

The book cover features a dark, blue-toned space scene. At the top, three faces are visible, looking forward with intense expressions. Below them, a large, complex spaceship is shown in a dynamic, angled position, emitting bright orange and yellow light trails and sparks, suggesting a high-speed maneuver or battle. The background is a deep blue space filled with stars and nebulae. The overall mood is one of epic sci-fi action.

WARHAMMER
40,000

STAR OF DAMOCLES

ANDY HOARE

Outnumbered, outgunned, thousands of
light years from home

A WARHAMMER 40,000 NOVEL

STAR OF DAMOCLES

Rogue Trader - 02

Andy Hoare

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 Emperors 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.

CHAPTER ONE

Lucian Gerrit, rogue trader and master of the heavy cruiser *Oceanid*, stood before the wide viewing port of his vessel's bridge, his arms crossed behind his back.

"Any minute now..." Lucian muttered, scanning the black vista. "Any minute."

Without warning, the low growl of labouring plasma drives rattled the deck plates and the bridge lights dimmed for just an instant, before flickering back to full power. Lucian grunted his satisfaction as a turquoise and jade orb swung into view across the viewing port, to settle in the dead centre as the *Oceanid*'s helmsman steadied the ship's course.

"Sy'l'Kell in range, sir. Closing as ordered," the helmsman called out, working the great levers and wheels that controlled the *Oceanid*'s bearing, speed and altitude.

"Thank you, Mister Raldi," replied Lucian, turning his back on the viewing port and striding across the bridge. "Continue as planned," he said, sitting down in the worn leather seat of his command throne.

With the press of a control stud on the arm of the throne, the area in front of Lucian was filled with a static laced, greenish projection. The holograph, a priceless example of nigh extinct technology, projected a three dimensional image into the air, a grainy, flickering representation of the space around the *Oceanid*. Lucian's vessel was at the centre of the image, and a shoal of other icons formed behind him, each representing another starship.

"Station three," Lucian called, addressing the half-man, half-machine servitor hard-wired into the communications console. "Open a channel to the *Nomad*."

In response to his order, the bridge address systems burst into angry life with white noise, before the servitor slowly nodded to indicate that the communications link was established with the other vessel.

"*Nomad*," said Lucian, "this is *Oceanid*. Do you read?"

"Aye, Lucian," came the reply over the address system. "This is Sarik, and I hear you loud and clear. Are you sure you're ready?"

Lucian chuckled out loud, refusing to be baited. "Yes, Sarik, I'm ready. Just don't bite off more than you can chew. Lucian out!"

As the communications servitor cut the link, Lucian grinned as he imagined the expression on Sarik's face. Sarik was a Space Marine, and Lucian did not doubt he would be outraged at having been spoken to in such a manner. But Sarik could take a joke, of that Lucian was sure.

"Sir?" Helmsman Raldi interrupted Lucian's chain of thought. "The *Nomad* is accelerating to attack speed. Match her?"

Lucian glanced out of the viewing port as his helmsman spoke, catching sight of a distant point of light speeding ahead. The *Nomad* was a frigate, far smaller than Lucian's heavy cruiser, but being a Space Marine vessel it was far more deadly than the average ship of her displacement.

"Well enough, helm. Offset by one-fifty as planned."

The speck of light that was the *Nomad* sped off towards the rapidly enlarging globe that filled a large portion of the viewing port. The planet was called Sy'l'Kell, but the vessels were not headed towards the world itself. Studying the holograph, Lucian saw that his vessel was still a good distance from its target. He scanned the other ships holding formation with his. The *Rosetta* sat at three kilometres astern, a rogue trader cruiser captained by his son, Korvane, and another two kilometres

further on, the cruiser *Fairlight*, commanded by his daughter, Brielle. He was gratified to see that both were exactly in position, for he had cause to keep a close eye on Brielle's actions, following her increasingly unpredictable behaviour of late. Dozens of other vessels were spread out across an area of space spanning fifty kilometres port and astern. Battle-cruisers, cruisers and escorts arrowed towards a single point in high orbit around Sy'l'Kell, while half a dozen smaller vessels, frigates of a class similar to the *Nomad*, formed up with Sarik's vessel, more Space Marine frigates, each carrying a deadly cargo of the Emperor's finest.

Lucian spared a thought for their target, but only a brief one.

"Comms," he called, "give me the *Rosetta*."

The bridge address system burst into life once more, the white noise even greater than before, the channel laced with a harsh, almost sub-sonic growl.

"Korvane?" Lucian called, "Korvane, do you read me?" The channel hissed and growled, before a voice cut in suddenly.

"...ference from the outer belt, attempting to compensate. I repeat. This is *Rosetta*. I read you, father, but the planet's outer rings are playing havoc with our transceivers and primary relays. Over."

"I read you, Korvane," Lucian replied. "I'm picking up the interference too, and I can only see it getting worse as we close on the target. We'll just need to let the Astartes carry out their mission and cover as best we can. *Oceanid* out."

Lucian glanced out of the viewing port once more, noting that Sy'l'Kell almost filled the armoured portal. Its glittering, icy rings scored the blackness of space, causing Lucian to wonder what manner of substance or reaction might be generating the interference they seemed to transmit across a wide area of the void.

"*Fairlight*," he said, the communications servitor at station three patching him through to his daughter's vessel at once. The channel opened, the interference bursting through the address systems before the *Oceanid*'s machine systems curtailed the signal.

"Duma's rancid left foot!" Lucian cursed. "If you can't invoke the buffers I might as well work the vox myself." The servitor nodded in mute response, incapable of taking offence at its master's scorn. Before Lucian could continue his invective however, another voice emerged from the howling comms channel.

"*Oceanid! Oceanid*, this is *Fairlight*. I repeat, do you read me, father?"

"Receiving, Brielle," replied Lucian. "Proceed as planned. No deviation. Do you understand?"

The comms channel howled its cold white noise for long moments, before the reply cut through, Brielle's tone as chilled as the interference plaguing the communications system. "Understood. *Fairlight* out."

Lucian sighed, but put aside his frustration at his daughter's continued obstinacy. He looked instead to the flickering holograph, the device, or more accurately, the sub-space sensor banks that fed it, evidently beginning to suffer from the same interference plaguing the communications systems. Amid the grainy, imprecise projection, he finally saw the target. Looking up, through the wide viewing port now entirely filled by the globe of Sy'l'Kell, Lucian could just make out a tiny, blue pinprick of light.

Lucian felt his pulse race as adrenaline flooded his system. These were the moments he lived for.

"Begin approach, my lord?" Helmsman Raldi enquired, Lucian noting the sardonic tone in the man's voice. Evidently, the master of the *Oceanid* was not the only man to enjoy the rush of ship-to-ship combat.

"Mister Raldi, you have the helm."

Lucian leaned back into the command throne as he felt the pitch of the *Oceanid*'s mighty plasma drives deepen. The bridge illumination switched to a bloody red, and the apocalyptic wail of the general quarters' klaxon sounded throughout the vessel. The tone of the ancient drives grew lower as their volume increased, and every surface of the bridge shook visibly as virtually immeasurable power was bled from the plasma core and squeezed through the engines.

Lucian smiled as he watched the holograph, the relative positions of the other vessels swinging wildly as Raldi brought the *Oceanid* into a stately turn to starboard. Only the *Nomad* was ahead of Lucian's vessel, the small frigate all but lost against the lurid glow of the planet's oceans far below.

"Shields up," Lucian ordered. "Frontal arc, minimal bleed."

Memories of his last space battle still only too fresh in his mind, Lucian determined not to take any risks against this foe. He looked at the holograph to check that the master of the *Nomad* had done likewise, when a curse from a sub-officer caused him to look up.

"What?" Lucian demanded of the man seated at the astrographics station.

"It's hard to tell with all the interference, my lord."

Lucian rose to his feet and crossed the bridge to loom over the man's shoulder. "Let me see."

Lucian stared at the man's console, reams of data scrolling across its banks of flickering screens. His mind raced as he tried to piece together exactly what he was seeing. Interference, certainly, and there was something else, but what?

"Station nine!" Lucian called. "Give me a near space reading, now."

The servitor stationed at the adjacent console nodded, machine nonsense squealing from the speaker grille crudely grafted into the flesh of its neck. The main pict-slate at the centre of its console lit up with a representation of the gravimetrics readings of the area of space around the *Oceanid*.

Once more, Lucian's mind raced as he attempted to assimilate the information presented on the screen. No wonder he needed so many servitors, he mused, dismissing the thought as his eyes fixed on an anomaly.

There, in the lee of the target, into which his vessel's active sensors could not reach, there was a ripple in the fabric of the void, a signature he had seen before.

"Sarik!" He bellowed, the servitor at the comms station opening the channel immediately.

Through the wail of interference, Sarik's voice came back over the bridge address system.

"Gerrit? Go ahead, but make it quick. I'm somewhat busy."

"Sarik, divert all power to your port shield, now."

"Are you...?"

"Do it!"

The communications channel went abruptly silent. Lucian held his breath, not realising he was doing so, before the holograph showed that the *Nomad* was rapidly bleeding power from its main drives while its shield was being raised. He let out his breath. He'd apologise later, he mused, if he got the chance.

An instant later, and the viewing port was filled with a great, blinding flash of purest white light. Having closed his eyes by reflex, it took a moment for Lucian's vision to clear. Nevertheless, flickering nerve lights rendered him almost blind.

"Report!" He bellowed, not caring who answered.

"Ultra-high velocity projectile, my lord. We've seen them before," Lucian's ordnance officer replied.

His vision clearing, Lucian looked to the holograph. The projectile had struck the *Nomad* amidships, half way down her port bow. Looking up, Lucian saw from where the projectile had been fired, as a long silhouette glided into view against the turquoise oceans of Sy'l Kell.

"I knew it," Lucian said. "I absolutely knew the camel toed bastards would try it on."

Exhilaration flooded through Lucian's body as he sat in his command throne once more, gripping the worn arms as generations of his forebears had done before him.

"Helm, twenty to port. Ordnance, prepare a broadside."

As the helmsman laboured at his wheel and levers, Lucian watched as the opening moves of the coming battle played out before him. The target, towards which the stricken Space Marine frigate still sped, was now visible. A mighty space station, shaped like some giant mushroom, blue lights twinkling up and down its stalk, wallowed at the centre of the viewing port, its bulk black against the lurid seas of the planet around which it orbited. A vessel emerged from behind that station; the same vessel that had come so close to destroying, in a single shot, a frigate of the White Scars Chapter of the Adeptus Astartes. Lucian's grin became a feral snarl and his eyes narrowed as the tau vessel cleared the station it had been hiding behind.

