art of Necromundan duelling, bringing his knee hard up into his opponent's groin.

Ulanti had no idea about any peculiarities of eldar physiology, or even what gender—if any—the alien might be, but the move seemed to have the desired effect. The alien grunted in pain and surprise, and staggered back for a moment. Swiftly, before the creature had a chance to recover, he swung his sabre at its exposed face, cleaving its skull.

For all the eldar's inhuman grace and speed, it died just like any other opponent Ulanti had slain in the past, falling heavily to the ground with a surprised gurgle.

"Caught it a shot there right in the bilge decks, sir," grinned Maxim, giving Ulanti a congratulatory clap on the shoulder. "Maybe we'll make a decent bit of

hivetrash out of you yet."

He had to duck, grabbing Ulanti and dragging him down with him, as the air around them was again rent with the strange, frightening sound of the aliens' weapons fire. There were several screams from nearby—Ulanti saw one of the Inquisition bodyguards, a middle-aged Imperial Guard veteran, sprawling in the dust, disembowelled by one of the deadly razor-edged disc projectiles—and then the answering bark of the Imperial guns.

The outlines of the alien warriors started to manifest themselves out of the murk of the storm. Ulanti checked the charge on his laspistol, as Maxim ratcheted back the loading lever on his heavy bolter, locking a full magazine of the lethally explosive rocket shells into place. He looked at Ulanti as he took aim at silhouette targets moving towards them.

Maxim grinned again, shooting a glance over at the officer. "Not to worry, sir. Like I said, we've seen the colour of their blood now, and, xenos bastards or not, we know that they bleed and die just like the rest of us."

He was just about to fire, just about to, by his own expert estimation, shred apart the nearest two eldar, when the shout came to them from somewhere close and to their right.

"Hold your fire. Stop, in the name of the Holy Emperor!"

The voice was shocking in its immediacy, and there was something in the command which demanded complete and instant obedience. Almost involuntarily, and to his own very great surprise, Maxim found that his finger had frozen on the trigger, just short of sending out a long, lethal burst of bolter fire. He looked at Ulanti, seeing the doubt and confusion that must have been evident on his own scarred, brutal face reflected in Ulanti's own expression.

They both became suddenly aware that all the other sounds of gunfire had ceased, human and alien. Whatever power that voice held had apparently held sway with the eldar too. Human and eldar faced each other uncertainly and in silence amidst the swirling screens of dust. The moment, probably only a few scant seconds in reality, seemed to stretch on forever in the minds of the participants, and then the spell was broken as Horst and the others appeared.

Ulanti and several of the others instinctively made to raise their weapons to fire at the sight of the armed eldar accompanying the inquisitor, especially when he saw that same tall, menacing eldar warrior lord amongst them. An unmistakably forbidding gesture from Horst, backed up by a command in that same compellingly dictatorial tone, brought a swift end to such intentions.

“I said cease fire. You’d do well to consider those words as immutable as if they were handed down to you from the Golden Throne itself.”

Ulanti’s weapon dropped down to his side, and he rose to his feet. The others did likewise, as did the eldar. The old eldar—some kind of seer or lord, Ulanti surmised—walked beside Horst, his presence commanding instant respect and obedience from the other eldar. He heard no words from the eldar lord, and saw little in the way of commanding gestures, but, somehow, the same command which had frozen the human combatants in place also communicated itself through the ranks of the aliens. The eldar also lowered their weapons and pulled back a short distance, standing warily and suspiciously eyeing their opponents while Horst, the eldar lord and the eldar’s peacock-attired bodyguards held the ground between the two hostile groups.

Suddenly, the eldar ranks opened, and the tall, menacing eldar warrior-lord strode forward, gesturing angrily at the seer. The seer’s bodyguards clustered nervously around their lord, uneasy at the presence of the armed humans, and the anger of the knight. Ulanti strained to hear over the smothering sound of the dust storm, catching only snatches of the aliens’ strange lilting, musical speech, shrewdly noticing that as much seemed to be communicated in silent gesture or body stance as it was in actual speech; noticing too the strange moments of silence and stillness in the conversation which would then resume without apparent interruption, almost as if the aliens had some secret means of communicating between themselves.

The knight’s voice became more strident, notes of unhappy discord evident in the aliens’ lyrical-sounding language. The bodyguards’ unease increased. Finally, at a gesture from the seer, one of the bodyguards threw something down on the ground before the knight. The effect was instantaneous: the knight stepped back almost in fear. His own group of warriors, catching sight of it, also drew back in revulsion from the object lying in the dust at the knight’s feet. The seer bent down and picked it up, holding it up for all to see. Ulanti saw it was an armoured

helm, black, barbed and sinister, unmistakably similar to the one worn by the strange dark-armoured eldar warrior that Borusa had killed earlier in the battle.

The eldar saw what their lord was holding, and, even over the sound of the storm, Ulanti and the other humans witnessing all this heard the word—half whispered in fear, half shouted in revulsion—which rippled through the aliens' ranks like a palpable wave of shock.

"Druchii," they said amongst themselves, making the strange word sound like a curse.

"We have been betrayed, Darodayos, both we and the humans. The Dark Ones—the druchii—are here amongst us, spreading their deceit and setting us and the humans against each other."

Darodayos stared at the hateful mask in Kariadryl's hand. Like many of his race, especially those of the aspect warrior castes, he was suspicious and hostile to all human-kind, and all too ready to believe that they had been betrayed by the humans. It would not be the first time that the followers of the human corpse-god had turned on the eldar, and Darodayos doubted that it would be the last.

Nevertheless, the eldar warrior was unable to deny the evidence in the farseer's hand. He had fought the Dark Ones before, and knew well enough the kind of trickery and deceit they were capable of, and seemed all but second nature to them. Still, with his own eyes, had he not just seen the humans turning their guns on his own people?

The two things, an innate and deep-seated suspicion of the humans and the equally deep-buried dread of his race's own darker, one-time kinsfolk, fought for supremacy in the mind of the neophyte exarch.

Sensing the confusion in her commander's mind, Freyra, one of the Striking Scorpion warriors and kinsman to the farseer lord, stepped forward, making the third aspect of the fourth gesture of respect—respect due to a war leader from a notable lieutenant—as she did so.

"What the lord farseer says is true, Darodayos. The druchii are upon us. They must have come through another webway portal elsewhere on the planet's

surface, and closed in on us under the cover of the storm." She pointed off into the storm-hidden distance behind her. "The ones I encountered came from the south. At first, we thought like you did, that the mon-keigh had betrayed us. Then I found the first druchii corpse lying amongst three of my brethren."

She broke off, pointing grimly to the object still held by Kariadryl. "I took that off it and brought it to the lord farseer."

Freyra and the other eldar relaxed somewhat, seeing the subtle but unmistakable signs of understanding and belief in the shifting stance of Darodayos's body language. Nevertheless, the same tone of hostile suspicion remained in his spoken words.

"And the mon-keigh?" he asked.

"My people have been attacked too," answered Horst in inelegantly-phrased but adequately spoken eldar, in one of the older trading dialects used amongst those eldar who travelled widely amongst the many different craftworlds and Exodite colonies. "Look upon them, Lord Darodayos. Can you not see the marks of battle upon many of them? We have not betrayed you, and your enemies are our enemies also."

The eldar knight blinked once in a show of startled reaction. He had never before encountered a human who could speak, however inelegantly, the language of his people, nor had he even heard of such a thing. There were those amongst his kind who sneered that the language of the mon-keigh was little better than the crude grunting and snarling of orks and other lower classes of animals, and it was widely believed that the subtleties of the eldar language, with its many hidden meanings and additional mind-speech and body gesture inflections, was far beyond human comprehension.

A mon-keigh with the gift of speaking the eldar language, and possibly other hidden gifts as well? This mon-keigh, this "inquisitor", as the humans seemed to term their sage-warlords, was either some kind of racial aberration or disturbing evidence that he and many of his brethren might have dangerously underestimated the humans and their abilities, Darodayos realised.

Now was not the time to debate such matters, though. In the distance, over the

noise of the storm, his keen eldar senses were already picking out the sound of the thin, rising whine of approaching danger. The humans had not yet detected it, but already Darodayos and the several of the other eldar were exchanging warning gestures and urgent mind-speech alerts.

“Dakiilithyli!” shouted Darodayos aloud in warning to the others who may not yet have sensed the danger.

The eldar knight shouted something unintelligible and the surrounding eldar reached for their weapons in sudden response to their leader’s command. Ulanti was just reaching for his own bolstered laspistol when, suddenly and without warning, the new threat came out of the dust storm at them.

Dakiilithyli.

Jetbikes.

Stavka ran forward, roaring in anger, to protect Horst, just as something came speeding out of the dust screen. Ulanti glimpsed gleaming dark metal and barbed blade edges honed to a cruel perfection, and then there came a sound like something you would hear from a butcher’s shop or execution block, and a thin wetness sprayed across his face. The object was past before Ulanti had even quite registered what it really was, and Stavka fell to the ground in two sections, the top half of his body landing a metre away from the lower part, his mouth incredibly trying to form words as his twitching hand reached out pathetically towards the fallen pistol lying nearby.

A few moments later, mercifully, he died with a final shudder. The object which had killed him—some kind of small alien jet vehicle, Ulanti realised—flew on into the dust storm again, its rider brandishing a sword in triumph, the Inquisition man’s blood still wet on the vicious wing-blades jutting out from the sides of the vehicle.

“More of them are coming. Defend yourselves!” shouted Horst, as more of the alien engine noises came to them over the sound of the storm.

The words were barely out of the inquisitor’s mouth before the alien jetbike assault was upon them. Ulanti saw one eldar lose his head to a passing sword

sweep from one of the jetbike riders, while one of the *Macharius*'s armsmen was swept off his feet by another of the attackers. One moment, the man was standing several metres away, trying to draw a bead on the fast-moving alien vehicles with his unwieldy shotcannon, and the next he was gone, carried screaming off into the storm, impaled on the prow blades of one of the vehicles which had struck him full on.

Ulanti fired off several las-rounds at the speeding targets, but at best only succeeded in managing a glancing hit or two off the black, chitin-like armour of one of them. Any attempt to make any improvements to his marksmanship was rudely interrupted by the screaming engine sound of another one of the vehicles coming straight at him.

He ducked just in time, avoiding the wing-scythes, and then had to keep on moving, rolling across the ground, as the vehicle's angry rider swung out at him with a short-hafted polearm weapon. Ulanti rolled, the weapon blade slicing a line in the ground just beside his head, and then the vehicle was gone, speeding off into the cover of the storm, its rider no doubt intending to make a tight, sweeping turn and come back to finish off his elusive target.

Ulanti came out of the roll, sending a flurry of las-rounds into the storm in the same direction the vehicle was going. His aim was guided more by sound than sight, following the noise of the vehicle's strange alien power source. The glowing las-shots were instantly swallowed up by the dust storm, and Ulanti was none the wiser if they had had any effect or not, when, through the howl of the storm, he thought he heard a more urgent note creep into the sound of the alien vehicle's engine. Ulanti had no idea how these alien craft operated or what kind of power source they used, but the sound made by a damaged and stricken engine was unmistakable.

The over-stressed pitch of the thing's power source grew in volume, becoming a loud, complaining whine, before abruptly fading away to almost nothing, then completely disappearing. Ulanti could have sworn he heard the sound of an impact over the noise of the storm and the surrounding gunfight, but could not be certain. Reasonably assured that the vehicle and its rider would not be returning for a second attack, he turned his attention back to the rest of the battle.

The second wave—or perhaps merely the first wave returning to attack again—

of jetbike riders was coming in at them now. Two more of the eldar went down, cut apart by streams of projectile fire from the oncoming vehicles. The eldar on the jetbikes—for that was what they were, Ulanti realised, even if they were members of some rival faction within the same race—were mostly ignoring the men from the *Macharius* and were instead concentrating their fire on their erstwhile brethren.

Whatever the cause of this seeming hatred for the eldar led by the knight and the sage, the Imperium men were more than happy to take full advantage of the fact.

Maxim knelt and took aim with the heavy bolter, patiently tracking one of the speeding enemy vehicles and then pressing and holding down the trigger and sending out a long, stuttering stream of fire. Maxim was not exactly a marksman with the heavy bolter, but the point of a weapon like a heavy bolter, with its high firing rate and lethal stopping power, was that you didn't have to be; with a weapon like this, all you had to do was fire off enough explosive-tipped rocket shell rounds, and you would eventually achieve the desired purpose.

The air around the jetbike and its rider was suddenly filled with screaming, glowing tracer rounds. The rider tried to swerve a path through them, and for a brief moment it looked like he might actually succeed. Then a round struck the vehicle's nose, shattering its armour, while at the same time several ripped through the engine innards at its rear.

The vehicle dipped towards the ground. The rider opened his mouth to scream or curse, but then several more heavy bolter shells struck home and blew him out of his saddle.

The burning, riderless vehicle crashed into the ground, exploding apart and transforming itself into a hail of razor-edged fragments lethal to humans and eldar alike.

Meanwhile, if the eldar were the targets of some special enmity from their darker-souled kin, then it was a hatred which they returned with equal fervour.

Eldar warriors knelt or stood, holding their ground, returning fire at the oncoming wave of jetbikes. The air was filled with deadly, whistling razor discs and crystal splinters from the differing alien weapons, and several eldar

screamed and fell, struck down by enemy fire, while more than one jet-bike suddenly swerved away, the vehicle or its rider hit by fire from the eldar disc weapons.

One of the sage's peacock-attired bodyguards—a fearsome-looking eldar female warrior in delicate bone-white armour and flaming red face-mask—ran forward to meet a jetbike which had peeled off towards where the eldar sage-lord stood. Pirouetting through a hail of fire from the vehicle and its rider, she leapt into the air, emitting a loud and inhuman, mask-amplified piercing shriek as she did so. Passing over the top of her target, she struck out with the crackling power sword in her hand, neatly decapitating the jetbike rider as he passed beneath her. She landed nimbly on her feet, but was unable to evade the first vehicle's partner, which brutally rode her down, ripping her apart with a burst from its nose-mounted weapon.

Another of the eldar bodyguards—a warrior in glittering, flame-decorated heavy armour—gave a cry of anger and swung round the barrel of his heavy weapon, immolating both jetbike and rider in a blast of searing heat-energy.

Two of the other riders bore down on Darodayos, perhaps drawn in by the eldar aspect lord's commanding presence and ancient and ornate armour. Darodayos unsaddled one of them with a single, lethal shot from his laspistol, and then stood his ground in challenge to the remaining one, lowering his pistol and brandishing his power sword in a show of unmistakable invitation to the other attacker.

It was a challenge which was enthusiastically taken up. The second rider discarded her own pistol and took up a scythe-like lance weapon, snarling in anticipation as she increased her vehicle's acceleration and bore down on her intended victim.

Darodayos continued to stand his ground, unblinking, as he stared down the approaching bike and its rider, apparently heedless of the weapon in the rider's hand, or the blades mounted in vicious, sweeping patterns along the length of the bike's flanks.

Then the bike and its rider were upon him. Darodayos leapt, jumping clear of the lethal blades that passed centimetres beneath his body, swinging his sword out in

mid-air to meet the blow from the rider's lance-scythe, the buzzing energy sheath which surrounded the ancient blade shearing through both the haft of the dark eldar weapon and the hand which held it.

The hand and the broken weapon fell away, and the bike and its crippled, cursing rider passed by, apparently escaping. Darodayos knew otherwise. The laspistol, holstered against his leg, seemed to actually leap unbidden into the eldar's hand, even though he had never even tried to reach for it, and then, still in mid-air, he shot the eldar rider three times through the back. She slumped forward dead across the vehicle's controls, and the bike spun out of control, crashing into the rubble ten metres away.

Darodayos's feet touched the ground again, just as the bike exploded. The entire duel had happened in the blink of an eye. Watching, almost mesmerised by the incident, and only able to mentally reconstruct the sequence of events after they had happened, Ulanti was stunned by the eldar warrior's devastating show of speed and masterful precision.

Remembering his own recent and hard-won duel with an eldar who had appeared to be nothing more than an ordinary rank-and-file warrior, Ulanti was forced into an unhappy consideration of how he would have fared in combat against a warrior like this knight. It did not make for pleasant thinking. Ulanti saw the eldar look towards him for a second, almost as if it sensed something of his thoughts, but then abruptly the alien turned away again, raising his weapons and calling out urgent warnings to his kinsmen.

"Beware! More of the Accursed Ones. They have raider vehicles!"

The words were barely out of the neophyte exarch's mouth before the first dark shape glided ominously out of the dusty murk. The eldar instantly directed their weapons fire at it, but the cannon weapon mounted on the armoured skimmer vehicle's prow swivelled round and unleashed a blast of dark-hazed energy at them.

"Disintegrator!" The same horrified mind-speech thought flashed through the minds of all the eldar, just as two of Freyra's Striking Scorpion brethren were struck by the weapon strike, and were instantly wreathed in a dark halo of

crackling, black energy. When the dazzling black energy glow faded away, all that remained of the two aspect warriors was two fused, smoking masses of twisted bone and armour fragments.

Chiron of the Dark Reapers stepped forward, picking off the disintegrator lance and its gunner with an expert shot from his missile launcher, but the dark eldar skimmer continued to advance, its narrow deck crowded with more battle-eager dark eldar warriors while, behind it, the shapes of several more fast assault vehicles appeared out of the gloom, accompanied by scattered lines of infantry on foot.

The druchii—the Dark Ones—had arrived on this world in force, and Darodayos and his brethren, as well as their human allies, were clearly outnumbered.

“We must retreat,” warned one of Freyra’s remaining Scorpions, in mind-speech thought. “They are too many, and we are too few.”

“That cannot be done,” mind-spoke Kariadryl, the farseer’s voice commanding instant respect from all the other eldar. “The webway gate link to this place is weak and damaged by age and neglect. It is closed now, and will require too much time to re-open, time which the druchii will not allow us.”

“Then what are we to do?” asked one of the mid-ranking Guardian warriors.

“We flee,” commanded Darodayos, tingeing his mind-speech words with the power of his aspect rank, in a clear indication that, as the most senior warrior here, this was a military command decision, not to be questioned, even by Kariadryl. “You must protect the lord farseer, he is all that is important here. You will hide from the druchii, and you will await rescue from the Vual’en Sho and the other craft of ours who are here to watch over us.”

“And what of you, Lord Darodayos?”

The question came from Kariadryl, even though the aspect lord suspected that the wise old farseer already knew the answer.

“I will remain here, lord farseer,” the aspect warrior commander replied, “to face the druchii and allow you more time to escape. I pass the favour of Asuryan to your blood kinsman Freyra. To her now falls the duty of protecting you.”

There was a chorus of mind-speech voices from the other warriors, many of them beseeching the aspect lord to rethink his decision to stay and fight alone, some of them requesting permission to join him in his stand. He silenced them all with a single, irrevocable mind-speech command.

“And the humans?” asked Kariadryl. “What will become of them?”

“With your permission, lord farseer, we will go with you.” It was the voice of Horst, spoken in slightly awkward but still comprehensible mind-speech. Shock and consternation—quickly masked—flashed through the minds of the eldar. How much of their mind-speech conversation had the human been able to listen in on and understand, they asked themselves in fearful doubt?

Horst continued, making no show of noticing the alarm he had caused amongst the aliens. “As I said, your enemies are our enemies too, lord farseer. We wish no harm to come to you and your companions, and our ships are also in orbit above us. Perhaps they will come with your people to rescue us from our mutual enemies.”

“So shall it be,” Kariadryl commanded, ending any further complaints or doubts from any of the assembled eldar.

With the issue settled, the eldar immediately began to follow their designated tasks for the chosen course of action. To the watching humans, it must have seemed as if the eldar were able to act together in eerie and silent synchronisation, for, in real time, the mind-speech conversation amongst them had only lasted a few moments.

“Lieutenant Ulanti,” ordered Horst, drawing the remnants of his own people around him and running over towards the contingent of navy men. “We’re pulling back. Get your people together, anyone that can walk and still hold a weapon is coming with us.”

Quickly, moving together, the two groups moved off away from the advancing dark eldar and into the safety of the cover of the dust storm. Behind them, Darodayos and the small group of aspect warriors who had elected to stay with him prepared to sell their lives dearly in combat against those who were once

their kin.

They ran through the storm, Maxim staying close behind Ulanti, barely slowed down by the extra weight of the heavy bolter he carried. The eldar, naturally faster-moving and less encumbered by the clumsier equipment, weapons and armour of the humans, were ahead, forging a path through the storm, although several of them ran behind, forming a small vanguard to guard the two groups' retreat.

Which left only the flanks to worry about, thought Maxim, holding the heavy weapon alertly and peering through his goggles into the depths of the storm around them, trying to detect any sign of danger.

It was not his eyes, but his ears, finely tuned for survival by the brutal necessities of existence on the hiveworld of Stranivar and its orbiting prison-moon Lubiyanka, which warned him of the first signs of approaching danger.

"Jetbikes!" he shouted, swinging the barrel of the heavy bolter round in the direction that the now familiar thin, whining sound was coming from. "They must fancy having another shot at us."

Forewarned, the others in the party swung their weapons round in the same direction. Maxim opened fire with the bolter weapon, spraying a non-stop stream of shots out in a generously wide arc, not even able to see what he was shooting at, but desperate to lay down a heavy field of fire in the path of the oncoming vehicles. A second later, the crash of shotcannons and crack of las-weapons signalled that the rest of the human group were following his lead.

Two dark eldar jetbikes roared out of the murk, spraying weapons fire into the midst of the Imperial troops. Maxim heard screams and the fearful whisper of the deadly alien projectiles passing close by, but the sounds were immediately drowned out by the chattering boom of the heavy bolter as he fired off a second long burst at the oncoming targets.

One of the vehicles targeted him directly, drawn in by the threat of the heavy bolter. Maxim's second or third burst of fire blew apart its nose, bringing an end to the splinter rifle shots now hissing dangerously close to him. The bike,

although damaged, still kept on coming. Its rider drew a pistol weapon and sprayed shots at two nearby armsmen who were drawing a bead on him with their shotcannons. The razor-edged alien projectiles took one of them off at the knees, effortlessly slicing through flesh and bone.

Cursing, Maxim readjusted his aim, zeroing in on the rider's central body mass, and pressed the trigger again, but the bolter only fired off a handful of shells before its cyclic firing mechanism suddenly juddered to a halt.

Ammo jam.

The jetbike rider grinned, sensing its target's predicament, and lowered its pistol, manoeuvring the bike to bring its blade points to bear on Maxim. Maxim judged the closing distance between him and his would-be slayer and compared that to how quickly he could draw, aim and fire any one of the several pistols he was carrying.

The likely answer to that equation was not encouraging, so he did the only thing he could, hefting the now useless bolter weapon and hurling it with all his considerable strength into the face of the oncoming alien vehicle.

It struck the rider with bone-crushing force, knocking him clear out of the saddle. The riderless craft spun past, its momentum carrying it forward, and Maxim still had to duck and twist gymnastically to avoid the fate the vehicle's rider had intended for him. Nevertheless, the edge of one of the sweeping tail blades still clipped him, and he hissed in pain as he felt the chill alien metal slice through the meat of his shoulder.

Clutching at the wound with one hand while drawing an autopistol with the other, he instinctively scanned the area for any other threats, and was relieved to see that, for the moment at least, the danger was over. The other bike had been brought down by massed volleys of shotcannon and las-fire, but the cost to the Imperium force had been heavy: of Horst's retinue, only the inquisitor himself and three of his bodyguards remained, while, of the party from the *Macharius*, only Maxim, Ulanti, a chief armsman and four of his troopers were left standing.

And Kyogen, although, from the looks of things, Maxim was delighted to note, the issue of the Ship's Commissar would seemingly not be a problem for very

much longer.

The big naval commissar officer had been struck low in the back by a shot from one of the alien weapons. There was a lot of blood soaking through the thick material of his commissar's coat—probably a punctured kidney, and, under the current situation, almost certainly fatal, was Maxim's expert judgement—and the skin of the man's face was pale and waxy-looking from shock and blood loss, and tight with pain.

He was a goner, Maxim knew, so perhaps the situation wasn't such a complete cluster-frag after all. Perhaps those prayer-droning bores in the Ecclesiarchy were right after all, the big hiveworlder thought, and that amongst even the darkest catastrophe there was a hidden blessing from the Emperor.

"We've got to keep on moving," ordered Ulanti. "Gather up any spare weapons and especially ammo supplies from the corpses. Emperor knows, I imagine we'll be needing every round we can lay our hands on, soon enough."

He broke off, looking at the injured commissar. "Maxim, see to Commissar Kyogen. We're taking him with us, and you're the strongest back we've got."

Maxim grinned as he bent down towards Kyogen, his grin spreading a little wider as he heard the sniffled grunt of pain from the man as he laid hands on him and roughly raised him to his feet.

"Come on then, commissar, sir, you heard what the lieutenant said. Time to be moving on. No need to worry though, old Maxim's here to look after you."

They moved off again, looking for refuge deeper within the heart of the storm, seeking another place of shelter somewhere amongst the planet's inhospitable surface.

Behind them, back at the ruins, the sounds of distant combat could still be heard.

Black smoke from the burning dark eldar raider craft drifted in thick banks across the battlefield, mixing with the effects of the dust storm and further adding to the confusion. Darodayos, dropping his spent laspistol and taking up an almost fully-loaded shuriken catapult from the hand of a dead Dire Avenger

warrior, gave up a silent mind-speech prayer of thanks for the favour of Asuryan, knowing that this confusion benefited him far more than his enemy.

It was Chiron who had sown the seeds of that confusion, moving swiftly and nimbly through the shifting dust storm eddies, firing off shots with his missile launcher, almost every shot striking its target without fail. After each shot, the cunning Dark Reaper warrior had vanished back into the cover of the storm again, leaving behind him only the sounds of blazing destruction and the angry, frustrated cries of his dark eldar hunters. Darodayos and the others had covered for him, drawing the hated druchii away from Chiron, even at the cost of their own lives, and allowing the veteran aspect warrior to accomplish his set task.

It had been minutes since Darodayos had heard the trademark roar of Chiron's missile launcher speaking in anger, and he knew that the Dark Reaper warrior was dead now, since he had heard Chiron's mind-speech death-cry as, finally hunted down and hacked apart by the talons and finger-blades of some of the druchii's most twisted and mindless servant-things, Chiron had commended his soul to the safe keeping of his brethren and detonated his remaining stack of missiles, despatching his killers into the ever-hungry maw of the Great Enemy. Nevertheless, the burning wrecks of the three destroyed druchii raider craft were testimony to the effectiveness of Chiron's tactics; if the druchii planned to pursue Kariadryl and the others, then they would surely now have to do so without the advantage of their deadly and lightning-fast skimmer craft.

Another sound tore through the noise of the storm: a terrible, wailing, screaming sound. The death-scream of a Howling Banshee; that of Alarriele, he knew. He had not known her well, for she was young and had only recently begun her journey on the path of the warrior aspect, but she had fought and died well, and her Aspect brethren amongst the warrior path shrines back on An-Iolsus would honour her spirit.

She was the last of those who had elected to stay behind with Darodayos, and now only the Aspect Lord remained. He knew now that his task was even more vital than ever. Every second he further delayed the druchii, every drop of extra blood he shed here increased the survival chances of Lord Farseer Kariadryl and the others.

The shapes of several dark eldar warriors loomed up before him, calling to each

other in their own debased version of true eldar speech. To Darodayos, even the crude word-shapes made by the mouth of the mon-keigh inquisitor when he had endeavoured to speak the eldar tongue were more honest and acceptable than the sound of the maliciously twisted but still recognisable parody of eldar speech spoken by these druchii.

Forewarned by a prescience sense which he had become more and more aware of, the closer he drew to the level of true exarch, Darodayos raised and fired the shuriken catapult before his eyes had even properly picked out the silhouettes of the two approaching targets. Both of them crumpled silently, near decapitated by the expertly-directed hail of razor discs, neither of them even able to get out any kind of final mind-speech death-cry that Darodayos could detect, if in fact fallen abominations such as the druchii still retained such abilities.

Nevertheless, no matter how swiftly and silently they had been executed, the deaths had still been detected, and others of their kind were already converging on him from all around.

Pain and death, that is what the druchii thrive upon, thought Darodayos as he despatched another over-eager dark eldar pursuer with a shot from his shuriken weapon. Perhaps that was what their vestigial psychic senses were attuned to now, and that was what drew them in.

More of them came at him. The shuriken catapult in his hand whispered once, twice, three times, and then he discarded it and drew his power sword in one smooth, quick reflex gesture as the next wave of them attacked.

Something screeching, with venom-dripping barbs where its hands had once been, threw itself at him. He cut it in half with one sweep of his power sword, leaping clear to avoid becoming entangled in the thing’s potentially lethal death flails. Another twisted abomination, another product of the pain-artistry of the druchii torture-masters, followed in close behind its sibling. It too died swiftly beneath the Aspect Lord’s blade.

Still more of them charged, and Darodayos slew them all in turn. These things were nothing more than pets, he realised, grotesques created in the laboratories and torture gardens of the druchii’s hidden fastness for the Dark Ones’ own amusement and hunger for cruelly and pain. They were using them now to wear

him down, he knew, to test his strength and speed without risk to themselves. They were out there somewhere in the gloom, watching and studying him, circling round as they waited for the right moment to attack and take him unaware.

Well, let them come, he thought to himself. No matter how many of their pets they sent against him, they would find him ready.

His power sword rose and fell, the energy current running in a glowing sheen across the surface of its rune-decorated blade, almost singing as it cleaved through druchii-altered flesh and bone, bringing a merciful end to the existences of things which may once have been living, sentient beings before they fell into the hands of the Dark Ones.

As he fought, Darodayos felt his psychic senses and martial skills merge together and become heightened to a degree he had never before experienced or suspected could be possible. Every blow he struck unerringly found its target, every move his opponents made, even their death spasms, had been anticipated by him seconds earlier. He felt parts of his life—whole centuries of experience, memories of valued friends and precious-remembered lovers—slewing away. All that mattered was the here and now, and the joy of combat and killing. In his mind's eye, he saw the lonely, final pinnacle at the end of the path of the warrior, and he knew that he was now ascending to that place, now on the cusp of becoming a true exarch, of abandoning all he once had been and could still be, instead giving himself over wholly and completely to the warrior aspect. Some rational part within him mourned the loss of self, but the greater part of all that remained now rejoiced in the freedom of combat and slaughter, so different from the paths followed by many of his kinsmen.

He fought and killed with wanton abandon. His enemies died around him, and, as they died, so too did the mind and spirit of the being once known as Darodayos. He was an empty shell now, hollow and spiritless, living only for combat and killing the enemies of his race.

And then, suddenly, there were no more druchii things to kill, and the druchii lord and his retinue were making their assault. Despite his anticipation of the attack, though, Darodayos was still almost fatally caught by surprise.

There were five of them, the druchii lord and four of his squires. They moved swiftly and with lethal intent, but little of the ill-cautioned eagerness which seemed to be a mark of many of their kind. The lord led the attack, but Darodayos's exarch-elevated senses saw him as little more than a dark, shifting blur. Darodayos could see the squires and their intent with perfect clarity, could see ahead to what they would be doing vital moments in the future, but to Darodayos's prescience sense, the druchii lord was a blind spot, his actions taking place in so many different, unknowable futures.

It was the fhaisorr'ko, the shadow point, Darodayos realised with a shock. Part of it was centred around this druchii lord, concealing him and his actions from the perceptions of those blessed with the gift of future-sight. Suddenly, the druchii commander was transformed into a far more dangerous and ominous opponent than he had seemed just seconds ago.

The druchii lord came on. Darodayos stood ready to meet him. Then suddenly, at the last moment, the dark eldar drew back, allowing the henchman to his left and right to launch their own simultaneous attacks on the Aspect Lord. Darodayos had not seen the move coming—the forces of the fhaisorr'ko that surrounded the druchii lord had left him blind to the ploy—and was almost skewered on the blade of the henchman to his left, while only the quickest parrying thrust with the point of his power sword saved him from a similar attack from the enemy on his right.

Darodayos leapt up and back, avoiding his two opponents' lightning-quick follow-up attacks, all the time aware that the third druchii was circling round towards his unprotected back.