"Enemy vessel powering up for another shot at the *Nomad*, my lord," called the ordnance officer. "She's going for the kill shot, sir."

"That's what she thinks," replied Lucian. "Ordnance? Open fire!"

"But, sir," the ordnance officer sputtered, "I have no firing solution. We'll..."

"I said open fire damn you!" bellowed Lucian. "Do it, or so help me..."

Lucian was glad to see that the officer had the presence of mind to order the broadside before his master could complete, or indeed enact, his threat. The *Oceanid* shuddered as the port weapons batteries unleashed a fearsome barrage towards the tau vessel. Lacking a solid firing solution for the war spirits of the super-heavy munitions to follow, the majority of the shells went wide, their fuses detonating them at random across the space between the two ships.

No matter. If Lucian had meant to destroy the tau ship he would have waited, but had he done that, the *Nomad* would now be smeared across a hundred square kilometres of local space. The tau vessel aborted its shot against the Space Marine frigate, its blunt nose coming around to face the greater threat presented by the *Oceanid*.

"My thanks, Gerrit. I am in your debt." Sarik's voice came over the address system.

"You're welcome," replied Lucian. "Good hunting."

Now, he thought, I've got a tau vessel to take out before it rains everything. As the explosions cleared, the greasy black smoke left in their wake almost entirely obscured the other vessel. Lucian judged that the distance between the two ships would level at an impossibly close five hundred metres before they parted once more. Five hundred metres, he mused, remembering just how deadly another tau vessel had almost proved at such a close range in a previous engagement. There was too little time for an effective broadside, but he had other tricks up his sleeve that the tau had yet to see. Besides which, he thought, it doesn't pay to let the enemy get too used to one's tactics.

"Ordnance, I want a focused lance battery strike on the module aft of the central transverse," he said, indicating one of the many blocky, modular units the tau vessel appeared to be carrying slung beneath its long spine.

"Aye, sir," replied the ordnance officer, Lucian noting with satisfaction that the officer was plotting the lance strike against the exact point he had intended.

At seven hundred metres, Lucian could make out the details of the flanks of the tau vessel, though he could not fathom the meaning of the many symbols or icons applied to its surface.

"I have a solution, my lord," the officer said. "Fire pattern set."

Lucian knew that even now, the sweating crews in the lance batteries atop the *Oceanid* would be toiling at the traversing mechanisms of their turrets, cursing crew chiefs threatening them with eternal damnation should they falter in their work.

At six hundred metres, the drifting smoke and debris of the broadside cleared enough for Lucian to pick out the point against which he had ordered the lance strike. At five hundred and fifty metres, he saw it clearly, and so did the ordnance officer, who communicated a series of final adjustments to the turret crews. A horizontal line of clear blue light appeared at the centre of the module, gaining in

height as it was revealed to be an armoured blast door opening upwards. A row of armoured figures was framed against the blue light, the like of which Lucian had seen before, from a distance, the last time he had fought the tau.

“You have fire control, Mister Batista.”

“Thank you, sir,” replied the ordnance officer, adjusting his uniform jacket, straightening his back and clearing his throat.

“Now would be good,” added Lucian.

“Yes, my lord.” The officer depressed the control stud that passed the fire order to the lance turrets. An instant later the lance batteries spat a searing beam of condensed atomic fire at the tau vessel, parting the smoky clouds, spearing the open bay, vaporising the armoured figures, and passing clean out of the other side of the module, accompanied by a rapidly expanding cone of fire and debris.

“Target well struck, sir,” the ordnance officer reported.

“Well enough, Mister Batista,” Lucian replied. “Prepare for a second strike.” Lucian scanned the flanks of the enemy vessel as the range closed to five hundred metres, seeking further armoured bays from which the battle suits he had seen used before might deploy.

“Negative, my lord,” the officer replied, doubt obvious in his voice.

“Negative?” Lucian asked. “Report.”

“Something’s blocking the targeting mechanisms, overloading their machine spirits, my lord. I can’t...”

“The interference?” asked Lucian, theorising that the incessant interference flooding from the rings of Sy’l’Kell was somehow confounding the *Oceanid*’s targeting arrays.

“No sir, there’s something else.”

Damn these xenos to the Gideon Confluence, thought Lucian, at once irritated and impressed by the tau’s ingenuity. He crossed to the wide viewing port and looked out across the narrow span of smoky void between the two vessels. The ships were rapidly passing one another in opposite directions, the tau vessel veering to its port in a course that would take it away from the *Oceanid* and towards the station. Odd, thought Lucian. He had expected the enemy to close even further in order to make full use of the extra-vehicular armoured suits, as they had done against Korvane’s vessel in the last battle.

Even as Lucian watched, the wound punched in the tau ship by his lance strike slid past, almost filling the entire viewing port. He judged the hole to be at least twenty metres in diameter, and as it passed across the dead centre of the port, he was afforded a view right through the enemy vessel, to open space beyond. The *Nomad* passed across that space, the tau ship turning towards her.

Lucian realised why the enemy ship was seeking to disengage from his own: it was seeking to hold him off while it swung around on the smaller frigate. He drew breath to order a change in course, when another sight greeted his eyes. A shoal of miniscule white objects, each propelled by a small, blue jet, was swarming across the gap between the two ships. So these were the cause of the fire control failure, Lucian realised. They were some kind of decoy, each, judging by their movements, possessed of some manner of machine intelligence, their density and erratic course confounding any effort to get a target lock on their mother ship.

“I can’t get a solution at this range, my lord,” the ordnance officer reported. “Whatever those things are, each one has an etheric signature far in excess of its size. All together like that, at such close range...”

“Saint Katherine’s pasty arse,” Lucian cursed, causing the ordnance officer to blush and the helmsman to smirk. They’re after the *Nomad*, and if they get her this whole operation will have been a waste of time. Mister Raldi, bring us in hard on the orbital, I want every ounce of power through the mains, but be ready on the retros.”

As the helmsman nodded his understanding, Lucian ordered a comms channel to the *Nomad* to be opened.

“Sarik, do you read?”

Lucian glared out of the viewing port as he awaited the frigate’s reply. The tau vessel had passed from view, to reveal the tau orbital beyond, and in its shadow, the floundering Space Marine vessel. Fires raged across the *Nomad*’s port flank. Misty contrails snaking from her aft section betrayed a massive hull breach through which oxygen was bleeding uncontrollably.

An angry burst of static was followed by the distorted, barely audible voice of the Space Marine. “Aye Lucian, I read. We’re preparing for our run.”

“You won’t make it at this rate, Sarik,” Lucian replied, knowing full well that he was pushing the Space Marine’s bounds in speaking to him in such a manner, but continuing regardless. “That vessel has you in its sights, and in your state you can’t hold it off for long enough. Will you accept my aid?”

For a long moment, only hissing, popping static was audible over the communications channel. Lucian prayed that the Space Marine would put pride aside, just this once, and accept the aid of another. Then Sarik’s voice came back.

“You and I shall have words, Lucian Gerrit, when this is over. In the meantime, speak your plan.”

Lucian felt relief flood his system, but saw that he did not have the luxury of time. “We’ll be with you shortly, Sarik. In the meantime, I suggest you continue on your course on momentum only, and shunt all available power to your aft shields. Understood?”

“Understood,” came the reply, this time without delay. “*Nomad* out.”

“Well enough,” said Lucian, as he sat in his command throne and turned his attention to the holograph. He took in the relative positions of the remainder of the fleet. He was gratified to see that his children’s vessels had maintained formation with his own, keeping a distance as ordered, yet close enough to respond to any order he might issue. He was even more pleased when he saw that the other vessels, even further out, had yet to close in on the action. He smirked as he imagined the scenes on the decks of those ships, picturing the various captains raging in jealousy as they watched Lucian save the Space Marines’ bacon and take all the glory.

Steady, he thought to himself. The glory was not his yet, and he still had a Space Marine frigate to rescue, a tau cruiser to take care of, and a space station to capture. This would match the exploits of old Abad, if he could pull it off, Lucian mused. Abad had taken on a Reek voidswarm at the Battle of Ghallenburg, and single-handedly stemmed the tide of filthy xenos interface vessels as they made planetfall. Lucian would do likewise, he determined, and to hell with the others.

“Approaching orbital, my lord,” the helmsman reported, interrupting Lucian’s rumination. He looked to the holograph and saw that the alien space station lay three and a half thousand metres off the starboard bow. The tau vessel was completing a stately turn that would bring it directly behind the *Nomad*. It had yet to open fire, but Lucian judged that it would not be long.

“Trim mains, Mister Raldi. Hard to starboard, full burn all port retro banks.”

Lucian stared at the holograph as the helmsman carried out his orders, feeling the enormous gravitational forces exerting themselves on his ship as it changed course sharply. The banks of mighty retro thrusters mounted along the length of the port side coughed into life as power was cut from the main drives, the *Oceanid* entering a manoeuvre that would see her slingshot right around the alien space station.

Then, the ordnance officer called aloud, “Brace for enemy fire!” Klaxons echoed up and down the *Oceanid*’s companionways, warning the crew of incoming fire, but Lucian knew that his ship was unlikely to be the target, for the tau had a more choice prey in their sights.

Lucian closed his eyes against the bright discharge of the tau’s ultra-high velocity projectile weapon, his vision turning red for an instant, despite the fact that his eyes were closed tight. An

instant later the viewing port dimmed automatically, once again, its simple spirit too slow to respond to the flash.

“*Nomad* struck, my lord,” called out the ordnance officer. “The enemy fired her port weapon, sir. *Nomad*’s shields took the worst of it, but I think her projectors took some feedback. Second shot any moment...”

The tau vessel fired a second time, and Lucian was thankful that the viewing port was still dimmed. Despite this, he saw the tau space station etched in stark silhouette, for the *Oceanid* was now on its far side with the tau ship on the other. He looked to the ordnance officer, who read off his report.

“*Nomad* struck again, sir. Port weapon again. Her shields are almost gone. I don’t think she’ll survive a third shot.”

“Hm,” replied Lucian. He’d seen the damage Space Marine warships could take, and was prepared to gamble that the *Nomad* would hold together. He had no choice, for his vessel would not complete its manoeuvre for several more, long, potentially painful minutes. Why hadn’t the tau ship fired its prow-mounted weapon, he wondered?

As the *Oceanid* ploughed on, edging around the tau space station, Lucian’s eyes were glued to the holograph. He saw that the tau vessel was trying to overtake the *Nomad*. The enemy ship was seeking to line herself up with the limping Space Marine frigate, which was careening towards the space station by way of momentum alone, every last portion of energy devoted to maintaining its rapidly failing rear shields.