His leap brought him down on top of this third enemy, his power sword cleaving through the druchii's body from shoulder to sternum before the druchii had even registered the manoeuvre. Still in mid-air, before his feet had touched the ground, Darodayos brought the sword round in a tight sweep, sending a fine mist of dark eldar blood flying from its crackling blade, and struck down one of the other squires with a single, disembowelling thrust.

His feet touched the ground and he brought the sword up to meet the already pre-determined attack from the last remaining squire and, then, shockingly, the druchii lord was upon him.

The druchii commander fought with two short, handheld, multi-bladed weapons which were part dagger, part scythe and part glaive. His manner of combat with these dangerously unfamiliar weapons was furious and lethally uncompromising. Darodayos, with the longer and more powerful weapon, was forced back on the defensive, his sword weaving a barrier before him to fend off the barrage of stabbing thrusts and sudden lunging sweeps from his opponent's blades. Crystallised matter was smeared across the blade edges of both those weapons, and Darodayos had no doubt that death, slow and agonising, lurked there.

Forewarned by his prescience-sense, the Aspect Lord saw the last remaining squire unfurl some kind of long whip-like weapon. The tails of the weapon were woven together from black, glistening cord, which twitched, sinew-like, with grotesque life.

The druchii warrior lashed out with the weapon. Again warned by his prescience, Darodayos twisted away on instinct, out of reach of those twitching cord tails, just as his prescience vision screamed at him in warning, showing him the mistake he had just made.

The druchii lord was on him instantly, one of the poison-frosted blades in its hand flashing past the Aspect Lord's parry to slash mercilessly through Darodayos's fatally exposed throat.

Feeling the blade's chill bite through his flesh, feeling the hot rush of blood from his severed jugular, feeling the first burning sting of the poison seeping through his flesh and veins, Darodayos followed the guidance shown to him by his dimming prescience vision, hurling his power sword out with the last of his failing strength.

The corpse of the last of the druchii squires, his body transfixed by the hurled blade, hit the ground even before that of Darodayos.

Kailasa of the Kabal of the Poison Heart stood over the corpse of his victim, dispassionately watching the tremors and convulsions run through the dead Aspect Lord's body. The corpse would retain this grotesque semblance of life for hours, he knew, as the venom ate its way through its nervous system, firing off random pain signals amongst dead nerve endings and lifeless brain matter.

He lifted the blade with which he had dealt the final, masterful killing blow, licking its edge with his tongue and relishing the taste of the crystallised venom mixed with fresh blood. After a lifetime of patronage of the many poison bars and venomfeast-houses of Commorragh, Kailasa was a connoisseur of all toxins and poisons, and was completely immune to many of the more mundane ones such as this.

Still, mixed with his victim's blood, the effects of the venom gave him a pleasingly exhilarating sensation which helped offset his anger and impatience at the unexpectedly costly losses the craftworld weaklings had inflicted upon his force.

He reached down to the corpse of the defeated craft-world warrior, casually removing its helm and plucking out the small jewel set into its forehead. He ran it between the delicately talon-tipped fingers of his gauntlets, peering into its misty, opaque depths. He sniffed at it, and then licked it.

"Exarch," he breathed to himself in pleasure, pleased that there should be such a fine soul-prize to show for his victory. He threw it over his shoulder, into the midst of the pack of warp beasts behind him. Immediately, the creatures began tearing and clawing at each other, fighting over the rare morsel. One of the haemonculi snickered in morbid pleasure as the creatures rabidly tore into each other.

Kailasa smiled. Afterwards, when this mission was over, he would lead a hunt for the victor of the battle, for the largest and most ferocious of the pack, and reclaim his soul-prize, ripping it out of the creature's belly with his own hands.

He turned, sensing the lurking, expectant presence of the Mandrakes behind them. He looked at them for a long moment, holding them in his gaze. Four pairs of eyes, full of hungry malice, four dead, gaunt faces, stared back at him.

"Find the farseer," he told them simply.

The storm was lifting now. Kariadryl sat at the entrance to the shallow gully where they had chosen to seek shelter and, most likely, he knew, make their last stand. The landscape of Stabia, revealed now under the lifting storm, was even

bleaker than he had imagined.

From where he sat, though, everything seemed bleak at present.

Only moments ago, he had heard the psychic death-scream of Darodayos, and was still mourning the Aspect Lord's loss. He had already foreseen the warrior's death—had caught glimpses of it in amongst the shifting deceptions of the shadow point—but the inevitability of the moment made it no less sorrowful.

The shadow point. The fhaisorr'ko.

It was here at last, all around them. They were caught in the midst of it, and his farsight was useless now, leaving him just another weak old man, depending on the strength of others, sacrificing the lives of the young to prolong his own already over-extended existence.

"Honoured kinsman. Lord farseer, you should not be here. It is too dangerous to be here alone."

He turned, seeing Freyra, the Striking Scorpion warrior who was kin to him. Her tone was politely respectful, but also scolding. Her stance, and that of the two aspect warriors who stood with her, was firm and unyielding; he was under her protection, a duty which she took with deadly earnestness.

He allowed himself to be taken back to the others. His discussions with the human called Horst had not been concluded, and further conversation with him would be a pleasing and enlightening experience, and would help pass the time before the druchii inevitably tracked them down to this lonely and desolate place.

Suddenly, he paused, turning as he sensed something else out there. Freyra sensed his disquiet, as did the other two warriors. Kariadryl sensed the hot psychic rush as their combat senses bristled in agitation, and hands tensed on weapons.

"You sense something, honoured kinsman?"

Kariadryl remained motionless, staring out into the depths of the storm, staring out with his farsight into whatever hint of the future had briefly been revealed to

him by the mocking blank face of the shadow point.

He saw nothing. Not even the phantoms of false ghost-futures.

“It is nothing, kinsman,” he answered, finally. “Just the dying breath of the storm,”

He allowed them to lead him off again, mentally mulling over the lie he had just told them.

He did not yet know what it was, but something was out there. Something was coming.

The burning god strode through the dying storm, and the storm retreated and parted before it in fear.

It had exited the webway through a long-disused portal amongst ruins far to the south. Nothing lived on this barren world, but the wind whispered its forbidden name in awe and the sand and rocks beneath its feet trembled at its passing. Its pace was steady and measured, its progress constant and immutable.

It continued on, knowing that the end was close, but not knowing whether it would be destined to arrive in time to intervene in the fates which converged at that end point.

SIXTEEN

“Alien attack craft are inbound on a direct assault approach. Still no response to our hails from the alien carrier vessel.”

All eyes on the command deck of the *Macharius* were fixed upon Semper. He felt the nervous, expectant gaze of his crew upon him, and could almost sense the anxious babble of thoughts going on beneath the tense, silent atmosphere which filled his vessel’s bridge.

What’s the old man playing at, they were no doubt thinking. We’re under attack, several of our sister ships have been attacked and destroyed, and he wants to parley with these xenos scum? We should be opening up at them with torpedoes and broadsides, not hailing frequencies.

Semper understood his crew’s frustration and anger. Nevertheless, something compelled him to try this most unorthodox of strategies.

“Enemy attack craft squadrons still approaching, commodore,” warned Remus Nyder, never lifting his gaze from the vital information relayed to him from lectern point’s surveyor screen. “They’re fast, these xenos crates, damned fast.”

The unspoken warning in his report was obvious: whatever it is you’re hoping for, you’d better hope it happens soon.

Semper paused, his mouth suddenly dry. Again, some ineffable sense told him there was much more at stake here than just the safety of his ship and the lives of his crew. Somehow, he knew that what happened here would have important ramifications far beyond this moment and far beyond the borders of the Stabia system. Something told him that the fate of the entire Gothic sector could be at stake, depending on what he did next and how his alien opponent reacted.

“Hailing frequencies?” he asked, struggling to keep any hint of inner turmoil out of his tone.

“Open, sir, but still no response to our signals,” answered a communications

officer.

“Then open them all, damn it. Use every frequency we’ve got. They may not want to talk to us, but, by hell, I’ll make sure they can’t pretend not to hear us.”

Semper waited until a communications ensign gave him the signal that all comms channels were now open. Drawing himself up to his full height and automatically and unconsciously assuming his most imposing and authoritative voice, he cleared his throat and began to speak.

“Attention, commander of the alien vessel. This is Commodore Leoten Semper, captain of His Divine Majesty’s Ship the Lord Solar *Macharius*. You have attacked my vessel and we have been forced to defend ourselves. I know that there has been conflict between our two forces already, and I know we have both suffered the loss of sister vessels and the deaths of valued comrades…”

“…it was never our intention for any of this to happen. We came here as you did, in good faith. We came to talk, not to do battle. There is suspicion and hostility between our two races, perhaps with good cause, but I am a warrior, just as you are. As warriors, we must follow orders, and my orders were to watch and guard, not to attack. It was never my intention to engage in battle with you and your forces, and it is not my wish to do so now. Your vessel’s strike craft are even now approaching my ship on a direct attack course. My own ship’s squadrons stand ready to meet them, just as my vessel’s gunners stand ready to open fire on you, to defend my ship against any further attacks. If you continue in this current course of action, we will defend ourselves with all the force at our command, and then there will be no turning back for any of us, for either of our two races. As one captain to another, as one warrior to a fellow warrior, I beg you to reconsider your actions. There… there are things here hidden from us both, I think. Do not ask me to explain, for I cannot, but I believe there is some other force at work here, a force which neither of us is responsible for.”

The mon-keigh’s words, barbaric, alien and incomprehensible to most of those listening, echoed through the bridge of the Vual’en Sho. Lileathon, listening along with the rest of her crew, had to wait several more seconds for one of her vessel’s Mind Talker crew to finish translating the alien commander’s words.

As soon as the mind-speech translation was finished, Lileathon and Ailill exchanged looks. In contrast to the captain of the Vual'en Sho, there was hope and surprise in the face of the vessel's second-in-command.

"You heard what the alien commander said, craftmistress. He has doubts, just as we have. We must call off this attack before it is too late."

"More mon-keigh lies! More mon-keigh tricks and deceit! They are filled with lies, filled with deception. That is all they are capable of, that is all their animal souls can conceive!"

Lileathon's voice was a shriek, the unshielded emotion that filled her emphasized by the blast of unmasked contempt which she mind-speech sent out to accompany her spoken words.

Ailill staggered as if physically struck, so powerful were the raw emotions of hatred and contempt psychically broadcast by his commander. There was a hushed, shocked silence all across the bridge. Several crew members made brief, frightened gestures while casting nervous glances at their ship's commander.

Ailill recognized it. The fourth aspect of the second invocation of protection, seeking protection from any eldar whose animus was possessed by powerful emotions. It was a powerful signal, rarely seen in eldar society, and used only in extreme circumstances as a show of severe disapproval at any eldar whose emotional behaviour had gone beyond acceptable bounds. It harked back to the dark time of the Fall, and carried with it the eldar's fear of events of that time, and of the cause of those events.

Raw, unchecked emotion was what the eldar feared most of all. Unbridled, their race's darkest and most sensual emotions had once almost destroyed them. Now, every eldar kept this side of themselves in careful check, and maintained a secret but equally close watch over the passions of their comrades.

Lileathon recognised the gesture too, and knew all too well what it meant. She stepped back, struggling to rein in the fierce emotions raging inside her. All eyes were on her, all eldar minds thinking the same carefully masked thoughts, and Ailill could only imagine how aware she must have been of the secret words those minds were now whispering to themselves.

Outcast. Renegade. Eshairr.

“Ailill, my old friend, my craft-comrade… I apologise…” Her voice was harsh and broken, her gesture of contrition clumsy and confused. Tears welled in her eyes, bringing more signs of fear and disapproval from her crew.

Compassion welled up within Ailill. “You feel the loss of Kornous deeply, honoured craftmistress, as we all feel the loss of any of our brethren. There will be a time for mourning, and then we shall remember our brother Kornous in a way which is fitting and honourable, but this is not that time, Lileathon, and this hatred you are filled with, this vendetta you pursue against the humans, these are not fitting ways to mourn those we have loved.”

He was looking directly at her now, his body language emphasising the nature of the relationship between them. “You are the craftmaster, but I am the Lann Caihe. It is my duty, when required, to bring water to quench your fire.”

All was still on the bridge of the Vual’en Sho. Although it had been unspoken, Ailill had made clear his intention to have Lileathon replaced as craftmaster, as was his right as the ship’s Lann Caihe, if he believed that his superior was no longer fit for command. Never before that anyone could remember in the history of craftworld An-Iolsus, had a vessel’s second-in-command ever had to invoke this ancient law. If it were to happen now, Lileathon’s shame and disgrace would be great indeed, and she would have no other choice than to leave the safety of An-Iolsus and become a true eshairr: a renegade without ties or allegiance to any craft-world, a homeless exile.

Lileathon realised the enormity of what she had done, of how close she had just come to crossing that forbidden line which her race drew around themselves long ago. She looked at her second-in-command.

“Ailill, wise Ailill, tell me what to do, and I will make it.”

The flight decks aboard the *Macharius* were a hive of activity, as yet more Fury fighters and Starhawk bomber craft were brought up from the hangar decks and prepped for take-off. The *Macharius* and its attack craft squadrons were going to war.

Strapped into the seat of his Fury, Kaether cursed loud at his ground crew, angrily urging them on to hurry up and get his fighter prepared for launch, even though he himself knew it would take several more minutes to familiarise himself with the status of the craft. Behind him, Manetho intoned tech-prayers under his breath as he communed with the fighter's machine-mind, running diagnostic checks on its systems. Their own fighter was a write-off, crippled beyond salvage after the earlier battle, and Manetho himself had conducted the rite of expiration over the remains of their former craft.

This new one was a training craft. No two craft were identical, and even though Kaether knew the dangers of entering combat in an unfamiliar craft, he was still impatient to be underway. The rest of his squadron was already launched and facing the incoming wave of alien attack craft, and Kaether was keen to rejoin them before the battle began.

"How long to launch?" he asked impatiently.

"Eight minutes," answered Manetho, in between snatches of the fourth passage of the rite of blessed synchronisation, "it being exactly one minute and fifteen seconds since you last asked the same question."

Kaether's reply, good-natured but typically foul-mouthed, was cut off by the booming voice broadcast over the flight deck vox-callers.

"Flight deck commander to all flight crews and ground crews. Stand down, that is an order. All launch missions have been put on hold. Complete pre-flight preparations and then stand to and await further instructions."

Kaether could not believe what he had just heard, and this time his comment to Manetho was less good-natured but equally foul-mouthed.

"Vandire's arse! The enemy attack wave is almost on top of us! Just what do those stupid scavving bastards up on the command deck think they're playing at?"

"Confirmed, sir. the alien attack craft formations are turning back. It looks like they're intending to maintain a wide holding pattern in orbit around the alien carrier cruiser."

Semper looked to Remus Nyder for confirmation of his own reading of the situation. The grizzled Ordnance Officer nodded in agreement. “A climb down, but not a complete back-off. So where do we go from here?”

Semper looked at the enigmatic image of the eldar ship on the bridge’s main auspex screen.

“A good question, Mister Nyder,” he breathed to himself. “A very good question indeed.”

The answer was not long in coming.

The ship was cruising on three-quarters speed, carefully managing its tell-tale power emissions, gliding in amongst the invisible and unpredictable radio wave currents thrown out by the pulsar star. It blanketed itself in their static interference, using them to further mask its presence from its prey.

Finally, though, it had to emerge from its concealment. When it did, it would be quickly detected by its prey’s surveyor senses. It didn’t matter, judged the ship’s commander. He and his vessel still had a second means of concealment at hand. By the time the prey detected the subterfuge, it would be too late.

“Contact!” shouted a surveyor ensign aboard the *Macharius*. “A capital-class vessel, coming in at speed off our portside.”

“Identify!” barked Semper, aware that it would take only the slightest thing to destroy the fragile ceasefire they had seemingly only just managed to achieve with the eldar.

Or perhaps you are the one who has been betrayed, said a worrying voice inside him. Perhaps it is another eldar vessel, and this “ceasefire” was only a ploy to allow them time to gather their forces against you.

“Its shields are raised and it’s powering weapons… wait, I’m picking up a registry code. It’s an Imperium ship… it’s the Drachenfels, sir!”

“Open hailing frequencies. Get me through to Ramas immediately.”

Communications officers and adepts hurriedly carried out their captain’s orders, but to little avail. A senior communications officer nervously informed Semper of their failure.

“No response, sir. Drachenfels appears to be running deaf. Either her comm-net is down, or she’s refusing to talk.”

Scraper’s angry oath sent the officer scurrying back to his station. Raising his head, Semper stared at the surveyor screen, seeing the target icon of the Drachenfels bearing down on his position and that of the eldar ship. Erwin Ramas was a fine captain, he knew; one of the best he had ever had the privilege of serving alongside, but he was also a hard and uncompromising man. And he was an eldar-hater of long and bitter standing.

“Ramas, you cantankerous old bastard, what are you playing at?” Semper murmured to himself, fearing the worst.

“A second human vessel,” intoned one of the Vual’en Sho’s bridge crew. “It is the same one which we believe destroyed the Lament of Elshor. It is coming in on an attack approach, with weapons armed. The first human vessel is hailing it.”

“What response to their hails?” asked Ailill, anxiously.

“None so far, that we can detect.”

Lileathon and Ailill looked at each other, communing quickly in silent mind-speech. Both soon came to the same mutual decision.

“Signal the attack craft squadrons. Tell them to prepare for battle again.”

Eldar crewmen glanced towards Ailill, who countenanced Lileathon’s order with an impatient gesture of command to them. With two powerful human warships apparently ranged against them, now was no longer the time to counsel caution.

Aboard the Drachenfels, cocooned in his armoured strategium shell, Erwin Ramas pored over the information fed through to him by his ship's surveyor senses. They were closing in rapidly on the target. All he needed was a few more precious moments to catch his prey unawares.

Aboard the *Macharius*, Semper could feel the situation slipping out of control again as more and more information came through to him.

"Drachenfels still inbound on our position. Still no answer to our hails."

"Alien cruiser is manoeuvring away. Could be swinging round to begin its own attack."

"Alien attack craft are changing course, speed and formation. They're reforming for an attack."

"Commodore, we must do something."

This last came from Nyder, who was staring hard at his captain. Swiftly, Semper came to a decision.

"Bring us around. Put us between the Drachenfels and the eldar ship. If Ramas wants to fire upon the alien ship, he'll have to go through us first."

The order brought blank looks of surprise and consternation from the bridge crew. If they were caught by surprise by their captain's first order, then what came next was to truly shock them.

"Arm two torpedoes and get ready to fire on my orders. Our target is the Drachenfels. Perhaps a shot across Ramas's bows will encourage him to start talking."

Reluctantly but efficiently, the bridge crew prepared to carry out their captain's orders. Powerful manoeuvring thrusters swung the *Macharius* round in space, bringing it onto a direct target bearing with the oncoming Drachenfels. Semper was awaiting final confirmation that torpedoes were loaded, aimed and ready to fire, when the urgent call came in from the command deck's surveyors section.

“Contact! Another capital-class vessel incoming on the same approach vector as the Drachenfels. It’s following on right behind it.”

“Identify immediately!”

The seconds seemed to stretch out forever before Semper got his answer.

“Another Imperium registry code, wait, it’s the same one… energy signatures match too! Golden Throne, according to the readings, the second ship is also the Drachenfels!”

Aboard the dark eldar cruiser, all was silent as they awaited the order to fire. Suddenly, there was a commotion amongst the crew manning the ship’s sensor systems. Their captain’s threatening hiss of displeasure was abruptly cut off by a warning shout from one of his crew.

“Mon-keigh vessel detected, directly astern. It’s powering up weapons and locking onto us with targeting scanners!”

The dark eldar captain hissed in fury. His plan had been a good one, but he had been out-thought and out-captained by a mere mon-keigh animal. His humiliation would be great indeed, if he ever survived to return in disgrace to Commorragh.

Erwin Ramas smiled as his mind-link to his ship’s systems confirmed that targeting systems had locked onto the alien craft. It had been a difficult chase, and only luck and skilful navigation had allowed him and his vessel to follow the alien ship and remain undetected on its tail for so long. The enemy vessel was a hunter, all its senses focussed on the prey ahead of it, little suspecting that it itself was also being hunted.

Yes, it had been a difficult chase, but now the chase was over.

“Fire,” Ramas commanded.

A full quartet of torpedoes rumbled out of their prow silos and roared away towards their target. Caught by surprise, with its attacker appearing at such close

quarters, the dark eldar vessel did what it could to evade the attack, turning rapidly to port and putting on a sudden burst of speed to escape the reach of the torpedoes. Had it been shadow-cloaked in the usual manner of a dark eldar vessel, its manoeuvre might have succeeded, but there had been no time to disengage its mimic engines, and it was still broadcasting the energy signature of a larger and more powerful human cruiser vessel, giving the crude machine-minds of the torpedo warheads a clear target to lock onto.

One of the torpedoes went astray, while another struck the target astern, inflicting serious damage on the dark eldar cruiser's engine systems. The remaining two torpedoes missed their target, but, armed with proximity fuses, the warheads detonated close enough to the target to cause widespread minor damage to the ship's thinly-armoured hull, and to violently buffet the cruiser vessel from prow to stern.

The damage was not crippling, but it was more than enough to achieve the intended purpose. The cruiser's mimic engines imploded, unmasking its true shape to those watching on the viewing screens on the bridges of both the *Macharius* and the Vual'en Sho.

Human and eldar eyes alike saw the same thing, as the image of the first detected vessel claiming to be the Drachenfels suddenly wavered and flickered weirdly in and out of existence in the direct aftermath of the torpedo hits. For a brief second, those watching thought they saw the images of ships of many different classes and races appear in rapid, bewildering succession, but then the cascade of false images was abruptly gone, and all that remained was the image of another different kind of vessel entirely.

To human eyes, it looked like something more akin to an engine-powered blade than a space vessel. Its lines were sharp and cruel, its silhouette vicious and dagger-like. It had little exterior hull detail, and the black, non-reflective material of its hull seemed to suck in the available light from the starfield around it, so that its shape blended into the blackness of space.

An assassin's blade, that was what it looked like: sinister and concealed, fast and lethal.

Aboard the Vual'en Sho, Lileathon and her crew looked at the newly-revealed

vessel in dread, instantly knowing it for what it truly was.

“Druchii cruiser!” spat Ailill, his tone full of utter loathing. Lileathon looked at the image on the screen, suddenly realising the full implications of the discovery of the dark eldar presence in the Stabia system, suddenly realising the game their enemies had been playing against her and the humans, and realising the terrible mistake she had come so close to making. Anger welled up within her, but was quickly subdued again. Instead of any personal anger, all that remained in her was the cold, calm fury and hatred and loathing all those of her race bore towards their once-kin.

“Signal the attack squadrons. They have a new target. Mael dannan: No mercy to the druchii abomination.”

“Goon to have you with us again, Drachenfels. You had us worried there for a moment.”

Erwin Ramas’s rasping, electronically-created laugh sounded over the comm-net of the *Macharius*’s bridge.

“The Emperor’s favour was with us, Leoten. We caught a glimpse of that damned thing on our surveyors, after it goaded us and one of the alien ships into attacking each other. We pursued it, and since then we’ve been chasing ghosts and shadows all over this damned hole of a star system. After we finally found it again and got on its tail, we couldn’t break comm-net silence and risk letting them know we were there.”

“Understood, Drachenfels,” smiled Semper. “Do your gunnery crews require any help finishing the target, or do you think you can handle this one without our help?”

“Let the damn xenos-kind kill each other, Leoten,” snarled Ramas in reply. “I’ve found better targets for our gunners to practise on.”

In his strategium, Ramas directed his bridge crew to send their gathered surveyor findings through to the other Imperial Navy ship. Moments later, its contents sifted through by the living machine-mind that inhabited the *Macharius*’s logic engines, the data was fed through to the bridge crew and, instantly, three new

target icons appeared on the surveyor screens.

Ramas chuckled to himself, and the sound carried over the comm-net, even as the startled cries of “Contact!” rang out through the *Macharius*’s command deck.

“Yes, Leoten, there are still more surprises. Three of the Despoiler’s fleet, one Carnage and two escorts. The cruiser and one of the escorts have been clipped once or twice already, so it would appear that von Blucher gave a good account for himself. They were sneaking round your flanks, hiding amongst all this damned pulsar interference, when we crossed their path and picked up traces of their energy wake.”

“They’re working with the other alien vessel?” asked Semper.

“You have another explanation for their presence here?” answered Ramas.

Semper did not. He turned to the communications section. “Relay the information we’ve just received to the eldar vessel. Tell them that their enemies and our enemies are the same. Our enemies have united against us, so let us do the same.”

He turned to Nyder, but the *Macharius*’s Master of Ordnance had already anticipated his captain’s next question. “All attack craft squadrons are mobilised and ready. The eldar squadrons are already closing in on the other alien target vessel. We follow them in?”

Semper smiled. “We do indeed, Mister Nyder. We’ll let the alien bomber pilots have their fun, and then we’ll have our pilots show them how a precision bombing run should really be done.”

Like avenging harpies, the formations of eldar Eagle bombers fell upon the dark eldar cruiser. All their race’s hatred and loathing of their fallen kin came to the fore as the bomber pilots and their crews attacked the fleeing cruiser with unsurpassed fury. Heedless of the fire from the cruiser’s own defences, they flew in recklessly close, not releasing their payload until they were sure of striking the target at some vulnerable point, not peeling away from the curtain of fire thrown out by the dark eldar vessel’s defence turrets until they were satisfied that their missiles had caused sufficient damage to the enemy ship. Of the Eagles that had

left the Vual'en Sho, only three quarters would return to their wraith-bone cradles within the cruiser's launch bays.

The dark eldar ship staggered under the fusillade of missiles. It threw out a protective shadow-field to conceal itself from the enemy craft, confusing pilot's senses and targeting scanners, but these were not human eyes and human targeting scanners they faced now, and the eldar pilots and the infinity circuit systems of their craft easily saw through such evasions. Sonic warhead missiles, designed to impact against the far denser armour and hull structure of ork and human ships, pierced the body of the dark eldar craft with ease, exploding deep within it and wreaking bloody havoc amongst the ship's shadow-haunted decks and galleries.

The crews of the eldar attack craft were well aware that this vessel was probably responsible for the loss of Medhbh's Shield and possibly also at least one of the missing human vessels too. The slave pens in its dismal holds were most likely crammed with captured prisoners—fodder for the druchii's abominable appetite for cruelty and pain—and it was also likely that there were eldar amongst those prisoners. Such awful knowledge did not deter any of the bomber crews as they brought their craft in close-range attack against the dark eldar ship, and more than one pilot or bombardier mind-spoke the words of prayers of solace to themselves as they launched their deadly payload at the target, knowing that the death they were now condemning the captured slave-fodder to was a far cleaner and quicker one than whatever fate otherwise awaited them in the druchii's secret citadel base.

By the time the last of the eldar bombers peeled away from the target, they left behind them a vessel transformed in minutes into a shattered, broken ruin. The ship's hull was pierced in dozens of places. Fires raged out of control on many of its decks, while others had been blasted completely open and exposed to the hard vacuum of space, sweeping them instantly clean of all life. Panicked by the explosions which had wracked the ship from end to end, and hunger-maddened by the pain-filled psychic screams broadcast from the minds of the dead and injured, the warp beasts and haemonculi-created monstrosities imprisoned in their lightless kennels in the hold decks broke free of their restraints and went on the rampage, killing dark eldar and terrified prisoners alike. For those slaves who had survived the initial bomber attack, the interior of the crippled ship must have seemed like hell itself. Some decks were an inferno of flame, others were

gripped by the stellar chill of open space, while the mindless abominations from the ship's darkest depths wandered freely through its chambers and passages, killing everything which crossed their path in the most brutal and terrible ways imaginable.

Fortunately for any innocents still alive within the dying craft, this particular vision of hell would prove to be mercifully brief.

As the eldar attack wave peeled away, the slower-moving Starhawks from the *Macharius* followed in their wake. What the eldar had begun, the pilots of the Imperial Navy craft would complete. Waves of plasma warhead missiles smashed into the dark eldar cruiser's fatally-weakened body. Entire sections of the ship were vaporised: the prow section blew apart, struck by ten or more missiles. The vessel's dark matter reactor was breached, releasing the pent-up fury of the ship's nameless power source in an all-consuming blast of destructive energy. The rear portion of the ship was disintegrated, disappearing in a lightless explosive flash which seared itself into the surveyor screens of the Imperial craft, appearing as a brief and miniature black hole which hungrily sucked in every available piece of matter in the vicinity, including three luckless Starhawk craft trailing in the rearguard of Firedrake squadron's formation.

The dark eldar ship's commander need have no fear now of the prospect of the cruel wrath of his kabal lord when he returned in failure and humiliation to Commorragh, for there was literally nothing left to show that he and his vessel had ever even existed.

The carnage-class cruiser Despicable and its two escorts had expected to take their targets by surprise, coming in with their energy patterns subdued and following the surveyor-confounding pulsar lines already mapped out by their temporary allies. They had expected to find an enemy force divided and possibly even warring amongst themselves, an enemy thrown into doubt and confusion by the subterfuge tactics of the dark eldar.

What they found instead were three cruiser-class vessels, including two powerful Imperial ships of the line, already alerted to their presence and bearing down upon them fast and hard.

The Vual'en Sho darted ahead of the slower Imperial ships, drawing the enemy fire upon itself. Lance shots from the Despicable and torpedo shots from its escorts reached out into space in search of the eldar ship, but its speed, manoeuvrability and baffling cloaks of holofields eluded the enemy's best efforts. Then, suddenly turning and effortlessly slipping past a brace of torpedoes from the escorts, it quickly closed to within firing range and opened fire with its pulsar lance. One of the escorts, already damaged from the early battle against the Graf Orlok, took the full brunt of the stream of tightly-focussed laser energy, and exploded apart. The Vual'en Sho attempted to slip away again, but the manoeuvre brought it within reach of the Despicable's rows of powerful flank batteries.

Even with its holofields fully deployed, the eldar ship could not evade the full effects of the punishing curtain of fire projected from the Chaos cruiser's weapons batteries. The delicate crystalline membranes of its topsails were partially shredded by the impacts of half a dozen macro-cannon rounds and a bleeding, ragged gash opened up along the length of its portside hull by the slashing beams of batteries of laser cannons, the Vual'en Sho retreated out of range of the Chaos guns again, its holofields projecting a rearward display of confusing multiple false images to cloak the escape manoeuvre. Lileathon knew that many long and painful months awaited her ship in its berth on An-Iolsus, as the Bonesingers and Fabricators repaired the damage done to the living psycho-plastic material of the Vual'en Sho's structure.

The gambit had paid off, however. By seizing the Chaos gunners' attentions, the Vual'en Sho's risky manoeuvre had permitted the two Imperial ships to close to within firing range of the Chaos force.

Dual torpedo salvoes from the *Macharius* and the Drachenfels hammered into the Despicable, registering several successful hits upon it. One struck the base of its command tower, bursting through the thick armour there and sending columns of fire roaring up through the interior of the tower. Another detonated amongst the galleries of gun batteries on the cruiser's forward portside, knocking out of action the weapon emplacements located there.

Moving in closer, and coming under fire from the Despicable's prow batteries, the *Macharius* opened up with its own portside batteries, goring the Chaos cruiser's void shield defences. The Despicable's remaining Infidel-class escort

darted in towards the Imperial cruiser, launching torpedoes at its vulnerable underbelly and engine sections. A patrolling swarm of Fury interceptors, launched for just such a task, moved in quietly to intercept the ordnance weapons, subjecting them to a bombarding hail of lascannon and missile fire and detonating them harmlessly in space before they could reach their target. Any further annoyance value the Chaos escort ship might have had was brought to a swift end when the Drachenfels turned its starboard side lance turrets upon it. Eviscerated by the sweeping lance beams, the craft was quickly reduced to a blazing and lifeless wreck.

Outgunned, outnumbered, stripped of his escorts and with the fighting capability of his ship dangerously reduced, the master of the Despicable chose to withdraw, trusting to his vessel's superior speed to carry him away from the Imperial vessels, judging also that the faster but lightly armoured eldar vessel would be unlikely to give pursuit on its own. Disengaging, he turned away, presenting his undamaged starboard side toward the Imperial ships and allowing the gun batteries there to bring their sights to bear on the enemy cruisers. The Drachenfels took the full brunt of the fire from the Chaos cruiser's formidable array of weapons batteries. Its void shields vanished in moments, and Erwin Ramas barked in pain and anger as he felt the enemy gunfire punch through his vessel's armoured skin, several particularly wounding hits penetrating deep into his vessel's body to damage its most vital systems. Every surveyor screen on the bridge and gunnery bay command posts went temporarily blank as one salvo of plasma missiles smashed into the ship's surveyor system, knocking them out of action, while a stream of laser fire also crippled the ship's void shield generators. Blinded, and robbed of its shield protection, the Drachenfels would be of little use for the time being in any further engagements.