Lucian saw hope in the tau’s actions. If he could intercept their ship before they were lined up, he knew he would have them. If he could not, then all was lost, for the tau would have the perfect firing solution and the frigate would be doomed. Then the thought resurfaced: why hadn’t they used their prow-mounted projectile?

“They’re launching something,” reported the ordnance officer. “More of the decoys.”

Why were the tau launching decoys? Lucian’s mind filtered the possibilities, but he was interrupted before completing his chain of thought.

“In position, my lord,” reported the helmsman.

“Open fire, sir?” asked the ordnance officer.

“Hold, Mister Batista,” Lucian replied. “There’s something else going on.”

The *Oceanid* having completed its long arc around the tau space station, Lucian’s vessel was heading straight towards the prow of the enemy ship. Crossing to the viewing port and squinting to make out the enemy ship as the distance closed, Lucian yelped in elation.

“I congratulate you, Mister Batista!”

“Sir?” The ordnance officer replied, confusion writ large upon his features.

Lucian laughed out loud for the sheer joy of it. “Your untargeted broadside, Mister Batista. Evidently, something struck.”

As the *Oceanid* closed on the tau vessel, a great gash upon its blunt, armoured prow became clearly visible. The position, Lucian knew from prior experience against tau cruisers, of its forward weapon turret.

The question remained, Lucian mused, as to why the tau had launched the swarm of decoys, which was closing in on the *Nomad*’s drive section even as he watched. Then it came to him, and he bellowed for the communications channel to the Space Marine frigate to be opened one more.

“Sarik?” Only interference answered him, louder and more intense than ever. Lucian realised that the decoys, combined with the static coming from the rings of Sy’I’Kell, must be blocking the ship-to-ship channels entirely.

“Comms. Bleed all power from all available systems to near-space vox.”

Lucian watched as the swarm of tau decoys arrowed towards the vulnerable aft section of the *Nomad*. They can't fire on me, he told himself, not with their prow turret out of action, but running with no shields in the middle of a space battle was considered bad practice, even by his standards.

A flashing tell-tale informed Lucian that the near-space vox was receiving all the power it ever would. This had better work.

"Sank!" Lucian shouted, praying that his voice was being transmitted at full signal strength on all available frequencies. "Sarik, power up your main drives right now!"

An instant later Lucian saw that his transmission had got through. The *Nomad's* drives flared into life, crimson fire belching from them. The swarm of tau decoys was almost upon the *Nomad* when her drives spat into life, and they were incinerated in an instant, seared to ash and scattered into the void in a matter of seconds.

There, where the decoys had been clustered most densely, Lucian saw what he had guessed would be revealed: more of the tau armoured suits. Each was equipped with fusion weapons capable of ripping a crippled vessel to glowing pieces, and they had sought to approach the wounded frigate under the cover of the decoys. Now, the suits battled against the steadily increasing wash of the *Nomad's* drives. Armoured plating, the likes of which Lucian had rarely seen, kept them going, even though the unprotected decoys had lasted mere seconds. The fire of the frigate's drives was so bright that Lucian was barely able to see. Nevertheless he watched the bulking forms as they blackened, their metal skins melting and running off in great billowing streams of vaporised armour. He watched as each suit took on the aspect of a comet rapidly shedding its mass.

At last, the armoured suits were blasted to their constituent atoms as the *Nomad's* drives reached full output, the Space Marine frigate powering inexorably towards the space station, its ultimate target.

Lucian crossed his arms at the viewing port. "Shields up, forward weapons target enemy ship's bridge. Fire!"

The scene that greeted Lucian as he stepped out of the airlock onto the tau orbital was one of unrestrained slaughter. He saw that the station had been, before the coming of the Space Marines, a well-ordered place, well lit and spacious. Now, it was a bloody mess, the formerly white, gracefully curved bulkheads bloody and scorched. Having made their boarding action, Sarik's Space Marines had rampaged through the hasty and ultimately fruitless resistance mounted against them. The tau had put up a fight, retreating in the face of the Space Marines' righteous fury, falling back down the corridors of their station, firing their alien weapons from concealed ambush points for as long as they were able.

Lucian was shocked, not by the savagery of the fighting, but by the fact that the tau defenders had continued to fight in the face of such impossible odds. He was shocked that they had not surrendered, or attempted to flee in the lifeboats that the station must surely have been equipped with. The tau cruiser had surrendered once beaten, why hadn't they?

The corridor into which Lucian stepped bore grisly witness to the brief fight. Huge, smoking chunks were blown from the off-white walls of the curved companionway, and tau bodies were strewn across the deck. He stepped over the body of a tau warrior, sprawled face down before him, and then stopped to look upon the body of another. The second was propped against the corridor's wall, and though clearly dead, had not died instantly from its wounds. The loops of its guts had spilled over its legs, falling over the cradling arms that had attempted in vain to hold them in. A bolter shell fired at close range will have that effect, Lucian mused grimly, knowing full well that the explosive bolts fired by the Space Marines' weapons were lethal to any target of flesh and bone.

Lucian went down on one knee to look upon the dead warrior's face. The thought struck him that in his brief, ship-to-ship encounters with this new, previously unheard of race, he must have killed several thousand of their number, but until now he had not looked one in the eye. He had not

known just who, or what he was dealing with. Now he looked upon the face of his foe, bloodied and broken as it was.

The face was narrow and noseless, with a small, lipless mouth, and was dominated by large, black, almond-shaped eyes. The skin was a blue-grey, and there was a slit in the centre of the forehead, an organ for which Lucian could see no obvious function. The alien was not tall, its stocky body certainly no taller than that of a man of average height. Its body was arranged in the same manner as a man's though, apart from its feet, which appeared cloven, though his son Korvane, who had met the aliens in the living flesh, had informed him they were not hooves, but more like wide-splayed toes.

Looking around him at the other bodies, Lucian marvelled that the aliens could have even thought to fight against the superhuman Space Marines of Sarik's small force. Blood was spattered across every surface, severed limbs scattered all around. The remains of a tau that had been cut in two by a single upward stroke of a chainsword lay nearby, split from groin to crown, the two halves of the body lying several metres apart. Lucian had never failed to be impressed by the Space Marines' skills, and was always reminded how fortunate he was that they were on the same side as him.

Lucian looked up from the bloody rain as he heard footsteps approaching along the corridor. It was his son, Korvane, stepping gingerly across the headless corpse of a tau warrior. Lucian stood, a wide grin on his face, the scenes of death around him forgotten.

"Father," Korvane said formally. Lucian noted that he appeared cold and aloof, but put it down to a reaction to the unpleasant surroundings.

"Korvane, what news?"

"The council, father. Gurney has called a session, right here, on the station, immediately."

"Has he indeed?" replied Lucian, knowing that this news could only bode ill for him and his kin. "He's riled that we got here ahead of him I'll wager. Ha! This should be fun. Come on, we can't keep the good cardinal waiting now can we, son."

CHAPTER TWO

Sarik gritted his teeth as the drop-pod disengaged from its cradle, his gene enhanced physiology coping with the punishing forces set into motion as the world of Sy'l'Kell leapt violently upwards to meet him. Course correcting retro jets fired seconds later, slamming the Space Marine's armoured shoulder into the padded, upright acceleration/deceleration couch into which he was strapped. The tiny vessel, with its cargo of ten of humanity's finest warriors was underway.

Sarik knew that the drop would be over as soon as it began. He had completed thirty-eight full combat drops before attaining the rank of Brethren, and he had completed, and commanded, many times more since. The pod shook violently, and a mechanical chime sounded in Sarik's ear. He glanced across at the tactical data-slate. The drop-pod was entering the upper atmosphere, its armour absorbing unimaginable energies as it began the main portion of its descent.

"Phase beta. The Khan and His Father protect us." Sarik spoke the words of the Rite of Planetfall by rote, the other nine Space Marines echoing his words over the comm-net.

The White Scars were coming to Sy'l'Kell to bring death to the foes of the Emperor, and no alien that Sarik had ever fought could hope to stand against them.

"Your name, sir?" A very junior naval sub-officer demanded of Lucian, in the manner of a man revelling in unfamiliar authority. The officer stood at the end of the typically stark, white corridor, blocking a large round doorway stencilled with a square icon, the meaning of which was totally lost to Lucian.

Lucian halted as he approached, the officer barring his passage through the circular portal. "What?"

"Your name, sir," the officer faltered.

Lucian was in no mood to be challenged by officious flunkies. He drew himself up to his full height, savouring the opportunity to vent some spleen, when he was interrupted.

"This," he heard Korvane snap from over his shoulder, "is the Lord Arcadius Lucian Gerrit, Heritor of the Clan Arcadius, as well you know."

The officer stammered, his mouth opening and closing in a manner quite unbecoming his rank. Would he really be so stupid as to bar the rogue trader's passage? Lucian prepared to unleash a tirade of invective, but saw that it would not be necessary. The man stood aside, evidently cowed by Lucian's stern manner, or by Korvane's recitation of his credentials.

Lucian grunted and put the fool out of his mind. He resumed his passage down the curved, stark white corridor of the tau orbital station, the armoured door rolling into the wall in near silence as he approached it.

Beyond the round portal, Lucian could make out the huge hall that the crusade council had commandeered for its latest session. The circular chamber, its ceiling entirely illuminated and glowing white, was home to a round conference table capable of seating two dozen and more delegates in the high-backed, shell-like seats mounted around it. The far wall was one sweeping window, affording an impressive view of the purple landmasses and turquoise seas of the world around which the station orbited.

As curious and attentive as Lucian was to such matters, however, the primary focus of his attention were the figures filing in to the chamber from a dozen other portals. The crusade council

was made up of some of the most influential men on the Eastern Rim, each attended by a flock of scribes, servants and functionaries of indeterminate purpose.

Lucian stepped through the portal, unaccustomed to the stark white light illuminating the scene. The chamber, he was informed, had been the meeting place of the high council of the tau rulers of this place until mere hours before. A wide bloodstain smeared across the centre of the table attested to the fact that the station's previous owners had not relinquished it willingly. Lucian appreciated the theatrical conceit inherent in holding the council in such a place. He strongly suspected, in fact that whoever had decided upon doing so had ordered that the bloodstain remain in place, only to be washed away once its message had been well and truly imparted.

The drop-pod's assault ramps burst open on explosive bolts the instant the vessel struck the ground, its ten passengers disembarking with a clatter of armoured soles before its drives had even shut off. Sarik looked around, comparing the scene that greeted him with the tactical display overlaid on his vision by his helmet's systems.

"Squad!" he bellowed over the scream of more incoming drop pods. "To me!"