Staying close by to protect its damaged sister ship, the *Macharius* had little choice but to allow the Despicable the prize of its fortunate escape, although Semper ensured that a brace of launched torpedoes would further speed the Chaos vessel on its way, and give the enemy's defence turret crews something to occupy themselves with.

Standing on the bridge of his ship, still flushed with the unnerving euphoria of battle, Semper at first did not hear the report from his communications officer.

"Incoming ship-to-ship communications signal, sir," the man repeated again,

finally catching his captain’s attention.

“From the Drachenfels?” asked Semper.

The officer paused before answering. “No, sir. From the alien ship. They’re hailing you by name.”

At Semper’s signal, the communication from the Vual’en Sho was put onto an open comm-net channel.

“Craftmaster Semper, I/we are Lileathon, second-born of the union of Faryiarda and Morgyell, who is also now known to you as craftmistress of this vessel which we term Vual’en Sho.”

The eldar’s voice was strange and eerie, her phrasing of the Gothic tongue of the Imperium stilted and awkward. Semper and those listening could not know it, but Lileathon did not speak one word of the language, and was speaking the words as they were psychically communicated to her by the Thought Talkers who had some fluency in Gothic.

“This is Semper, Vual’en Sho. Go ahead.”

Again, the strange alien voice sounded over the command deck comm-net. “You fight well, human. I/we thank you for the aid you have given, and I/we regret what nearly came to pass between our two ships. But we still have comrades trapped on the world below, Semper-human, both your people and those craft-brethren precious also to us.”

“What do you propose, Vual’en Sho,” asked Semper.

The answer he received made perfect sense, and flew in the face of everything he had been taught in his entire life regarding the well-known dangers of having any dealings with cunning xenos-creatures such as these eldar.

SEVENTEEN

It began with screaming. It would end with screaming too.

Sheltering in what little cover there was on offer in the ravine, Ulanti tried to snatch a few hours' much-needed rest after the battle in the ruins and the desperate flight through the storm and across the barren surface of the planet. Minutes or hours later—he couldn't tell, and the deadly, muscle-numbing weariness which had gripped him earlier seemed no less diminished—he was awakened by the sound of screaming.

With a shock, he realised that it was one of the eldar sentries screaming: Banshee warriors, Horst had called them. The sound seemed to start off as a scream of warning, or defiance, but at some swift point became transformed into a scream of pain, a long, ululating howl which could only have been caused by some awful abomination being inflicted upon living, vulnerable flesh. The scream ended, perhaps mercifully, in a dying, choking gurgle, horribly amplified by the vox-caster systems build into the eldar warrior's helm.

Seconds later, the gunfire began. The harsh, dry hiss of dark eldar weaponry, answered seconds later by the quieter, different-toned sound of the eldar's own armaments.

Ulanti was on his feet in moments, almost colliding with Maxim, who had armed himself with a shotcannon following the loss of his heavy bolter. The big hiveworlder's eyes were red-rimmed, his pupils fixed and dilated. He had been chewing tajii root for hours, and was pumped up on aggression and pain from his wounds. Ulanti knew that if Maxim Borusa was going to die today, he wouldn't die easily.

As Ulanti hurried off towards the sounds of battle, Maxim paused to recheck the load on his shotcannon; he wasn't yet too narcoticised that he would forget to do what, for him, was so basic and elementary a survival precaution as to be second nature to him. He felt eyes on him, and looked up to see Commissar Kyogen nearby, propped up against the rock wall of the ravine. By all rights, Kyogen should be dead by now; one of Horst's retinue was a qualified medic and had

done what he could for the Ship's Commissar, but the dark eldar round which had struck him down had been imbued with some kind of anti-coagulant poison, and the medic had been unable to staunch the flow of blood that seeped out from the deep wound in the man's flesh.

Kyogen was big, as big as Borusa himself perhaps, but the hiveworlder had been amazed that even a body as large as that could contain so much blood. Kyogen's uniform and thick felt coat were heavy with the stuff, and the dust of the ground around him stained dark by the creeping tide of blood still oozing out of him. He was still conscious—perhaps the medic had given him something to prevent him passing out, or perhaps, Maxim mused with a smile, a stickler for the rules such as Ship's Commissar Koba Kyogen wasn't allowed to pass out and die until he received the properly authenticated orders to do so. He gripped his bolt pistol tight in one hand, and a small book—probably something about naval regulations and discipline, Maxim supposed—in the other, holding it tightly to his chest, and glared at Maxim.

Maxim looked back, and laughed. "Don't forget to save the last round for yourself, commissar. We can't afford the likes of you falling into the hands of the xenos and spilling your guts about the precious secrets contained in all them regulation manuals and loyalty codices you're so fond of."

The only reply he got was a mute, hostile glare. Still laughing, Maxim turned his back on the dying man and ran off after Ulanti.

Kailasa moved forward with the first line of dark eldar warriors, keen to ensure that his orders were carried out. The Mandrakes who had gone on ahead of the rest of the dark eldar force and who had successfully tracked down and located the prey's hiding place had been allowed to keep and do whatever they wanted with the enemy sentries, but Kailasa had ordered on pain of death that no one else would be allowed to kill any of the prey. It was vital that the farseer was taken alive, and the kabal commander did not want to risk any chance that his prize might be killed by mistake.

The dark eldar advanced into the face of sporadic, scattered fire from the craftworld eldar and their mon-keigh allies sheltering in the scant cover of the rockfall at the mouth of the ravine. They had no heavy weapons, and not enough

ranged ones to count.

Given time, Kailasa knew it would be a simple matter to surround them and pick them off at leisure with massed volleys of splinter rifle fire, backed up by covering fire from the several heavy weapons still possessed by what remained of his force, but time was something the dark eldar lord no longer had. He had received word that the ships belonging to the craftworld eldar and the mon-keigh had not only failed to destroy each other, but had united together and were in the process of driving off his own vessels. Soon, they would send shuttles to rescue their kin trapped here, but it was Kailasa's intent that all these would-be rescuers would find would be dust and a pile of corpses, with the dark eldar long ago escaped through a webway portal, taking their captive prizes with them.

And besides, he still wanted to take as many captives alive as possible. His losses so far had been higher than expected. Added to this, the loss of an entire Torture-class cruiser, as now seemed highly likely, would not carry much favour back in Commorragh, and so, in order to help assuage his Archon's potentially lethal displeasure and save face, it was now in his interests to bring back as many prize captives as possible.

One of the warriors in front of him cried out and fell, struck down by a well-aimed shot from a shuriken catapult. His companion instinctively raised his splinter rifle and returned fire, sending out a hail of deadly, poison-coated splinter shots towards the rocks. Just as instinctively, Kailasa raised his own splinter pistol and shot the warrior in the back.

"Agoniser rounds only," he commanded. "I want live flesh, not corpses."

Mindful of the brutal lesson just displayed, the rest of his troops took greater care in firing upon their enemies. Although agoniser shots could still kill, they were intended to subdue their targets and render them incapable of escaping, inflicting mainly minor superficial wounds, but introducing a nerve toxin into the target's bloodstream which would subject them to the most horrific agonies for a short time, but leave them still alive afterwards. Living targets struck by agoniser rounds would frequently break their bones and wrench apart joints and muscle, so severe were the spasms and contortions caused by the toxin. Kailasa had seen victims chew through their own tongues on occasion, paralysed by pain and choking to death on their own blood, but it was still his most favoured and

amusing method of taking captives.

Laughing in anticipation of the glory that would soon be his, he ran on into the battle.

The dark eldar were in amongst them now, overrunning the defenders at the entrance to the ravine and falling upon those behind. An armsman in front of Ulanti cried out and fell to the ground, screaming shrilly and writhing in agony, although the only wound Ulanti could see on him was a tearing flesh wound to his shoulder from a passing shot from one of the dark eldar weapons. This was the third time Ulanti had seen one of his men or the eldar so struck down, and he swiftly realised that they had just discovered yet another form of the maliciously perverse warfare favoured by these dark eldar creatures.

The dark eldar warrior who had just picked off the armsman sighted Ulanti and swung its pistol weapon round to fire at him. Ulanti ducked, hearing the sinister hiss of the crystalline shot as it skimmed past him.

He came up firing, sending two las-shots into the target's central body mass. It went down hissing in pain, its armour partially protecting it from the worst of the damage. Ulanti kept on firing, sending more las-shots into the thrashing body of the dark eldar, only stopping when he had completely depleted what remained of his weapon's power charge. When he had finished, all that was left of the dark eldar was scattered pieces of charred flesh and fused armour.

He was still reloading when another dark eldar warrior charged down the side of the ravine towards him, brandishing a sword and a crackling whip-like weapon. The roar of a shotcannon lifted the warrior off its feet, smashing its body ragdoll-like against the rocky wall of the ravine.

Ulanti looked round to see Maxim nearby, the shotcannon in his hands firing off more volleys of explosive scatter shells into the ranks of dark eldar following on behind the first.

"Best fall back, sir," the big hiveworlder shouted. "I'll cover you. The inquisitor and that alien magician are back there. If we're going to die then we should at least make sure we die in the best company. Arriving before the Golden Throne

alongside a senior inquisitor might help when the Emperor makes his judgement on our immortal souls. Mind you, I'm not too sure what he'll have to say about all these aliens we'll have brought with us."

Ulanti did as commanded, the distinctions between first lieutenant and chief petty officer blurring in the heat of battle. Maxim swung his shotcannon round, searching for more targets amongst the shadows of the ravine, when one of those shadows suddenly detached itself from amongst a cluster of nearby rocks and leapt upon him, knocking him off his perch and sending both him and his attacker hurtling down the slope of a steep side gully.

Maxim had fought many tenacious opponents hand to hand before, but nothing like this creature. It was one of the dark eldar things, but unlike any that Maxim had seen so far. Its naked flesh was pierced by hooks and barbs, many of which seemed to be holding parts of it together, with the glistening red of raw viscera clearly visible through the splits in its flesh.

As they rolled down the slope, Maxim's hands scrabbled for purchase on the creature's slime-coated flesh, one hand finally finding purchase round its throat, piercing himself on the blades set in its flesh as he tried to throttle the life out of the thing. The creature giggled as Maxim's powerful grip crushed its windpipe, grinding together the bones of its throat. It cackled as the sharp rocks of the gully tore and bruised both their bodies as they rolled over them.

The two of them were momentarily thrown apart by the bone-jarring impact of their landing at the foot of the gully. Maxim felt some of his ribs break under the impact, and coughed up blood as he tried to shout in pain.

The creature was on him again in an instant, tearing at the skin of his chest and face with the metal blades hammered into the tips of its malformed fingers. Maxim's grasping hand found a fist-sized rock, and, roaring in pain and anger, he swung it up into the creature's face, repeatedly smashing it into its nose and teeth. The creature sniggered to itself through the ragged hole of its mouth. Its fingers were round Maxim's throat now, not so much strangling him as working their way into the flesh of his neck, leisurely searching for the arteries and veins.

Maxim felt himself starting to black out, part of him grateful that he probably

wouldn’t feel anything when the creature’s questing fingers finally found his jugular. Dimly, from far away, he heard a familiar voice calling distantly out to him.

“Up! Get its head up, Borusa, damn you, so I can get a clear shot at it!”

There was something in the voice which compelled obedience. With the last of his strength, Maxim’s fingers found the creature’s throat and jaw. Pushing upwards, he forced it to raise its head.

The bolter round caught the creature in the centre of the face, blowing away most of its skull and throwing it several metres back. Groggily, Maxim watched as, incredibly, the thing began to rise to its feet again. Another bolter round blew it backwards again, followed by another and another.

The detonations rang out in quick succession, until the shredded remains of the dark eldar Grotesque fell to the ground in a ragged, bloody heap.

Maxim heard the sound of another body falling to the ground nearby, behind him. Before he passed out, he just had time to glimpse the prone figure of Commissar Kyogen, the man somehow having dragged or staggered his way down here from further along the ravine. The now empty bolt pistol was still clasped in his bloodless hand.

Kailasa knew the prize was close now. The craftworld weaklings and what remained of their mon-keigh allies had fallen back as far as they could and attacked what remained of his own forces with desperate fury.

A female Striking Scorpion—one of Arhra’s cowardly brood, who had refused to follow their Fallen Phoenix lord father into the dark embrace of Chaos—leapt forward, cleaving in the skull of the retinue bodyguard beside him, spitting another warrior on the point of her blade with her return blow. Kailasa stepped over the tumbling bodies of his two dead followers, and casually swept aside the Scorpion warrior’s attack upon him. His own blow severed her weapon arm at the shoulder. Numbly, in shock, she fell to her knees as the dark eldar lord swept past her.

A mon-keigh in the uniform of the second-in-command of one of their warships

—Kailasa had seized enough slave-fodder in successful raids along the mon-keigh shipping lanes to know something of the hierarchy of their rankings—brandished a laspistol weapon at him. Kailasa stepped aside, dodging the mon-keigh's shot, and felled him with a single agoniser round from his splinter pistol.

Another mon-keigh in elaborate robes of rank barred his way towards the prize. Kailasa brought his pistol up to bear again, but was made to stagger back by the invisible impact of a psychic blow emanating from the upstart mon-keigh. The blow was weak—the rune-wards carved into the dark lord's armour were enough to protect him from the full force of it—but it was enough to knock him off-balance for a moment.

In that moment, Horst raised and fired the plasma pistol in his hand, but the shot missed, striking the ravine wall behind where Kailasa had been standing, turning the rock into molten slag. The dark eldar moved with preternatural speed, closing the distance between him and the human inquisitor and felling him with a stunning strike with the pommel of his sword.

At last Kailasa stood before his prize. The figure of the aged farseer cowered before him, frail and helpless. Kailasa doubted that this one would be able to withstand the ordeal which would soon be his for long, but there were haemonculi surgeons and skilled flesh-sculptors and pain-artists who knew ways of trapping life and sensation within the ravaged forms of their victims for longer than could ever be thought imaginable.

"Grandfather farseer," the dark eldar lord sneered, affecting a mocking bow. "If only you knew what pleasures await you when I bring you back in triumph to Commorragh."

Kariadryl stared in awe and dread at the figure before him. The dark eldar lord was everything he had ever imagined, a piece of black legend from his race's darkest and most secret myths come to terrible life. More terrible still, with his mystic farsight, he was able to see the swirling black halo which surrounded the dark eldar like a living cloak of shadow.

This creature, this abomination standing before him, was the focal point of the shadow point, even if the dark eldar itself did not perceive it. All the elusive

glimpses of possible futures, all the false prophecy images, all the tantalising hints of what might still come to pass, coalesced into this place and moment of time.

And then, like shadows retreating and shrinking before the rise of the dawn sun, the black light aura around the druchii warrior lord dwindled and shrivelled away, scorched by the light and heat of something far greater and more powerful.

Kariadryl looked, with his eyes, with his inner farsight. And then he laughed in genuine pleasure, for now he knew what was coming along the ravine towards them.

The burning god was here at last.

EIGHTEEN

The avatar advanced down the neck of the ravine, the stone of the walls glowing cherry-red in places as they were touched by the heat of his passing. Where he walked, dark eldar died before him.

Some ran, trying to flee his terrible wrath. Others stood and tried to fight, spitting blasphemous curses against his holy name. Flee or fight, it did not matter. They died, no matter what they tried to do.

Three Mandrakes hurled themselves onto the avatar, dinging to its burning skin and hacking at it with their blades. They clung on to it relentlessly, screaming their hatred as the meat of their flesh was cooked from their bones.

Dark eldar warriors retreated before the avatar, shots from their splinter rifles vapourising against its glowing iron skin. Some it cut down with its black blade, or incinerated with fiery blasts of the blade's arcane power, others it crushed into the dust beneath its iron feet, others it struck down with its terrible molten gaze.

It did not matter. Flee or fight, they all died, no matter what they tried to do.

A pack of warp beasts leapt snarling at the burning god. One creature it smashed aside with a blow from its glowing fist; another it spitted on the end of its wailing blade. The third managed to land and raked at it with its talons. Magma blood boiled up out of the rents torn in the burning god's iron flesh.

The burning god seized the creature and ripped it away from its body, smashing it against the unyielding rock face of the ravine wall.

Kailasa charged at the burning god, screaming his hatred. His first blow cut deep into it, splattering the dust and rocks with burning blood.

One blow, however, was all the burning god would permit him.

As he swung again, aiming at the iron skin of its neck, the avatar reached up and simply caught the blow in its hand. Its great fist closed around the blade of the

sword, melting through it. Magma blood welled up and fell in steaming drips to the ground from where the unnatural metal of the blade cut into its divine flesh.

In seconds, the dark eldar lord's sword glowed red hot. Kailasa screamed as the heat seared the palm of his hand, and he released his grip on its pommel, just as the molten blade broke apart and fell uselessly to the ground.

He raised his splinter pistol and aimed it up into face of the avatar, but was stopped in his tracks as he saw the god staring down at him, the cold fury in its burning eyes holding him in a paralysing stasis more compelling than any poison or nerve toxin.

Slowly, helplessly, he watched as the giant warrior laid down its sword and reached up with two massive hands to unfasten the bindings of its helm.

Slowly, helplessly, he watched as the giant warrior removed its helm and turned its naked face towards him.

The burning god looked upon the dark eldar. Kailasa looked up into the god's terrible, beautiful face. He tried to scream, but the flesh of his face was already melting away as the unbearable light and heat radiating from the visage of the burning god's unmasked face fell upon him.

All that was left of Kailasa of the Kabal of the Poison Heart fell to the ground in a smouldering ashen heap, which the avatar trod unnoticed into the dust as it strode over to Kariadryl.

The farseer bowed in awed abeyance before the burning god, not daring to look up into its forbidden face.

"My lord Kaela Mensha Khaine, what would you have me do?" he asked, trembling.

He felt the burning god lay one fiery hand upon him. Its touch did not harm him, even though the air around its skin shimmered with the searing heat radiating from its iron skin.

Kariadryl understood what was required of him. Slowly, helplessly, he raised his head and looked into the god's face. Light, bright and unbearable, washed over

him, obliterating everything.

He gazed into the true face of the burning god. And at last he understood.

Everything.

Still sick with pain, Freyra of the Striking Scorpions climbed groggily to her feet, slowly taking in the details of the carnage around her. The stump of her severed arm still burned with pain, but, as one who walked the warrior path, she knew mental incantations and secret body disciplines to numb the pain and staunch the life-threatening flow of blood from the wound.

She remembered being struck down by the druchii warrior, and, dimly, as she lay semi-conscious, she remembered a burning giant looming up over her and looking down upon her with a face that blazed like the heart of a star. She was still trying to remember what had happened, when she saw the body of the farseer. She ran towards it.

The bodies of two mon-keigh lay nearby. Both were alive, although the one in the uniform of those who manned the warships of the humans' corpse-god emperor had been struck by a druchii agoniser round. He had mercifully passed out from the effects of the venom, but the toxin was still in his blood, and it would require a rare anti-toxin to fully flush the poison out of his body. From the marks in the dusty ground and from the attitudes of the two unconscious humans, Freyra could tell that both had been struck down while trying to defend her honoured kinsman. She would see that the human received a plentiful supply of the antitoxin.

She knelt by the body of her farseer kinsman, knowing already that he was dead. The ground around him was blackened, seared as if touched by a great heat, but, strangely, Kariadryl's body had been left completely untouched by whatever force had been unleashed here.

Stranger still was the look of utter calm and even the hint of a contented smile on the face of the aged farseer.

Freyra knew there were things that needed to be done. Kneeling over the corpse of her kinsman, she began to recite the necessary incantations of honour and

mourning to mark the passing of her craftworld's most venerable seer, stopping only briefly when she heard sounds in the sky overhead.

It had begun with screaming, and now it ended with screaming: the screaming of thruster engines as a trio of human shuttle craft came into land nearby. Given all that had happened since she arrived on this forsaken world, she did not find it strange at all when the landing ramps of the craft opened to disgorge mixed groups of human troops and eldar Guardian crewmen from the Vual'en Sho.

The search party from the *Macharius* found Maxim's unconscious form at the bottom of the gully. He was covered in so much dried blood from the slashes across his neck and chest, as well as the numerous other minor wounds, that at first they had assumed him to be dead, but he had stirred groaning to life when they began to roughly haul his body back up the rocky slope.

Stretcher litters were brought down, to carry Maxim and the corpse of Kyogen up from the bottom of the gully. Maxim watched as the commissar's body was lifted onto the other stretcher. The bolt pistol was still gripped in the corpse's hand, but, as the stretcher bearers hauled the body into place, Maxim saw the small, gilt-edged book slip out of the dead man's other hand and fall to the ground.

"It's funny," Maxim grunted, gratefully accepting the tajii stick offered by one of his own stretcher bearers, who he knew to be a long and valued customer of his, and a useful source of pharmaceutical supplies from the ship's medical stores. "Me and that silver skull bastard, we hated each other. There was probably nothing he'd have liked more than to send me to the Emperor with an execution round to the back of the head, but in the end he still saved my life."

Pain and the effects of the drugs he had been administered—and those others he had earlier self-administered—might have dulled his senses, but he still caught the look shared amongst the apothecary crewmen.

"You must be mistaken, chief petty officer," one of the surgeon's assistants said in a tone reserved for politely humouring those whose brains had been scrambled by serious head wounds. "The commissar's been dead for hours. He must have died before the battle even began."

Maxim painfully hauled himself out of the stretcher litter, angrily shrugging off the attempts by the stretcher bearers to restrain him, and staggered over to Kyogen's corpse. He bent down and picked up the small book the dead man had been clutching.

It was no book of naval regulations or Imperium political doctrine, which was what he had assumed it to be. It was an Ecclesiarchy prayer book, of the standard type issued in their billions to the officers and men of the Imperium's armed forces. The fake gold-embossed aquila emblem of the Holy God-Emperor winked up knowingly at him from the book's scratched and battered cover.

Somewhere far on the edge of the Stabia system, the last remaining dark eldar cruiser made its escape, unscathed and undetected. Its crew knew that their mission's failure would not win them a warm welcome from their kabal lord back on Commorragh, but the vessel's captain was quietly confident that the greater part of the blame would settle on the dead shoulders of Lord Kailasa and on the unworthy nature of their Chaos allies.

And, besides, her holds were filled with slave-fodder taken from the attacks on two of the vessels belonging to the mon-keigh and their weakling craftworld allies, so she would not be returning home to face her lord's displeasure empty-handed.

Down in the suite of rooms assigned to him by his dark eldar hosts, Siaphas of Eidolon was plotting the details of his continued survival in the face of the recent disastrous events.

By now, with the escape of the Despicable back into the warp, the Despoiler would know what had happened here, so Siaphas knew the folly of even thinking about returning to the Warmaster's court to attempt to give his version of events. He was irrevocably tainted with failure now in the unforgiving eyes of the Despoiler, and not even the patronage of his protector Zaraphiston would shelter him from Abaddon's wrath.

No, the Chaos sorcerer decided, he would remain here amongst these dark eldar creatures. As he had realised before, they could easily be fashioned into a powerful and effective force by one with the imagination to see the unique

possibilities they represented. Of course, their ridiculous and self-destructive kabals and their love of intrigue and in-fighting would have to be done away with, but, given time, Siaphas was certain that a being of sufficient guile, intellect and mystic power could easily manipulate events so as to ensure their rapid rise to a position of command over such a force, and was he not just such a being?

Siaphas was still considering the pleasant details of his future empire-building over his unwitting hosts, when his reverie was interrupted by the sound of the door to his chambers sliding open.

One of the creatures known as a haemonculus stood there. Several more lesser members of the same kind stood in the shadows behind him. It was only when the lead one started to speak that Siaphas noticed the cutting tools and restraining devices in their hands.

“A pity that your master’s plan has come to nothing, Chaos-thing,” it snickered, “but do not fear, for if you cannot serve us in one way then you can still do so in another. The voyage home is a long one, and our commander requires we provide her with some form of diversion to pass away the time. It should be an interesting experience for us too, for never before have we been gifted with such exalted, Chaos-altered flesh to work with. When we are finished with you, Chaos-thing, there should be enough of you left to fashion some new and novel kind of pet to present to the Archon himself. He keeps a large menagerie of such things, and you will enjoy your new home amongst them in the kennels of his citadel.”

Siaphas was still trying to frame the words of a spell as the gaunt figures of the dark eldar flesh-sculptors glided silently forward towards him.

After the horrors of Stabia, the interior of the dome of the crystal seers of craftworld An-Iolsus was a reminder of all that they had fought for and died to protect. The delicately perfume-scented mists dung like wisps of vaporous silk around the bodies of the trees, while the tiny jewel-carapaced insect-drones drifted from tree to tree in lazy pursuit of their endless, slow maintenance tasks. Peaceable musical-sounding chimes sounded from somewhere deeper in the crystalline forest, while the air gently pulsed with the soundless psychic

whisperings of the minds which inhabited this place.

Freyra finished her task, planting the spirit-stone two hand reaches deep within the rich loam of the forest floor. She stepped away, still aware of the pain from her wounded arm, still aware of her awkward control over the new limb there. The healers had done their work well, but it would take much effort for her to learn how to master the movements of her new wraithbone-crafted prosthetic arm with anything like the dexterity she had previously taken for granted. She was unsure, and the healers were unable to make any promises, if she would ever be able to wield a weapon again effectively in combat. She had thought of abandoning the warrior path and finding other ways to serve her race and craftworld, but she knew what would soon be required of all of them on An-Iolsus and the other craftworlds, and she realised that soon enough the eldar would need every warrior they could find.

In honour of her fallen kinsman, and in recognition of the coming sacrifices that would still be required of them, she would persevere and regain the skills her injury had robbed her of.

She bowed silently to the trees around her and exited the dome.

The dome's occupants waited until she had gone before linking minds with the new arrival. An invisible psychic breeze stirred to life amid the mists and bowers as the spirits of those who had gone before gathered to commune with the new mind amongst them.

It is good to be amongst you all again, my old friends, sounded the mind-speech voice of Kariadryl the farseer. I have much to tell you…

EPILOGUE

Ships of the line, they called them. Now, for the first time, Leoten Semper understood just what exactly that phrase meant.

In carefully manoeuvred formation, in wide, serried rows, the Imperial ships advanced into battle. Seventeen capital-class ships, including two battle cruisers and also two battleships, the fleet flagship, the mighty Divine Right, amongst them. Twenty smaller vessels, frigates and destroyers mostly, swept out across either flank of the formation or formed a rearguard, following in the wake of the lumbering but majestic cruiser squadrons.

It was a line of giant leviathans, the greatest ever force assembled in Gothic sector history, the cream of Battlefleet Gothic, under the direct command of Lord Admiral Ravensburg himself. It was an awesome sight, possibly the largest single naval force gathered together for battle since the long ago and almost forgotten days of the titanic struggles of Warmaster Horus's treacherous rebellion against the Emperor. Looking out from the bridge of the *Macharius* at the lines of ships as they gathered prior to battle, Semper had turned to his second-in-command and smiled in grim humour at the vista before them.

"Vandire's teeth, Hito, I don't know what it'll do to the enemy, but just the sight of all this is enough to scare the life out of me."

And now the *Macharius* was there amongst them, moving forward with the rest of the fleet formation, taking its place alongside its sister ships. They were surrounded by illustrious names well known from Battlefleet Gothic history: the battleships Divine Right and Cardinal Boras, venerable old warhorses which formed the solid backbone of the Imperial line; the Mars-class battlecruiser Imperious, under the command of the near-legendary Compel Bast, whom even Erwin Ramas was said to be in awe of; the cruisers Iron Duke, Minotaur, Zealous, Hammer of Justice, Sword of Orion, Mjollnir, Legend of Romulus and Sinus.

Amongst them too were other, less familiar names. Newly-built ships which had come into service only in the last few years, to help replace some of the

catastrophic losses suffered by Battlefleet Gothic in the earliest stages of the war. These ships may not have carried the same illustrious pedigree as some of their more venerable sister vessels, but already several of them—the Lunar-class cruisers Lord Daros and Jotunheim, the Gothic-class cruiser Invincible, the Overlord-class cruiser Cypra Probatii—had distinguished themselves sufficiently to have already assured their place in the annals of Battlefleet Gothic history.

Yes, we'll all see our names mentioned in the history books, thought Semper, taking his customary place on the command deck. Assuming any of us actually live through this day.

They had been hounding the Chaos fleet through the Gethsemane system for days, trying to bring it to battle. Now at last, spotted and flushed out of its hiding place in the surveyor shadow of the system's second world, the enemy had been forced out into the open and made to stand and fight.

No man within the Imperial fleet had any illusions about just how critical this battle was. So far, Battlefleet Gothic had been slowly but inexorably losing the war. Barely won holding actions were falsely hailed as major triumphs, scattered retreats were disguised by Imperium propaganda as defiant withdrawals, worlds retaken from the enemy were trumpeted as significant milestones on the path to final victory, with no mention made of the dozens of Imperial worlds still under the yoke of the Despoiler, nor the stream of worlds which continued to fall to his endless attacks.

"We need this victory, gentlemen," Semper had told Ulanti and the other senior officers of the *Macharius* in the private briefing in his quarters before the commencement of the battle. "This is the first time an enemy force of this size has been detected and identified, and the first time we of Battlefleet Gothic have been able to assemble a force of sufficient size and strength to bear on it and bring it to open battle. Have no illusions, gentlemen. If we win today, the war will continue, but we will have dealt the enemy a grievous blow, and we will have shown the Despoiler and our own people that we are indeed capable of defeating him." His voice had lowered then, and he had looked his assembled officers in the face, repeating the same words which he had heard from Ravensburg himself just a few hours ago aboard the Divine Right, during the Lord Admiral's final briefing to his fleet captains.

“But, if we lose, gentlemen, then we will have lost the greater part of our battlefleet’s strength, and the Despoiler’s final victory is all but assured. What we do here today determines the fate of the entire Gothic sector, and we can depend on none but ourselves to determine what that fate might be.”

Semper himself had looked up sharply at this last comment when he had first heard it, catching the eye of Ravensburg, and, more significantly, also that of Inquisitor Horst, standing anonymously and unnoticed amongst the scrum of scribes and Administratum and Munitorium officials that formed part of the Lord Admiral’s vast personal entourage. Horst held Semper’s gaze for a moment, and then glanced away, eyes downcast. To Semper, the meaning seemed unmistakable.

Everything that happened in the Stabia system, was it all for nothing, he wondered? Did we completely fail in our mission there?

Now, standing upon the bridge of his ship, Semper stood to attention, his officers and crew immediately following likewise, as the ship’s comm-net system crackled into activity, patching into a fleet-wide broadcast from the Divine Right. The distinctive voice of Lord Admiral Cornelius von Ravensburg, dipped and supremely confident, commanding and autocratic, echoed round the command deck of the *Macharius*, and round every deck level of every ship in the Imperial formation.

“Hah, here we go, gentlemen. Into the jaws of death, into the mouth of hell. Damn his eyes, may the Emperor bless and bugger us all!”

At those semi-blasphemous words, which Imperium historians would subsequently alter to make sound a little more eloquent and noble, waves of torpedoes were launched at the Chaos armada, the combined energy signatures from their massed launching momentarily blotting out surveyor screens on many ships throughout the fleet.

The Chaos fleet, still manoeuvring for position, scattered wildly to avoid the menacing waves of torpedoes, in the process tearing apart their own lines of battle. Bright star-bursts of plasma detonations blossomed amongst the Chaos ranks, signalling at least a dozen or more successful torpedo impacts. Those Chaos ships which had avoided the first torpedo wave now brought their own

superior-ranged weaponry to bear on the advancing Imperial fleet. Lance and battery fire, sporadic but deadly, reached out across the gap of still tens of thousands of kilometres between the two fleets, seeking targets amongst the Imperial line. Several vessels, the Drachenfels and Lord Daros amongst them, shook under the impacts of direct hits, but, able to present their heavily-armoured prows to the enemy, the Imperial line continued its advance into battle with only minimal damage.