Sarik scanned the landing zone as his cohorts took up position around him. Each Space Marine was a giant, his enhanced physique far taller and broader than any normal man. Each wore a suit of all-enclosing armour, capable of withstanding the harshest of environments and of protecting him from the fiercest of enemy fire. That armour was painted the white with red trim of the White Scars Chapter of Space Marines, the wild, proud sons of Jaghatai Khan, children of the feral nomads of Chogoris, and one of the most celebrated and feared Chapters in the Imperium.

The scene before Sarik and his squad was one he had witnessed many times before. He gave silent thanks to the war spirit of the drop-pod for delivering them safely through the world's atmosphere, to this place in which he would serve the Emperor, and if called upon to do so, die in his service.

The landing zone was atop a high plateau, a flat expanse between two spurs of the world's largest mountain range. The air was cold and clean, and low clouds scudded across the contrail streaked sky. The ground underfoot was rough and uneven, strewn with loose boulders, but of no hindrance to a Space Marine. It had been selected for one reason and one reason only: it was the site of the world's alien government, the single organ that, if excised, would spell the immediate death of the entire body. The Space Marines were the Imperium's terror troops. Their mission was to strike at the very heart of the Imperium's enemies, to rip that still-beating heart out, without mercy or delay, and in so doing to slay the enemy utterly, that none might rise in his place ever again.

"Objective Primus, five hundred, fifteen east, moonrise. On me!" Sarik used the battle-cant of his Chapter, a series of clipped commands that his men understood without hesitation, but which any enemy able to intercept them would find entirely unintelligible. Sarik advanced, his men formed behind according to his orders. All eyes were fixed on their objective, a fortified building at the very edge of the plateau, melded into the nearest of the mountain peaks. Surface-to-orbit missiles streaked upwards from automated turrets atop the fort, while bright tracers spat incandescent death across the plateau. Sarik heard the ultra-high velocity rounds sing as they split the air nearby. He looked into the skies, to see more drop-pods descending upon columns of fire, retro thrusters screaming. Soon the squads of the Iron Hands and the other Chapters would join his own, but for now, he thought with a feral grin, the White Scars were at the very spear tip of the assault on Sy'I'Kell.

"Sons of Khan!" he bellowed, unashamed of the joy and pride audible in his voice. "Let us show our brothers how the White Scars fight!"

"I declare!" Lucian winced as the cardinal's booming voice filled the chamber, "Our mission here anointed by the Most Holy God Emperor of Mankind! The Damocles Gulf shall be crossed, the darkness pierced! So it has been decreed, and so it falls to us to enact!"

The Cardinal of Brimlock, Esau Gurney, had risen from his seat to pronounce the council in session. Lucian knew that he would proceed in such a manner for long minutes, declaring the benefaction of the Emperor upon the crusade's undertaking. He would make it abundantly clear, much to Lucian's chagrin, that it was through the cardinal's own authority that such benefactions were granted.

Lucian sighed inwardly and glanced around the table, the cardinal's words receding into the distance. He had heard the exact same speech on at least a dozen occasions now, Gurney's ranting tone growing more and more strident each time the council had sat.

The cardinal was placed directly across the huge, round table from Lucian, a flock of scribes and minor Ecclesiarchy officials clustered behind him. Those that were not engaged in recording their master's every word in spidery script across flowing parchment seemed intent upon producing a bank of cloying holy incense from wildly swinging burners. Such displays were not in Lucian's nature; he had been reared an Emperor fearing man, but placed little value in such ceremony. The Emperor, Lucian believed, helped those who helped themselves, ignoring those undeserving of his attentions.

To the cardinal's left sat a man for whom Lucian had far more respect. The hooded figure appeared capable of finding a shadowy space even below the direct lighting cast by the brightly illuminated ceiling above. This was Inquisitor Grand, an agent of the Ordo Xenos and no doubt the single most dangerous man in the entire crusade fleet. The inquisitor, for reasons Lucian had not yet determined, had chosen to ally himself with the cardinal. He preferred, it seemed to Lucian, to remain, literally, in the shadows. The man sat at council, casting his vote with the rest of the cardinal's faction, but rarely made any overt show of power. Such a man was to be watched closely, Lucian had determined, and watch him he most certainly would.

Looking to the inquisitor's left, Lucian exchanged a glance with General Wendall Gauge. A hard, battle-worn man from the death world of Catachan, Gauge had been appointed the commander-in-chief of the Imperial Guard regiments assigned to the crusade. Lucian considered him a sound choice, and had liked the taciturn old veteran the instant they had met, mere weeks after the pronouncement of the crusade. The General had until recently been serving as adjutant to the noted Lord Marshall Holt in his prosecution of the Wendigo Gulf rebellion, but had, he told Lucian, grown tired of the so-called "great man's" shadow. He had not expounded further, but upon hearing of the founding of the crusade, had exerted considerable influence to gain his rank.

Lucian saw in Gauge a potential ally on the council, through whom he might gain power over the cardinal and his faction, though he knew he had a long way to go before he could bring such power to bear.

His mind brought back to the cardinal, Lucian focused once more on the stream of oratory that Gurney was spewing across the table.

"To us falls the most holy task of eradicating these foul xenos beasts, of putting down the heresy of their existence. We who pledge allegiance..." The rant went on, Lucian deciding it was safe to ignore the man once more. He regarded the figure next to the general.

Admiral Jellaqua appeared to be in his early fifties, but must have been far older given his rank as commander of the Imperial Navy vessels assigned to the Damocles Gulf crusade. He was stout with a broad chest; a goatee beard and sly eyes his most striking features. Like the general, Lucian saw the admiral as a potential ally, one he would have to work hard to court, but a man whose aid would no doubt prove invaluable in the conflict to come, against the tau and the cardinal both. Jellaqua was a man who brooked no nonsense or affectation from any around him, whether subordinate or peer.

As the cardinal's address droned on, Lucian's glance passed to the empty seat to the admiral's left and his own right. It was the position in which Captain Rumann of the Iron Hands Space Marines would ordinarily have sat. Lucian had never before encountered the brethren of that chapter, though he knew them to be cold and methodical in their approach to war, and to bear an

unusual amount of cybernetic enhancement. Rumann was absent, leading the Space Marine forces as they assaulted the tau centres of power on the world below, fighting and no doubt shedding their blood even as the council sat and the cardinal ranted. The crusade force was fortunate to be attended by detachments from a number of Space Marine Chapters, and the captain of the Iron Hands had been elected by his peers to represent their interests on the crusade council, and was as such the most senior ranked Space Marine in the fleet. Rumann was a man the like of whom Lucian had seldom met. He was as aloof as any other Space Marine, but far colder and more distant than any Lucian had encountered. He really could not tell whether Rumann might prove a sturdy ally or a terrible enemy, or even whether the Space Marine had any awareness or concern of such matters. Lucian determined to pursue the matter further at the first opportunity.

To Lucian's left was an empty seat that belonged to the second Space Marine on the council, also absent, leading his forces in battle on the world below. Veteran Sergeant Sarik of the White Scars Chapter had been elected Rumann's second, and in Lucian's opinion provided the perfect counterpoint to the taciturn captain. In common with his kin, Sarik was hot-blooded and wild, yet surly and stubborn in the pursuit of victory. The White Scars hailed from the windswept steppes of the feral world of Chogoris. He preferred not to dwell on the savage beauty of that world, for it was the place that had given birth to his first wife, and the world upon which Brielle had been raised amongst the ruling classes of that race of noble savages. He cast the memory aside as quickly as it came to him, glancing instead to the next seat along.

Here sat the Magos Explorator Jaakho, a hooded figure whose face was almost entirely lost to a hissing cluster of pipes and cables, his eyes only barely visible as red-lit, cybernetic discs glowing from the depths of the explorer's hood. Jaakho was the fleet's most senior member of the Cult Mechanicus, the brotherhood of the Machine God, disciples and prophets of the innermost mysteries of technomancy and psience. It fell to the Magos to direct the crusade in its encounters with the technologies of the foe, to identify what might be exploited, and to combat that which must be resisted and destroyed. Lucian saw in Jaakho's position a potential ally, for the tech-priest's stance must surely be the opposite of the cardinals. Where Gurney preached that the tau and all their works must be ground to dust, reviled as unholy anathema, the Magos might look to exploit or to study new technologies discovered along the way. If such a possibility existed, Lucian determined that he would exploit it. Then he moved on, glancing to the next man at the table.

At Jaakho's left hand was Pator Sedicae, the most senior Navigator in the crusade, and the man ultimately responsible for the safety of the entire fleet. In common with many Navigators of his age and rank, Sedicae suffered from the genetic curse of his strain. The Navigators were a unique strand of humanity, gifted with the witch-sight that allowed them to see the ebb and flow of the tides of the warp, through which they guided their vessels, navigating by the ever-constant light of the Astronomican on distant Terra. As each grew older, and more powerful, he was afflicted with terrible mutations, often causing him to retire from public view and devote himself entirely to his task from the lonely sanctuary of his navigation blister. Sedicae was quite unique in Lucian's experience, for his curse had not caused him to retire, though some would prefer that it had. Sedicae's skin was disturbingly translucent, his blood vessels, muscles, bone and pulsing organs plainly visible. The effect was ghastly, but it in no way impeded the Navigator in his duties, and so he went about his business, sitting on the crusade council and representing the interests of the other Navigators serving the fleet where a compatriot of a like age might be rendered unable to do so by the extent of his mutation. Lucian found the man hard to read, no doubt, he mused, due to the rigorous defences the Navigator, by necessity, surrounded himself with when traversing the daemon haunted depths of the warp.

To Sedicae's left sat a man for whom Lucian had felt a deep, abiding dislike the instant they had been introduced at the outset of the crusade. Praefect Maximus Skissor of the Adeptus Terra was a tall, hawkish man, whose haughty nature had infuriated Lucian from the off. Skissor was tasked with the political governance of the crusade, of overseeing the installation of new planetary

governments, and of coordinating the crusade's efforts with the strategic concerns of the entire Ultima Segmentum. To Lucian, Skissor was a man promoted way above his abilities, due no doubt to some debt owed him by a compatriot, called in to buy him a seat on the council and to make his name along the way. Lucian had no problem with ambition, he welcomed it in the right sort of man, but here was ambition entirely divorced of potential, and Lucian had seen much death and destruction brought about by such a combination. He had already decided that when Skissor fell, for fall Lucian knew he would, he would not take any of the Arcadius with him. Lastly, to Gurney's right sat Logistician-General Stempf of the Departamento Munitorum. If Lucian disliked Praefect Maximus Skissor, he positively loathed Stempf. The task of organising the crusade's logistics, of ensuring its supplies of ammunition, fuel, foodstuffs and a thousand other items would never run out, fell to the logistician-general. He was, Lucian believed, the worst possible crossbreed of autocrat and accountant, politician and statistician, warmonger and profiteer. Lucian's dislike of such men was bred into his line since the time of Maxim Gerrit, the ancient ancestor upon whose legacy the entire Arcadius dynasty was built. Well, Lucian thought, old Maxim would turn in his icy grave at the thought of an Arcadius having dealings with such a man, and as such, Lucian would have nothing to do with the logistician-general. He suspected that the man would throw his lot in with the cardinal anyway, and had long since written him off as a source of support.