Inside the torpedo rooms of more than two dozen Imperial vessels, crews sweated and strained to load more volleys of the huge, thirty-metre long missiles into their firing chambers. On the gun decks of every Imperium ship, and on every command deck, anxious gunnery officers checked their firing solutions over and over again and maintained a careful watch on the green-glowing lines of gun deck status runes.

The Imperious, leading the charge from the vanguard of the Imperial line, was the first to draw serious blood. Even before the other ships could launch off a second torpedo wave, the Mars-class battlecruiser’s nova cannon was firing with its deadly trademark accuracy. Its chosen target was the Murder-class cruiser Deathblade, an old and bitterly-hated adversary from several actions the Imperious and its crew had waged against the enemy in the Orar sub-sector. The front section of the Deathblade was consumed in a sudden and fearsome explosion. Broken and ablaze, the cruiser fell out of the Chaos formation, its sister vessels hurriedly manoeuvring to get away from it as its surveyor signature showed all the wild and tell-tale energy fluctuations from damaged and out of control plasma reactors heading towards imminent and explosive overload.

Cheers rang over the Imperial comm-channels at the fate of the stricken enemy ship. Then, in the roaring blast of launching torpedoes, the deck-shaking earthquake rumble of gun batteries unleashed and the incandescent scream of lance fire, the two fleets dashed together.

Ravensburg’s plan was simple. A mass front assault with waves of torpedoes would, and now did, split the enemy formation into two. The Imperial fleet, formed into carefully staggered lines, would then advance through this newly-formed breach, taking fire from enemy ships on both sides, but simultaneously bringing their own port and starboard batteries to bear on different enemy targets.

As a strategy, it was brutally direct. In execution, it was simply brutal. Ravensburg was well known for his jocular references to battle casualties as “paying the butcher’s bill”. The price of the butcher’s bill for the Battle of Gethsemane would be steep indeed.

The Imperial formation, passing through two lines of intersecting fire, was buffeted and blasted on both sides by the enemy gunners. The Tyrant-class vessel Zigmund, singled out by the gunners of four different enemy vessels, two on each side of it, was the first to fall. Its shields stripped away in seconds, it staggered under the impact of multiple simultaneous hits on both its flanks. Its engines destroyed, its gun decks reduced to burning wreckage, it lay stricken and helpless as its sister vessels mercilessly passed it by, abandoning it to its fate. Enemy torpedo destroyers and attack craft bomber squadrons, hiding nearby in the cover of the larger cruiser vessels, quickly closed in for the kill like schools of hungry barracuda.

The Lunar-class cruiser Excellent, famous for its defiant no-retreat stance in the face of an ork space hulk monstrosity two centuries earlier at the Defence of Platea, was set ablaze prow to stern by a series of devastating torpedo and lance hits from the grand cruiser Foe-Reaper and its phalanx of escorts. The last act of the Excellent’s captain, Leonardus Mathieu, was to bring his dying vessel up to ramming speed, sending it crashing catastrophically into the hull of the Foe-Reaper and bringing to an end the Chaos ship’s litany of atrocities against the Imperium, which stretched back for millennia. Captain Lagardo Mathieu, who had commanded the Excellent during its most famous action at Platea, would surely have approved of his descendant’s own final and very effective act of defiance.

The entire Omega squadron of Sword-class frigates was destroyed in a vicious duel with the Carnage-class cruiser Wanton Desecration and its squadron of Infidel escorts, finally succumbing when bomber waves from the nearby Styx-class cruiser Violator entered the fray.

The Firestorm-class frigate Europa fell prey to the guns of the Desolator-class battleship Nergal. For Lord Admiral Ravensburg, this particular item on the butcher’s bill would come at an especially heavy price. His son Mannfred, the youngest of his eleven children and one of his favourites, had been first lieutenant on the Europa.

On every ship involved in the engagement, surveyor screens swarmed with target icons. On both sides, members of gunnery crews simply dropped to the decks in exhaustion, overwhelmed by the heat, noise and toxic off-spill from weapons overheated to the point of catastrophe. On flight decks, ground crews worked numbly and robotically on a seemingly endless number of attack craft, prepping them for launch just as previously-launched craft, battered and missing many of their wingmen, returned to their carrier vessels for refuelling, re-arming and urgently-required repairs. The void around the giant cruisers was filled with a bewildering, swirling maelstrom of attack craft, fighters and bombers, Chaos and Imperial craft alike, all caught up together in one vast, straggling dogfight, spread out over tens of thousands of kilometres of space. Unable to distinguish friend from foe under such conditions, turret gunners on both sides often simply opened fire at any attack craft which came within striking distance, and more than one bomber or fighter pilot, having managed to survive the lethal gauntlet of the battle, found himself coming under fire from the defences of his own mothership.

In a final, deadly series of salvoes, the dual Imperial formations broke through the Chaos lines, the Divine Right brutally ramming and smashing apart a damaged and powerless enemy frigate which drifted into the battleship's path. As Ravensburg's flagship pulled away from the enemy fleet, ships on both sides still exchanging lethal bouts of weapons fire, the punishing damage taken by both sides quickly became apparent. If the Lord Admiral cut his losses now and fled back into the warp, then he would do so without three of his capital ships and five of his escort vessels. Some badly damaged vessels would be unlikely to survive the dangers of the immaterium, while several more, including the Lord Daros and the Dauntless-class light cruiser Guardian, would surely face many long months or even years of repair work in orbital dry dock.

Still, despite the damage his fleet had suffered, Ravensburg's plan had succeeded. As his ships continued to put distance between themselves and the enemy, gaps in the Chaos battle line quickly became visible.

The Foe-Reaper was gone, reduced to a tangled mass of burning wreckage from its collision with the dying Excellent. The Malignus Maximus and the Murder-class cruiser Steel Fang had been similarly reduced by concentrated salvoes from the Imperial formation, while Steel Fang's sister ship Krotos had been the victim of wave after wave of combined attacks from the bomber squadrons of the

Macharius and the Imperious, and was now little more than a gutted hulk. Similar massed bombing waves from the Divine Right had relentlessly harried the Styx-class cruiser Corpsemaker and its escorts, crippling its launch bays and effectively knocking it out of the fight. Elsewhere, a wide ring of expanding super-heated gases and wreckage fragments was all that remained of a nameless Slaughter-class cruiser which had explosively succumbed to combined fire from three different Imperial cruisers, while the Nergal, flagship of the Chaos Warmaster admiral, Baal-Hierophant Lokkis Vanama, bled out a telltale plume of burning plasma from its rear section, indicating the probable loss of one of its reactors from the numerous torpedo, lance and weapon battery attacks which had been directed at it during the battle.

Aboard the Divine Right, Ravensburg watched the progress of the injured enemy battleship with his trademark cold, remorseless gaze. He would not learn until after the battle about the destruction of his son's ship by the guns of the enemy flagship, but it would add little to his already firm determination to see the notorious battleship mercilessly hunted down and destroyed today. Once he learned of the vessel's presence in the Gethsemane system, then its destruction and the death of one of Abaddon's chief lieutenants immediately became one of his main aims in this conflict.

"Our fleet?" he asked without looking away from the enemy positions.

"Still battle worthy," answered one of his adjutants, thinking of the number of crippled and seriously damaged ships in the Imperial line, and tempted—but only briefly—to add the word barely to his report.

"Good enough," nodded Ravensburg, turning to his waiting command staff. "Signal the ships and tell them to come about and re-engage the enemy. Tell them we're going back through the gates of hell to finish the job properly this time."

At Ravensburg's command, the lines of Imperial ships swung ponderously round, presenting their prows once more to the enemy. As they turned, flank-mounted batteries were able to open fire at the distant enemy, which dutifully returned the favour. The void between the two battered fleets was filled with sporadic weapons fire, as both sides steeled themselves for the second round of

battle.

The Imperial force advanced in a rag-tag formation, its original line of battle broken by the rigours of the first encounter and the losses sustained then. The Chaos fleet, split apart by the first Imperial charge, was in even greater disarray.

Torpedo launches streaked from the prows of various Imperial craft, seeking individual targets of opportunity within the confusion of the enemy ranks. Other ships, damaged or with their torpedo payload already fully expended, were unable to launch anything. Aboard the Tyrant-class cruiser Incendrius, its captain screamed vicious, bloody obscenities into his internal comm-net, threatening death, damnation and the worst punishments allowed under naval regulations if his loading crew didn't get their fingers out and fire off some damned torpedoes, all the time unaware that his entire torpedo room had been transformed into a derelict morgue. A lucky melta missile hit had struck that section in its weaker flank side, opening up a catastrophic breach in the cruiser's hull. Those torpedo room crew not fortunate enough to be immolated in the initial blast had instead been sucked screaming out into space through the giant molten hole in the chamber's wall.

Aboard the *Macharius*, Leoten Semper faced the prospect of his probable and imminent extinction with all the aplomb expected of a product of Cypra Mundi's thousands of years of breeding officers for the Imperial Navy.

"What's our status, Mister Ulanti?"

"Two starboard gundecks ablaze, captain. We have a minor conflagration raging in the secondary rear arsenal, and a larger one in the upper portside launch decks, but that perhaps doesn't matter so much, since we've accounted for and recovered rather less than half of our attack craft squadrons, and we really have no more need for those decks any more. External communications are shot half to hell, but that doesn't perhaps matter so much either, since there's so much battle interference and comms babble going on out there that no one can hear anything anyway. Crew casualties are currently running at almost twenty per cent and expected to rise even without any further battle damage. Our void shield generators are dangerously overloading, and I believe Magos Castaboras is down in the enginarium now, in the process of performing the last rites on our number three plasma reactor."

Semper almost smiled. Ulanti could make the second coming of the Traitor Warmaster Horus sound like nothing more than a petty inconvenience. “What’s your opinion of our current battle status then, Mister Ulanti?”

Ulanti’s answer was immediate and unblinking. “I think there’s a damn good chance we’ll all be getting reacquainted with a few long-dead old comrades before the day’s out.”

Semper looked shrewdly at his second-in-command. “Did you think you would end your days back home on Necromunda, Hito, telling bored grandchildren tales of your glorious exploits amongst the stars in the service of the Emperor’s navy?”

“The thought had occurred to me, sir, but only in a pleasing if somewhat abstract sense.”

This time Semper did smile. Laugh, in fact, as he clapped his second-in-command on the shoulders. “A fine daydream, Hito, but you’re Battlefleet Gothic now. For us, and all those like us, this is always how it’s supposed to end.”

The *Macharius*, along with the other ships in what remained of the Imperial line, drew closer on their targets. The bridge rocked as the first enemy weapons hits impacted against the ship’s beleaguered, failing void shields.

“Torpedoes, Mister Nyder?” asked Semper.

“Six in the pipe, six more on the shelf, captain,” reported the *Macharius*’s ordnance officer, the strain of the engagement showing on his face. Semper knew that the loss of so many of his attack craft crews had affected the man deeply, even if he would never openly admit it. “That’s all I can give you for the time being, sir. The loading track from the forward arsenal is smashed, and I can’t release anything from the rear arsenals until those fires back there are under control.”

“Very well. Twelve it is,” nodded Semper. “No sense letting them go to waste. Find a target and fire when ready, Mister Nyder.”

The *Macharius* shook, and shook again as it fired off two salvoes, sending three

missiles apiece streaking off towards two different targets. Semper studied the surveyor screen closely. At first he thought the ships within the Chaos fleet were simply manoeuvring to evade the many individual torpedo salvoes from the Imperial line, but then, even before the shout from one of his helm officers, came understanding about what was really happening.

“Their fleet’s breaking up! They’re attempting to disengage!”

On surveyor screens and augur displays all through the Imperial formation, the truth quickly became evident. The enemy fleet was breaking off from battle, those vessels which could running for the warp jump point at the system’s edge and abandoning their damaged brethren to the mercy of the Imperial guns. Ravensburg’s attention was still almost solely fixed on the escaping fleet and the prize of its fleeing flagship, but he was not about to pass up the free opportunity now being presented to him.

“Open fire,” he commanded to his fleet, as they swept past the drifting clutter of damaged Chaos vessels, firing broadsides into them at something close to point-blank range. “We’ll gladly accept these scraps, but only as an appetiser for the rest of the feast.”

Many of the ships within the Imperial line channelled extra power to their engines, pushing ahead to catch up with the faster enemy ships. Speculative shots from lance turrets and torpedo tubes ranged out in pursuit of the escaping enemy, seeking to hit and hopefully cripple engines and power systems.

Suddenly, a Sword-class frigate, speedier than the larger capital ships and racing ahead of the main Imperial formation, exploded apart, its prow bursting open. At once, the alarm was passed through the Imperial fleet.

“Mines!” captains and surveyor officers shouted to helm crews, as emergency surveyor sweeps were made, and new courses urgently laid in to avoid this latest threat.

Aboard the Divine Right, Ravensburg cursed violently and volubly. The enemy had dropped mines in their wake, to cover their retreat. Scattered widely amongst the other debris of battle, they would be a real hazard to the pursuing Imperial fleet. By the time his ships had picked a safe passage through the

drifting minefields, or had sent out attack craft squadrons to clear a path through them, the Chaos fleet would be long gone.

How many casualties could he afford, he wondered, if he simply ordered his already-weakened force to simply push on ahead and run the gauntlet of the minefield?

He was still pondering on the variables in that cold, harsh calculation when he heard the astonished shout from one of the bridge officers.

“Vandire’s teeth! Ships, a whole new fleet of them! Where did they come from?”

Aboard the *Macharius*, aboard every ship in the Imperial formation, the reaction was the same. Looking at the images on the augur screen, seeing the distinctive energy signatures of the new arrivals on the surveyor screen, Semper could only imagine the mood of consternation amongst his counterparts on the command decks of the enemy ships.

Ulanti confirmed what Semper already knew. “Eldar vessels, more than twenty of them, including a dozen or more capital-class warships. Emperor only knows where they came from, or how long they’ve been here watching everything.”

And Emperor only knows what they’re going to do next, Semper thought to himself, almost afraid to watch, but unable to tear his gaze away from the lines of newly-emergent icons on the surveyor screen, their strange energy patterns shifting and fluctuating as they drew closer towards the Imperial and Chaos fleets.

The eldar ships were coming in fast on a tangent course intercepting the escaping Chaos fleet, but which, with a minor change of heading and brief burst of speed, could just as easily bring them into attack range of the Imperial ships. Everyone aboard the command deck of the *Macharius* knew all too well just how fast and manoeuvrable the alien vessels were, and how such a sudden but significant course change could be made effortlessly and without warning.

“Alien bastards, I’ve known their treachery before,” cursed Augustus Ortelius, captain of the Divine Right. “They’re going to attack us, admiral. We must open

fire upon them now!”

“No!” It was the voice of Horst, standing on the command deck beside Ravensburg, the full weight of authority of his rank of senior inquisitor and envoy of the Council of Terra evident in that single word. “We wait. Let them act first. Then we will know what their true intentions are.”

Aboard the *Macharius*, the mood was equally tense.

“Damn it, we still can’t positively identify any of the eldar ships?”

The surveyor officer wilted before his captain’s impatience. “It’s notoriously difficult to identify an individual eldar vessel’s energy signature, even if you already have previous sightings of that vessel on record, captain. The fact that there are so many of them together only makes it—”

A shout from the communications section put the man out of his misery. “We’re being hailed, captain. By one of the alien ships!”

Semper and Ulanti exchanged quick, alert glances. “Open comm-net channels,” ordered Semper.

“Good hunting, *Macharius*!” The voice on the bridge comm-net speakers was proud and confident, with a slight mocking edge to it. The familiar words of Battlefleet Gothic’s customary greeting between vessels sounded strange too, framed in the inhuman voice of an eldar. Both Semper and Ulanti were grudgingly impressed; Craftmaster Lileathon’s spoken Gothic was nearly flawless, and the haughty eldar commander had clearly learned much about the Imperial Navy and its customs since they had last encountered her and her ship.

“Good enough, Vual’en Sho,” answered Semper. “When we first met, we were mostly enemies, when we parted, we were mostly allies.”

“What are we now, you wonder?” Again, that slight mocking tone to the eldar’s voice. “This time we bring a gift with us, *Macharius*. The gift of mael dannan for the servants of the one you call the Despoiler.”

Ulanti looked at his captain, puzzled. “Mael dannan?”

“Total and merciless extermination,” smiled Semper, as the eldar ships opened fire.