"...should pledge his unconditional support in this matter," Gurney was saying as Lucian turned his attention back to the cardinal's ranting. He became aware that an unusual silence had settled upon the council, and that each member was looking in Lucian's direction.

"You will, of course, support us in this matter?" said the cardinal, directly to Lucian.

His mind racing, Lucian cursed himself for a fool. He had let his mind wander whilst the cardinal ranted, and had missed some important point on which Gurney sought to entrap him. He heard a soft cough from behind him, and subtly turned his glance towards Kor-vane, who sat at one of the many seats arranged around the outer circumference of the chamber. With the slightest shake of his head, Lucian's son told him all he needed to know.

"I advise caution in this matter," said Lucian, fully aware how glib his answer must sound, but determined not to allow the cardinal to win any victory over him, no matter how minor.

"Caution?" retorted the cardinal, sitting himself down and exchanging a silent glance with the inquisitor at his side. "You would cast doubt upon the divine right of mankind to rule this region? You would suggest that these xenos filth enjoy a higher place in the holy order of existence than we do?"

So that was his game. Lucian saw then the point the cardinal was trying to push through the council.

"My dear cardinal," Lucian replied, warming to the confrontation now that he had the measure of his opponent. "I have travelled from one end of the Emperor's Domains to the other. I have travelled far beyond of the realm of the Imperium. Though I have encountered many and various civilised xenos races, I have yet to discover one that is not of more value to us alive than dead."

A murmur rippled around the table, some councillors evidently agreeing with Lucian's statement, others disagreeing and others still uttering noncommittal niceties. Within scant seconds, Lucian saw a new balance of power form, perhaps one that would ultimately shift the council in his favour. He saw that Jellaqua and Gauge agreed with his position; the tau should not be wiped out indiscriminately, but should be conquered for the benefit of the Imperium of Man.

Lucian's position on this matter was the product of his unique upbringing. As a rule, humanity was jealous of the galaxy's other races, for most were dire threats to the continued existence of the human race, and besides, felt that theirs was the right to rule the galaxy and not man's. Rogue traders, however, were unusual in that it was their duty to go out in to the dark places beyond human controlled space and to exploit what they encountered. In some cases this meant trading with alien races rather than destroying them outright. Rogue traders often held the view that not all xenos

should be exterminated on first contact, a view at odds with the teachings of the Imperial Creed, the dogma the cardinal held as sacrosanct.

“What use to let them live?” asked the cardinal, now addressing the entire council. “What use their continued existence? What might they teach us? What might they provide us?”

“I would suggest,” replied Lucian, also addressing the council as a whole, “that the best way to find out might be to ask one.”

Another ripple of comment passed around the table, this time more urgent in its tone. Lucian saw that Inquisitor Grand was looking right at him, his hooded face making his expression entirely unreadable, only his frowning mouth visible in the shadows.

“You are suggesting,” the cardinal replied, once more addressing Lucian directly, “that the pure form of Man should be sullied in body and soul by contact with a living, breathing alien?”

“If the crusade might benefit from doing so, and if the Emperor’s cause might be furthered, then yes,” said Lucian, looking the cardinal straight in the eye. “That is exactly what I am suggesting.”

“Ware the fore!” called Sarik, ducking behind an outcropping of rock, and resisting, barely, the urge to laugh out loud for the joy of battle coursing through his veins. A mighty explosion sounded a second later, the heat of the melta charge he had just planted evident even through his armour and from behind cover. He had led his squad across the cratered plateau, glorying in the fact that he had done so before the Iron Hands had even disembarked. Now, he would lead his brother Space Marines in an assault against the enemy bunker complex.

“With me!” shouted Sarik, rising from his position and striding into the smoke of the explosion. Through the enhanced vision granted him by the systems in his helmet, he saw that the armoured door had been reduced to glowing slag by the miniature nuclear charge he had placed against it, providing a way in to the tau command centre. Sarik’s squad would be the first into the bunker, the glory of victory would belong to the White Scars.

Sarik passed through the rained bunker entrance and slowed to allow his squad to catch up with him. He trained his bolter at the darkness before him, his suit’s systems detecting no life forms within the shadows.

He opened his mouth to issue the order to advance, when he heard a high-pitched whine pass mere centimetres from his head. He turned, catching sight of a blue flash illuminating the shadows further down the corridor. It was the unmistakable signature of a weapons discharge, Sarik was sure of that, but despite that, he had no clue as to what type of weapon was being fired.

“Squad!” he called. “Target ahead. Overwatch.”

Another whine passed dangerously close, but still the war spirit in Sarik’s armour could not identify the position of the firer. He ducked back, but too late, as a mighty impact struck the armour of his right shoulder. He stifled a curse as the reactive actuators compensated for the impact. He was not hurt, but still he could not locate his foe.

“By the Great Khan,” he swore, releasing the catches that secured his helmet. The air of Sy’l’Kell greeted him as he lifted the helm, the smell of cordite and smoke filling his nostrils. He strained his eyes to pick out his attacker, and was rewarded with a brief glimpse of movement amidst the smoke.

He raised his bolter and fired two shots the length of the corridor. Sparks flew where the bolts struck, followed an instant later by two muffled explosions as they detonated within their target. But where Sarik had expected to hear the wet thump of a body hitting the ground, he distinctly heard the crash of a solid object falling, followed by a small explosion.

Seizing the initiative before any more foes could zero in on his position, Sarik rose and charged down the corridor, knowing that his brethren would follow his lead. The smoke parted as he reached the end of the low, dark corridor, and Sarik saw that he had come to a junction at its end. Burning scrap was scattered across the floor, the remains of a flat, dome-shaped machine with twin weapons mounted beneath. Sarik saw instantly why his suit’s war spirit had been unable to detect an enemy.

“Squad, disengage target acquisition. Use your own senses, not those of your armour.” Several of the Space Marines removed their helmets as they took up position around their leader, while others spoke words of command that would render their armour’s targeting systems dormant until revived. “The enemy are using thinking machines to fight us, and they barely show up on autosenses.”

Such a thing was anathema to the White Scars, indeed, to all Space Marines. They were a warrior brotherhood, fighting and bleeding and dying together. To rely on a machine to do one’s fighting was a blasphemy against their warrior honour, as well as against the religious dogma of their Chapter.

Sarik kicked the sputtering remains of the tau fighting machine, contempt writ large across his face. “Brothers, we seek the tau leadership. I think they have need of a lesson in honour.”

“Which man here,” asked the cardinal, addressing the entire council, “would consort with xenos?”

Lucian looked around the table, noting that none of the council members would answer a question so obviously weighted to implicate any who did so. If the cardinal can play that game, then so can I, thought Lucian.

“Which man here,” Lucian asked in reply, “would throw away a chance to know more of his foe, that he might defeat him all the more decisively?”

At that, Lucian saw a number of heads nod in thoughtful agreement. Admiral Jellaqua and General Gauge were unashamed in their agreement, while other council members were more subtle and cautious, restricting their gestures to slight nods.

The cardinal saw this too, Lucian noticed, and evidently decided to change his tack.

“Gentlemen. I would point out that I could settle this matter entirely, and I would not need your permission or assent to do so.”

“Explain,” said the Magos Explorator Jaakho, the first time a council member other than the cardinal or Lucian had spoken up.

“By all means,” replied Gumey. “I could simply order the world below us virus bombed. Believe me, I would do so.”

“How?” replied the magos explorer, his voice mechanical and grating. “How do you come to have such devices?”

Though the tech-priest’s voice was almost emotionless, Lucian caught the edge to it. Little could cause excitement in a senior adept of the Machine God, for they surrendered much of themselves in their integration with the mechanisms of their calling, merging and becoming one with the great cogitation banks with which they communed. A virus bomb, an example of high technology proscribed by ancient decree and available only to the very highest of authorities was just the type of thing to gain a reaction from such as he.

Lucian saw the answer coming, and looked to the cardinal’s left, to Grand, as Gurney replied.

“There are those of the council who agree with my position,” stated the cardinal. Lucian saw that the inquisitor was looking right at him, the effect made quite disconcerting, because Grand’s eyes were still obscured in shadow.

“My lords,” Lucian addressed the council, let us not be drawn into rash, unilateral action. “Let us stand united in our efforts to prosecute the crusade, for is that not the task the High Lords have set us?”

He knew even as he spoke that he had made an enemy of the cardinal, and must work to draw the non-aligned members of the council to a new faction of his own creation.

“With me!” Sarik called, launching himself through the wreckage of the final armoured barrier between him and the inner command centre of the tau bunker. Even as the smoke cleared and his brothers crashed through behind him, he saw that he had reached the final phase of the mission.

Sarik and his brother Marines had fought through the winding corridors of the complex, facing and destroying more of the machine-warriors as they penetrated deeper. They burst into a massive chamber, its walls stark white and illuminated by the blue light of a thousand data screens. One such screen dominated the far wall, a massive projection plotting the course of the battle as it raged all around the plateau.

Silhouetted against that huge display, Sarik saw what he knew instantly was the alien he had come to kill, the head that when decapitated would spell the death of the entire body.

Attendants wearing oil-stained jump suits and bearing all manner of alien tools surrounded a mighty suit of armour far larger and more bulky than the armour worn by the White Scars. More accurately, Sarik saw, the figure did not wear the armour at all, but had climbed within it, to act not as a wearer but as a pilot.

Their task complete, the attendants stepped away from their leader. Relishing the thought of the upcoming duel, Sarik stepped forward, waving his brethren back as they went to follow. An unspoken understanding had, somehow, made itself apparent between the two leaders. Perhaps the tau did know of honour, Sarik thought, stowing his bolter and drawing his chainsword.

The tau commander drew himself to his full height, ignited his suit's jets and leapt to the floor before the Space Marine. Only ten metres separated the two warriors, affording Sarik a view of the weapons his adversary carried. He saw instantly that the tau was equipped for a ranged fight, apparently lacking any form of weapon that could be used in a melee.

"Man," the tau said to Sarik's surprise, "though we may be enemies, I am duty bound to offer to you our friendship. We need not fight, you and I. What say you?"

Though taken aback by his enemy's question, Sarik answered in the only way he could. "Tau, we are foemen. If you wish to surrender, that choice is yours."

The square device atop the tau's armour, which Sarik took to be some form of armoured sensor block, dipped, perhaps in sadness. "You misunderstand me, human," the tau replied. "I do not offer you my surrender. I offer you my friendship and that of all the tau. You must join us, or we must fight."

It took Sarik a moment to assimilate the alien's words, for no foe had ever asked him to surrender and to join him. Such a thing was utterly unthinkable, the very notion causing Sarik to bristle in anger.

"If you truly expect me to throw down my arms and join you, then you do not know honour after all," said Sarik, thumbing the activation stud on the grip of his chainsword and causing it to growl into angry life.

"I do not ask you to throw down your arms, for I, like you, am a warrior and know well what that would mean. I offer you common cause. If you join the Tau Empire then you may fight for a cause truly worthy of your life. Join the Tau Empire, and we might fight together, not against one another!"

"You insult me with words, xenos," spat Sarik by way of reply. "Enough with words. Now, we fight!"

"I move," Lucian addressed the council, "that we vote on this issue."

"And what motion would you table? asked Sedicae the Navigator, surprising Lucian and, it appeared, the rest of the council by choosing to speak up at this time.

"I ask that the council moves to delay any use of the cardinal's ultimate sanction," Lucian replied, aware that the cardinal seethed with anger as he did so, "until such time as the situation on the ground is fully resolved."

"What right have you to naysay me, rogue trader?" growled the cardinal, his tone dangerous and his bearded face scowling.

“It is my right as a member of this council, should another member second me,” replied Lucian, knowing full well the gamble he was initiating.

The council knew the gamble too, so it seemed, for a tense silence settled on the chamber as each councillor considered his position. Lucian had taken a huge risk in calling for a vote, for should no other councillor second the call, then he would be humiliated, entirely isolated and devoid of power or influence. Furthermore, the councillor that seconded his call would be setting himself up against the cardinal as surely as Lucian had. A successful councillor might gain unimagined power, but a defeated one might be lucky to come out alive, so brutal could the power play become.

“I will second the Lord Arcadius’ call.” Lucian let out a silent breath of relief, seeing that it was Admiral Jellaqua that had spoken up. “If for no other reason than to settle this issue and move on to more pressing matters.”

Lucian nodded his thanks to the admiral, before addressing the council. “I call then for a vote, on the issue of the enactment of the ultimate sanction against the taking of enemy prisoners. Gentlemen, please cast your votes.”

Lucian smiled to himself, pleased that he had worked the issue of taking prisoners into consideration, setting it up as the natural opposite of the cardinal’s stance. And in his mind, it was, for if the cardinal convinced Grand to virus bomb Sy’l’Kell, then the taking of prisoners would be a moot point, and the crusade would be throwing away potentially vital intelligence.

The council’s etiquette stated that the member nominated as chairman for the session should vote first, the voting passing around the table clockwise. The cardinal was the chairman. “I vote against the motion,” he growled.

“As do I,” stated Inquisitor Grand, his voice dry and sinister, little more than a whisper emanating from the depths of his hood, but plainly audible.

“I vote,” said General Wendall Gauge in his no-nonsense, gravel voice, “for the motion. Arcadius has the truth of it.”

Lucian nodded his thanks to the general, and looked to the next man along.

“I hardly need to do so,” said Admiral Jellaqua, “or I would not have seconded the call to vote, but I too vote in favour of Gerrit’s motion. In war, one must marshal one’s resources and know what weapon to use when. I believe it wise to capture and interrogate an enemy. It is not ‘consorting with xenos’, it is common sense.”

Lucian savoured the outrage the cardinal fought so hard and unsuccessfully to contain, but knew better than to celebrate just yet.

The seat to the admiral’s left, belonging to Captain Rumann of the Iron Hands Chapter, was unoccupied, the Space Marine being otherwise engaged with his role in the planetary assault in progress below. That meant that Lucian was the next in line to vote. He said simply, “I vote in favour.”

To Lucian’s left was the empty seat belonging to Sergeant Sarik of the White Scars. It was a shame the Space Marine was absent, Lucian thought, for he suspected Sarik might have voted against the use of the virus bomb, even if he would have no great desire to interrogate prisoners.

The next councillor along was Jaakho, the Magos Explorator. Lucian counted two votes against his motion so far, and three for. He had no idea how the Magos might vote. A long silence preceded Jaakho’s answer, punctuated by the slow wheeze of his augmetic systems and the rattle of the many pipes and cables draped from the facemask hidden beneath his red hood.

“I must,” the Magos stated at length, “abstain from this vote.”

Lucian waited for some explanation from the tech-priest, but soon realised that none would be forthcoming. Jaakho’s reasons for voting for or against any of the council’s actions appeared to be couched in an entirely unreadable logic, one that Lucian believed was divorced from the reality in which he lived.

The next councillor to vote would be the Navigator, Pator Sedicae. As with Jaakho before, Lucian could not predict how the Navigator might vote, for he appeared to judge matters entirely by

the unknowable concerns of his kin. The Navigators, as with the Techno Magi, moved in their own circles, and their ways were frequently alien and arcane to other men. The thought occurred to Lucian that Sedicae might feel the same about the circles in which rogue traders moved, so perhaps there was some possibility of finding common ground and of working towards an alliance.

The Navigator visibly gathered his thoughts, before casting his vote. "On behalf of the Navis Nobilite," he said, referring to all of the Navigator Houses, of which he was the head of just one, "I too must abstain."

Lucian was not entirely surprised to hear the Navigator's vote, though he could not help but feel mildly disappointed. He looked at the two remaining councillors yet to cast their votes, cold doubt rising within him.

Praefect Maximus Skissor stood to deliver his vote, Lucian's view of the man plummeting even further. Skissor cleared his throat as he straightened his robes, before raising an ancient data-slate and lifting a tattered feather quill to its surface.

"I, Praefect Maximus to the Damocles Gulf Crusade, do hereby exercise the right and responsibility entrusted to me." Skissor allowed a pregnant pause to drag on, apparently blind to the hostile glances that various councillors, not least among them Lucian, were casting his way.

"I choose to abstain."

Lucian felt a cold sweat appear at his brow, but refused to let his discomfort show.

"I believe," the Praefect continued, "that to actively seek out tau prisoners to interrogate would be to create a line of communication between the aliens and ourselves. This I believe to be tantamount to recognising their empire and its right to exist. The purpose of this crusade is to challenge the tau, not to talk to them. Having said that, I believe it is my duty to consider how the tau might be of use to us, and I believe that to exterminate them would be to throw away what advantage we might gain by doing so."

Lucian resisted the urge to rise to his feet and berate the councillor. Did he really believe his own nonsense? No, Lucian realised, that little speech was intended to bolster the Praefect's position, no matter how it sounded to the remainder of the council.

Looking across at the last councillor still to cast his vote, Lucian realised that he had, in all likelihood, lost this battle. The cardinal sat at the head of his faction, which included Inquisitor Grand, and, Lucian was sure, the logistician-general, even though Stempf had yet to cast his vote. Lucian could count on Jellaqua and Gauge, but with the abstentions and absences, it looked like that would not prove sufficient.

It was no surprise to Lucian then when the logistician-general cast his vote against the motion, putting the result at three for, three against and four abstentions; not enough to carry the vote.

Hot pain flared across Sarik's chest as high-velocity impacts cratered and buckled his power armour. The alien spoke no more, but would fight, that much was clear. Sarik offered a brief but heartfelt thanks to the Emperor that the ceramite armour was proof against the alien weaponry, for now at least.

Wasting no more time, Sarik launched himself at his foe, seeking to get within the tau's guard, from where the alien's weapons would be useless and his own lethal.

Before he could close on the tau, however, Sarik's enemy launched himself into the air upon flaring blue jets, leaping clear of the screaming chainsword blade as it sliced through the space he had just vacated. Sarik cursed, and rose to his full height, reaching up and grabbing hold of one metallic foot of the battlesuit. The tau's upward motion was arrested as the Space Marine attempted to pull the suit back down to the floor. In response, the alien pilot increased the power to the jets, searing blue flames scorching Sarik's left arm and shoulder pad, the white paint peeling off and the metal skin below beginning to blister.

Sarik cursed as his flowing black hair set alight, forcing his right arm up against the jet wash, seeking to use the chainsword against his foe.

The tau, seeing his peril, twisted around in an attempt to use the downdraught created by the powerful jets to topple the Space Marine. But Sarik's power armour lent him superhuman strength, and he resisted the fierce blast even as his hair burned. He raised the chainsword and thrust it screaming into the battle-suit's primary thrusters, causing a spectacular chain reaction within the propulsion unit even as the blade melted and fused, its screeching gears jamming entirely.

Sarik threw himself clear as the battlesuit was engulfed in a series of small explosions, the pilot attempting to draw a bead on the Space Marine even as his suit disintegrated, blue bolts streaming from the rapidly spinning barrels of the suit's primary weapon system.

Drawing himself to his feet and shaking his face clear of his smouldering hair, Sarik could see that he had won. The battlesuit toppled backwards and fell with an almighty crash. The Space Marine watched in mute fascination as a series of tiny discharges popped the suit's front plates clear and a figure rose from the flaming wreckage and staggered clear, flames licking around its torso, to fall on its face at Sarik's feet.

Sarik grinned as the tau commander raised his blackened face and looked up at him.

"Surrender accepted," Sarik said, "you fought with honour."

"It falls to me," said the cardinal, addressing the council, "to declare the result of the vote."

Gurney's face was a mask of triumph, the cardinal evidently keen to consolidate the power he felt had come to him thanks to the result of the vote. Lucian looked away, unwilling to acknowledge that his gamble had failed. In so doing, he caught sight of his son, who indicated with a tap of his data-slate that Lucian should look to the console placed in the centre of the table.

A flashing light told Lucian that a priority transmission was incoming from the planet's surface.

"Wait!" Lucian called, standing and reaching across the table to activate the console.

"What is this, Gerrit?" demanded the cardinal. "The vote is defeated. You are defeated."

Lucian smiled as he pressed the control stud on the console. Three large pict-slates rose up, cables and purity seals snaking after them. The screens flickered to life, and a familiar face appeared for all the council to see.

"I repeat," said Sarik, his face visible on the screen through banks of drifting smoke, "this is Sarik to the crusade council, do you receive?"

"We receive you Sarik," replied Lucian, the attention of every councillor glued to the screens. "How do you fare?"

Sarik's face grinned, a feral glow evident in his eyes. "We fare well, Gerrit. I have to report that the primary objective is secured. The enemy leadership is suppressed, and the world will soon be ours."

A round of approval swept the council, but Lucian guessed there was more to come.