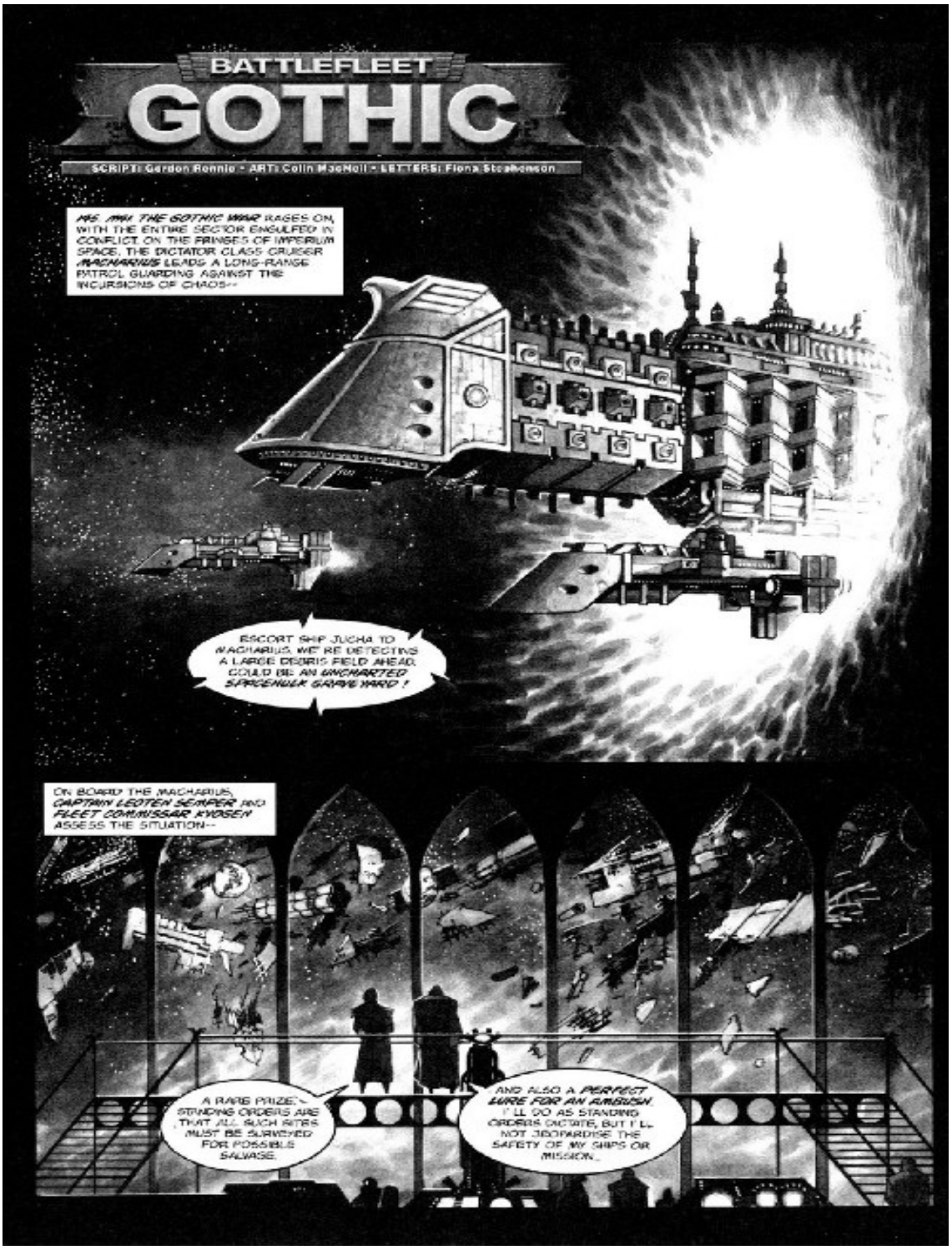
A cruiser at the head of the retreating Chaos fleet was blown to pieces, struck multiple times by the withering, relentless fire from the eldar vessels’ pulsar lance armaments. Seconds later, more hits registered all along the front length of the Chaos formation. Some returned fire, their gunners desperately seeking targets amongst the elusive, fast-moving eldar ships. Others manoeuvred in panic, seeking another escape route, their course taking them back towards the guns of the waiting Imperial fleet.

Both fleets, human and eldar, with the Chaos fleet trapped between them, opened fire. The Battle of Gethsemane would rage for days yet, with elements from both fleets hunting the remnants of the Chaos formation through the system, and there would be fierce losses on all sides, but the final outcome of the battle was no longer in doubt.

Mael dannan. Total and merciless extermination of Warmaster Baal-Hierophant Lokkis Vanama and his entire fleet.

A new chapter in the Gothic War had begun.

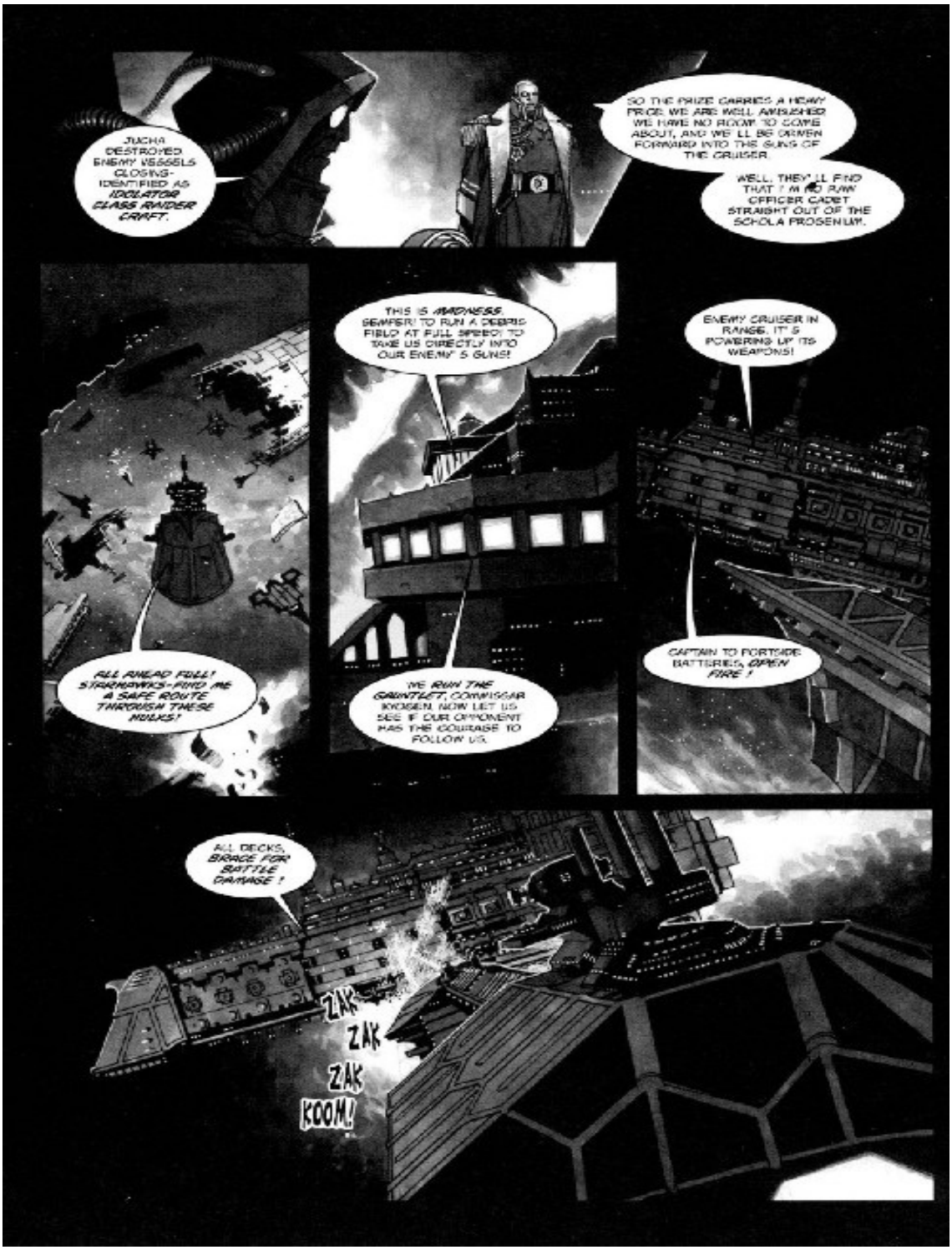
BATTLEFLEET
GOTHIC


BATTLEFLEET
GOTHIC
SCRIPT: Gordon Rennie • ART: Colin MacNeil • LETTERS: Fiona Stephenson
AS THE GOTHIC WAR RAGES ON, WITH THE ENTIRE SECTOR ENGULFED IN CONFLICT ON THE FRINGES OF IMPERIUM SPACE, THE DICTATOR CLASS CRUISER MACHARIUS LEADS A LONG-RANGE PATROL GUARDING AGAINST THE INCURSIONS OF CHAOS--
ESCORT SHIP JUCHA TO MACHARIUS. WE'RE DETECTING A LARGE DEBRIS FIELD AHEAD. COULD BE AN UNCHARTED SPACEHULK GRAVE YARD!
ON BOARD THE MACHARIUS, CAPTAIN LEOTEN SEARFER AND FLEET COMMISSAR KYDSEN ASSESS THE SITUATION--
A RARE PRIZE. STANDING ORDERS ARE THAT ALL SUCH SITES MUST BE SURVEYED FOR POSSIBLE SALVAGE.
AND ALSO A PERFECT LURE FOR AN AMBUSH. I'LL DO AS STANDING ORDERS DICTATE, BUT I'LL NOT JEOPARDISE THE SAFETY OF MY SHIPS OR MISSION.

SEMPER TO SQUADRON MACHARIUS. PROCEED WITH CAUTION-ALL GUNNERY CREWS TO THEIR STATIONS, INCREASE SURVEYORS AND VOID SHIELD GENERATORS TO MAXIMUM!
SEMPER TO FIGHTER BAYS. I WANT TWO FLIGHTS OF STARHAWKS READY FOR LAUNCH WITHOUT DELAY.
IS THAT WISE, CAPTAIN, LAUNCHING FIGHTERS INTO SUCH A DENSE DEBRIS FIELD?
YOU SHOULD HAVE MORE FAITH IN OUR PILOTS, COMMISSAR KROGEN.
THEY'RE THE BEST IN THE GOTHIC SECTOR FLEET, AND THEIR STARHAWKS' SIZE AND AGILITY MAKES THEM PERFECT FOR SCOUTING OUT THE GRAVEYARD!
ESCORT SHIP THOTH TO STARHAWK COMMANDER, DRIFTING WRECKAGE IS OVERLOADING OUR SCANNERS, BUT WE'RE PICKING UP A WEAK ENERGY SIGNAL FROM ONE OF THE HULKS.
COULD BE AN OLD PLASMA REACTOR STILL ONLINE AND SALVAGEABLE. INVESTIGATE AND CONFIRM.

UNDERSTOOD, TIGHTH FLIGHT. NOT SURE WHAT RESPONDING.
GOT IT IN VISUAL. HULL SHAPE SHOWS IT'S AN IMPERIUM VESSEL- COULD BE ONE OF THE OLD SLAUGHTER CLASS CRUISERS DOESN'T LOOK TOO BADLY DAMAGED--
STAND BY, GETTING A RETURN ON IT FROM SURVEYORS--
EEP EEP EEP EEP EEP EEP EEP EEP
MAJOR ENERGY SPIKE! THAT'S NO LIFELESS DERELICT-- IT'S POWERING UP ITS ENGINES AND WEAPON BATTERIES!
EMPEROR'S OATH.. PEEL! PEEL! PEEL!

AMBUSH ! CHAOS CRUISER COMING OUT OF HIDING ! EVASIVE AC--
SHROOOM!
THE THOTH... IT'S GRIMM!
THEN WE STRIKE BACK NOW, AND MOURN OUR DEAD LATER.
HELM CREW--HARD TO PORT. GUNNERY OFFICERS- PREPARE TO FIRE!
CAPTAIN SEMPER! AN EMERGENCY MESSAGE COMING IN FROM THE JUCHA ON OUR REARGUARD!
JUCHA
-- JUCHA TO MACHARIUS. CHAOS RENEGADE SHIPS ATTACKING!! THEY WERE HIDING INSIDE THE SHELL OF ONE OF THE HULKS!
CAN'T OUTRUN THEM. SHIELDS GONE... LOSING HELM CONTROL... AAARGH--!
KROOM!


JUCHA DESTROYED ENEMY VESSELS CLOSING- IDENTIFIED AS IDOLATOR CLASS RAIDER CRAFT.
SO THE PRIZE CARRIES A HEAVY PRICE. WE ARE WELL AMBUSHED. WE HAVE NO ROOM TO COME ABOUT, AND WE'LL BE DRIVEN FORWARD INTO THE GUNS OF THE CRUISER.
WELL, THEY'LL FIND THAT I'M NO RAW OFFICER CADET STRAIGHT OUT OF THE SCHOLA PROSENIUM.
ALL AHEAD FULL! STARBOARD- FIND ME A SAFE ROUTE THROUGH THESE HULKS!
THIS IS MADNESS, SEMPER! TO RUN A DEBRIS FIELD AT FULL SPEED! TO TAKE US DIRECTLY INTO OUR ENEMY'S GUNS!
WE RUN THE GAUNTLET, COMMISSAR KOGGEN. NOW LET US SEE IF OUR OPPONENT HAS THE COURAGE TO FOLLOW US.
ENEMY CRUISER IN RANGE. IT'S POWERING UP ITS WEAPONS!
CAPTAIN TO PORTSIDE BATTERIES, OPEN FIRE!
ALL DECKS, BRACE FOR BATTLE DAMAGE!
ZAK
ZAK
ZAK
KOOM!

CARNAGE ON THE MACHARIUS, AS ITS VOID SHIELDS OVERLOAD UNDER THE POUNDING OF THE CHAOS SUNS---
FA-DOOM!
WE'RE HIT--! DAMAGE REPORTS--
-- CAN WAIT. ALL I NEED TO KNOW IS THAT I STILL HAVE A SHIP AROUND ME AND ENOUGH CREW LEFT TO MAN IT!
THE ENEMY?
STILL WITH US. THEY'RE IN PACK FORMATION AND CLOSING ON US.
SO BE IT. LET'S DRAW THEM IN ALL THE WAY. HELM CREW--TAKE US IN FULL AHEAD BETWEEN THOSE TWO HULKS!
SERVITOR TO PROW GUNNERY DECK. LOAD AND ARM TWO PLASMA TORPEDOES--FIVE SECOND DELAYED IMPACT FUSES ON BOTH.
PREPARE TO FIRE ON MY COMMAND

I SENSE YOUR APPREHENSION, KYDSEN. HAVE PATIENCE, AND DO NOT THINK TO EXECUTE ME FOR MADNESS JUST YET..
IN A FEW MOMENTS, I'LL EITHER BE A HERO OF THE IMPERIUM, OR WE'LL ALL BE PART OF A LARGE AND EXPANDING CLOUD OF SUPER-HEATED SPACEDUST!
LAUNCH TORPEDOES! ONE APIECE AT EACH OF THOSE HULKS!
COLLISION ALERT! STAND BY FOR IMPACT!
DUAL PENETRATING HITS! DOUBLE DETONATION IN FIVE SECONDS.
FOUR..
THREE..
TWO..
ONE..

DETONATION!
SHADDA-KOOM!
ENEMY VESSELS CONFIRMED DESTROYED.
ALL CREW SECTIONS AWAITING FURTHER ORDERS.
RECALL THE STARHAWKS AND SEND REPAIR CREWS TO ALL DAMAGED DECKS. REASSIGN CREW UNITS FROM UNDAMAGED DECKS TO COVER OUR CASUALTY LOSSES, RESUME PATROL AND BRING US BACK ON TO OUR ORIGINAL HEADING.
AND SEND AN ASTROPATH MESSAGE TO GOTHIC COMMAND NOTIFYING THEM OF THE LOSS OF THE JUCHA AND THE THOTH AND OF THE LOCATION OF THE SPACEHULK GRAVEYARD.
EMPEROR KNOWS, NO PRIZE IS FREE -- BUT WHATEVER THEY FIND IN THERE, WE HAVE MORE THAN PAID FOR IN BLOOD TODAY...
THE END

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