"I would also report," continued Sarik, "that I have captured the enemy commander. I recommend his immediate transferral to the fleet. I'm sure he will be of use to us."

"I think," said Lucian, turning his back towards the cardinal and addressing the council at large, "that makes it four votes in favour, three against and four abstentions. The vote, by my calculation, is cast."

CHAPTER THREE

The airlock door opened with an explosive hydraulic hiss. Brielle stepped through to the tau orbital, the first time she had left her vessel, the *Fairlight*, for many long months. She halted, taking in her surroundings, savouring the novelty after so long aboard ship.

The docking hub's inner ring was a wide area, its every surface from its deck to the high ceiling a brilliant white, unsullied except where long, crimson smears indicated that a fallen body had been dragged away. In all likelihood, an alien body, Brielle knew, for she had read the reports of the boarding action that had captured the orbital with such brutal efficiency.

Replaying in her head the account of the action, she set out along the lonely, deserted corridors. The White Scars, thanks to her father's intervention, had closed on the orbital in their wounded frigate *Nomad*, and had launched themselves in a boarding torpedo at the orbital's main docking station. The torpedo had breached the orbital's armoured skin, disgorging its contents of just a single Space Marine squad. That squad, led by veteran sergeant Sarik, had initially encountered few defenders, leading the crusade council to assume that the aliens had abandoned the station in the face of the Imperium's overwhelming attack.

As the White Scars had advanced further, they had encountered opposition, armoured and well-equipped tau warriors waiting in ambush at key defensive points. These would open fire before falling back to the next, prepared position, initially wounding three of Sarik's men, though none were put out of the fight permanently. Brielle could see the evidence of the accounts as she passed a junction between major companionways, the site, she saw clearly, of one of the tau defenders' early ambushes. The wall before her was pockmarked with a line of small craters. Each was surrounded by a dirty halo where a round fired from a Space Marine's bolter had entered the wall and exploded an instant later. The weapon was intended for use against lightly armoured enemies of flesh and blood, upon which the effect of the exploding bolt was quite lethal. A wide, red stain across the corridor's deck bore witness to just how potent the weapon was, testament to the price the tau had paid in discovering that fact.

Brielle walked right through the dried blood, a faint sense of revulsion welling up in her as the soles of her boots stuck ever so slightly as she passed. She forced herself to ignore the sensation, knowing she would see a lot more death, and from much closer quarters before this so-called crusade was done.

Passing a work crew of junior tech adepts engaged upon the installation of new, Imperium standard, phasic power transfer coils, Brielle considered just what her role in the crusade might turn out to be, and how she might prosper from it, so long as she could survive it. Her father, upon dealing with the renegade planetary governors of Mundus Chasmata and Arrikis Epsilon, had decided that the rogue traders should remain in the Timbra subsector. He had seen the opportunity to take part in the gathering Damocles Gulf Crusade, to revive some age-old family traditions and generally profit from the great undertaking as it got underway. All had gone well, Brielle mused, until the crusade had caught up with the rogue traders at the twin colonies of Garrus and Kliest, evacuated by small tau forces before the fleet proper could arrive and see them off by force.

The rogue traders had been introduced to the key members of the crusade council at those colonies. Its head, by way of influence rather than title, was the bombastic Cardinal Gurney, and ever lurking in the shadows nearby was his ally, Inquisitor Grand of the Ordo Xenos. The cardinal had held the crusade's reins, and had launched a series of courts of assize, putting to death hundreds

of the liberated colonists whom he had accused of welcoming the recently departed aliens with open arms. The scenes of torture and execution had been etched into Brielle's memory, her hatred for the likes of the cardinal multiplying a thousandfold that day.

Then, she had heard of the assault on the world below. The tau presence on Sy'l'Kell was small, and like the defenders posted to slow the Space Marines' boarding action, were limited to warriors. The council had determined that the tau had evacuated all of their non-combatant personnel at the first sign of an attack. The cardinal's faction had declared this to be evidence of the aliens' inferiority to mankind, for whom every last man, woman and child was a combatant in the war against the xenos.

Brielle had watched the orbital assault as it had unfolded, for the Space Marines allowed a portion of their signals to be routed to the crusade's command network. She had listened as the blustering Sarik had led his squad in the attack on the tau command bunker, noting how the Space Marine sought to cover himself in the glory of victory, at the expense of his brothers of the other Chapters that had contributed squads to the crusade. She had been brought up around men like Sarik, and regarded them as little more than strutting wilde-dons, determined to prove their dominance over the lower ranked males of the herd.

When Sarik had reported over the command net that he had neutralised the tau bunker, Brielle had felt a stab of distain. When he had boasted that he had captured the alien leader, she had determined to meet this tau, or to look upon him as he was executed at the very least.

Approaching the last junction before the area of the station in which the tau prisoners were being held, Brielle felt a chill run down her spine. She came to an abrupt halt, hearing lowered, conspiratorial voices from around the corner as she did so. Even as she strained to make out the words, the voices stopped in mid sentence. Brielle held her breath for a moment, not really knowing why, her pulse thundering in her ears. Then she broke the spell, and stepped around the corner.

Standing as if interrupted in the midst of treason, Cardinal Gumei and Inquisitor Grand both looked up at her approach. She saw surprise writ across the face of the cardinal, but the inquisitor, from beneath his deep, shadowed hood, appeared to Brielle to have been expecting her. She floundered for words, but the inquisitor addressed her first.

"My lady," Grand said, nodding as he did so, his voice, as ever, scarcely more than a grating whisper. "What, may I ask, might concern you in a place such as this?" The inquisitor made an expansive gesture with both arms as he spoke. Brielle knew that he referred not to the station as a whole, but to this specific section of it, the section in which the tau prisoners were to be held, to be questioned and, she had little doubt, to be put to death.

"I have come..." Brielle said, her mind racing to justify her presence when she could not entirely explain her reasons for coming, even to herself. "...I have come to look upon the face of our foe, to watch as he dies." She knew the words were lies even as she spoke them, but hoped it was the sort of statement that the cardinal and the inquisitor might appreciate.

"Indeed?" said the inquisitor. Brielle caught a glimpse of slitted eyes beneath the hood. "You, unlike your father, would see these aliens die?"

"I would see them die, my lord," Brielle replied, aware of the annoyance evident in her voice at the mention of her father.

"Good!" interrupted the cardinal, stepping forward to stand before Brielle, his arms reaching out to grasp her shoulders. "Perhaps, my child, there is hope for you yet."

Brielle resisted the urge to squirm at the cardinal's touch, standing defiant as she caught another glimpse of those eyes beneath the inquisitor's hood. She felt somehow... unclean in his presence. What is he, she wondered?

"I am an inquisitor of the Ordo Xenos," Grand said, "and as such it is my duty to persecute the xenos wherever it may be found. My lady, if you too would serve your Emperor in this manner, come and look upon the face of our enemy."

Brielle stood frozen as the inquisitor turned, hauling open the armoured portal before which he and the cardinal had been standing when she had come upon them. Crimson light washed from the opening, its hue obviously at odds with the brilliant white and pale jade given out by *the* station's own illuminations. She knew that the light told of some human wickedness, though she had no idea what machinations of torture the inquisitor might have concocted.

Brielle watched from the shadows of the darkened interrogation chamber, intent upon the scene unfolding before her. She felt a thrill of tension, combined with the queasiness of apprehension at what she might be forced to witness. She had put aside her musings on just what had drawn her to this place; she would find out soon enough.

Brielle found herself in a low, wide chamber, its tau manufacture usurped by arrays of devices of human crafting. Tall banks had been placed against the walls, glass dials and rapidly blinking lights adorning their surfaces. Fat cables, some pulsing with obscene motions, writhed across the floors and connected the machines, paper seals, secured with holy wax, fluttering from each. Such machinery would soon become a common sight across the tau station, now that it was in the hands of the crusade forces, turning the orbital entirely to the function of serving the Imperium's mighty war machine.

A ring of tall, floor standing lighting rigs stood at the centre of the chamber, each casting its hellish red glow inwards. Brielle could just make out the shuffling figures of Mechanicus attendants within the ring, each making miniscule adjustments to the controls mounted on a further array of machinery. An empty surgical chair stood in the midst of the scene, mighty iron bands mounted where they might secure ankles, wrists and neck. Behind the chair a senior tech-adept tinkered with a device that resembled a crown of incredibly fine needles, each tipped with a tiny point of red glowing light.

Brielle saw clearly that the chair and its associated paraphernalia would be used to extract a confession from a tau prisoner. Sermons she had heard as a child returned to her, reminding her that the xenos must be shown no mercy, it must be sought out and ruthlessly crushed, lest its loathsome presence taint the very soil of the galaxy's worlds, worlds reserved for mankind by manifest destiny and the blood of the martyrs. Yet, her life as a rogue trader had taught her that such doctrines did not apply to all. Furthermore, at Mundus Chasmata she had caught a glimpse of something more, something offered not by conflict with alien races, but by contact. She had caught a glimpse, and desired to see more.

The heavy thud of an armoured portal swinging open caused Brielle to turn her attention to the centre of the chamber. Emerging from the shadows and into the red light stepped two bulkily armoured, helmeted figures. Each held a long staff, the wicked claw at the end of each shaft securely clamped around the neck of the tau prisoner.

Brielle pushed herself back against the wall, raising herself on her toes and craning her neck to gain a clear view through the jumble of machinery. Then she caught herself and shrank back into the ill-lit corner, not wishing to draw attention to herself, though she had the blessing of the cardinal and the inquisitor to view the proceedings.

Despite the clutter surrounding the scene, Brielle was afforded a clear view of the prisoner, the first tau she had seen in the flesh. He was tall, his limbs spindly and fragile in appearance, his neck forced sharply upwards by the mancatchers held by the guards. Brielle noted that the tau was indeed male, and naked, his blue-grey skin cast in a sickly hue by the red illumination. Despite the indignity of his treatment, Brielle noted that the prisoner bore himself with a degree of pride, not having been reduced to the snivelling creatures even many human convicts would be reduced to in such a position.

The guards shoved their prisoner forwards with a cruel jerk, manoeuvring him to a standing position before the chair, his back facing it. Then they yanked back on the mancatchers, forcing the

alien down so that he was lying on the chair. The instant his limbs touched the device, the iron bands snapped shut with a vicious clang, securing him firmly against all hope of escape.

The mancatchers disengaged from the prisoner's neck with a metallic rasp, and the guards brought their weapons to their sides in parade ground fashion. The two armoured figures then turned and stomped off into the shadows, where Brielle assumed they took up guarding positions, though she could not make them out from where she stood.

Silence settled over the chamber. Brielle became aware of a stark, somehow acidic tension building in the air. Seconds dragged into minutes, the Mechanicus attendants shuffling around the prostrate alien, making unseen adjustments and mumbling prayers to appease the machine spirits. She watched as the prisoner's chest rose and fell, a fine sheen of sweat appearing beneath the heat of the lights.

Then, Inquisitor Grand emerged from the shadows, into the harsh red light. He wore his customary black hood and robes, but Brielle could see that he wore some manner of glove, long needles and fine, silvery wires protruding from his robes.

As the inquisitor approached the tau, Brielle saw that the prisoner too had caught sight of Grand. The tau's breathing increased as he strove to turn his head to look upon the inquisitor. Grand took up his position immediately behind the prisoner, and rested his hands on the device mounted over the tau's head.

"If the choice were mine," whispered the inquisitor, his voice plainly audible despite its low tone, "I would incinerate every last one of you. I would reduce you to ashes, and scour clean those worlds you have sullied with your filthy tread."

The breath caught in Brielle's throat at the inquisitor's words, their sheer vehemence making her profoundly grateful that they were not directed at her.

"But, it has been decided that you may be of more use to mankind alive, for a time at least. Although I have the authority and the right to order you and all your kind destroyed," said the inquisitor looking away from the prisoner and, it felt to Brielle, turning his head in her direction, "I am willing to accede to the will of the whole, for a time at least."

Brielle looked at the prisoner's face, to see what his reaction to the inquisitor's words might be. It occurred to her that the tau, in all likelihood could not understand Grand's words. She knew that some amongst the aliens had learned to communicate in passable Gothic, gleaned from the many systems throughout the entire region that they had infiltrated, but she had no inkling how widespread this had become. The tau's face betrayed no specific understanding of Grand's statement, beyond an evident appreciation of the inherent malice.

As if in answer to Brielle's musings, the inquisitor drew himself up to his full height. He lifted his hands and placed them on either side of the apparatus behind the tau's head, lowering the crown of needles and probes. The wires writhing at Grand's wrists snaked out of his voluminous sleeves, each linking up, and melding to a tiny port on the device.

Brielle realised that the inquisitor meant to undertake something other than a verbal interrogation.

The rise and fall of the prisoner's chest became faster and shallower, yet he closed his eyes as if in noble resignation of his fate. Brielle felt a prickling sensation crawl over her skin, realising that the feeling was more than one of simple unease at the scene unfolding before her. Her skin itched, and it took a supreme effort to resist the urge to scratch it with raking nails. She forced her attention onto the centre of the chamber, seeing that the inquisitor's hands were clamped around the prisoner's forehead, a halo of writhing, hair-thin wires joining human and tau in some cruel, blasphemous union.

Brielle watched as Inquisitor Grand used some form of witchery. He was tearing into the prisoner's psyche, using the wires to bridge the gulf between human and xenos. She felt revulsion well up within her; she felt unclean. She felt spiritually soiled by the psychic taint radiating from the

scene before her. She felt literally revolted, as if she had not washed in a month, as if her skin, her organs were contagious, and to wear her own body was to wallow in corruption.

Brielle caught herself, shaking free of the sensation with a supreme effort of will. She leant against the wall behind her, realising that she was reacting to the inquisitor's use of his powers. She took a deep breath and gathered herself, before walking from the chamber in as controlled a manner as she could manage.

Ever-increasing waves of actinic corruption snapped at her heels as she walked through the chamber's armoured portal, the prisoner's alien screams echoing behind her before being abruptly cut off as the door rolled shut at her passing.

Having left the interrogation chamber, Brielle paced back and forth in the brightly lit, sparsely appointed atrium. She could not physically be in the room, sharing the space with the inquisitor as he went about his terrible business. Yet she feared the impression her leaving might create, and so she impatiently awaited the end of Grand's bloody interrogation. All the while, she was able to hear the prisoner's screaming, faint and muffled by the heavy armour of the chamber's entrance. Worse still, she could feel the psychic backwash of the inquisitor's probing, though thankfully the effect was but a shadow of what she had experienced within.

After an hour or more had passed, the portal rolled open with a heavy grinding, the deep red, infernal light washing through. Standing in the portal was the cardinal. He beckoned her to follow with a silent gesture.

Stepping across the chamber's threshold once more, Brielle was greeted with the overpowering stench of burned meat. As revolting as the odour was, more disturbing was the realisation that the taint was also spiritual, a stain upon the soul and upon the ether that would remain within the chamber even were it scoured with the cleansing flames of holy promethium.

"Be not shy, child," the cardinal said as he turned to address Brielle, his voice low and threatening. "We do the Emperor's work."

"But you wanted them all dead," she blurted, unable to comprehend why the cardinal and the inquisitor had interrogated the suspect when, by all accounts, they had opposed doing so in the recent council session.

"Oh, I do," the cardinal replied, a twitching grin touching the corner of his mouth, "I very much do, but the council has decided that we should know our foe, and so we shall." With a slow flourish of his right arm, the cardinal stepped to one side to afford Brielle a view of the centre of the chamber.

She looked to the surgical chair, gave an involuntary gasp and spun around, her hand shooting up to cover her mouth. What she had seen upon, and scattered around, the chair filled her with utter horror.

"I understand," the cardinal said from behind her. "The xenos is a filthy creature, its form so different from the consecrated body of Man."

She caught her breath as the cardinal spoke, feeling her heart beat return to something approaching a normal rate. She turned to face him, but pointedly avoided looking towards the chamber's centre.

"I thought..."

"Speak child, for you are among friends."

"I thought," she continued, "you were going to question him." She felt foolish even as she spoke, but went on regardless. "Why did you..."

"Kill it?" the cardinal asked, his voice loud. "The xenos has no right to live in the galaxy. The stars belong to mankind. The council would have us question the prisoner, and so we did. Once questioned, it was disposed of, as is only fitting."

Brielle felt cold dread at the cardinal's words, not that he should act in so callous a fashion, for such deeds were the price of humanity's survival in a galaxy of a million threats.

No, she was filled with the notion that here was a man who would manipulate the entire crusade to achieve his own ends, and it mattered not a bit who suffered along the way. She saw in her mind's eye the course the crusade would take if the cardinal were to become the dominant figure on the council. The entire region, the Damocles Gulf and beyond would be reduced to ashes. None would survive to profit, whether from conquest or conflict.

"But," the cardinal continued, "the beast's death was not in vain." Brielle looked up to see that Inquisitor Grand had come silently upon the pair, and was standing at the cardinal's shoulder.

"Indeed," the inquisitor whispered, his eyes seeming to Brielle to flash crimson for just an instant, before being swallowed up beneath the shadows of his hood. "I discovered much of interest before the prisoner expired."

"What did he tell you?" Brielle asked, playing along with what she saw as the inquisitor's theatre.

Grand chuckled by way of explanation, a sound Brielle scarcely believed could have issued from a human throat.

"He told me nothing," the inquisitor replied. "I saw what I needed to see, but no words were exchanged between me and the prisoner."

"So what did you see?" Brielle asked, annoyance spiced with fear rising within her.

"I saw a race entirely consumed with a false ideology. They believe they expand for the good of all, but I saw where they fear to look, and I saw it is fear that drives the tau ever outwards, and it is fear that will ultimately drive them to destruction as they are dashed against the ancient forces at large in the galaxy."

Brielle felt confusion at the inquisitor's words. She had gleaned a little of the tau's philosophies, and did not recognise the drives that Grand described. So far as she understood, the tau sought to unite every race they came into contact with, through a desire for mutually constructive cooperation.

The inquisitor was studying her, Brielle realised, and she returned her attention to him, locking her thoughts away.

"I saw a race that believes the galaxy is a small place. A place they believe they can tame with childish ideologies and cold technologies. They hurl themselves across the void without an inkling of who or what awaits them. If they only knew..."

"They would run and hide," said the cardinal. "And so they should, for even now a force is being gathered to seek out and destroy a nearby colony that the inquisitor learned of from the prisoner's mind. Even as the battle rages below us, we shall send out our forces and destroy these aliens wherever they may be found. When every tau on this side of the Gulf is dead, we shall cross the void and raze to ashes every last world in their pathetic little empire."

Brielle knew then that the crusade could not be allowed to continue if these two were to be its leaders. What had begun as an opportunity was rapidly descending into utter madness. Her mind reeled as she considered the scale of the disaster about to descend upon the Eastern Rim, upon man and tau both. She looked up and saw that the inquisitor's armoured guards were escorting in the next prisoner, and the Mechanicus attendants were shovelling the previous one into a large containment drum, to be jettisoned, no doubt, with the station's waste. As the cardinal and the inquisitor turned their backs on her, their attentions entirely shifted to their new task, she turned and walked on unsteady legs out of the chamber.

She maintained her composure almost the entire way back to her ship. It was not until she had boarded once more that she gave in to the urge to throw up violently across the deck. The confrontation had left her soiled. She was sure that it was not merely the exposure to Grand's witchery that left her feeling so compromised. It was the rank insanity that made her so ill, an epic lunacy that would spell the doom of the entire fleet and, perhaps, an entire race, if she did not act.

Later, Brielle lounged in her quarters aboard the *Fairlight*. She had welcomed the return to the familiar surroundings of her vessel. It might be cramped and ill lit compared to the tau station, but it was her home. The lighting was turned low, and a shadowed figure sat opposite her.

“I know enough of the Imperium,” the man said, “to know that they will carry out their threat.”

Brielle sighed and took a sip of liqueur. Despite the fact that she had bathed, for hours, and scrubbed her skin raw, she still felt the horrific stain that had touched her in the interrogation chamber.

“I know that, Naal.”

“And you must act.”

“I know that too.”

Naal leant forward in his seat, his face, tattooed with an Imperial Aquila and lines of spidery text, came into the light. “My masters aided you when you called upon them. They, in turn, require your aid.”

“I know,” Brielle replied.

CHAPTER FOUR

“The council is in session,” the orderly announced, the iron shod end of his ceremonial staff striking the floor. “General Gauge has the chair.”

Lucian settled into the high-backed chair, still unused to the shape, for it was manufactured not for the comfort of the human council, but for the tau whose station they occupied. At least his eyes were adapting to the stark light, he mused, and he was getting used to the alien contours of the station’s design. Thank the Emperor it was the general’s turn to serve as chair of the crusade council, Lucian thought, for Wendall Gauge was a man that Lucian could respect.

“Please, gentlemen,” Gauge said as he sat, “make yourselves comfortable. We have much to discuss.”

Lucian watched as the members of the council settled themselves in for what they all knew would be the final session before the crusade embarked upon its most ambitious phase. All members were present, including the huge figures of the two Space Marines who sat on the council, each barely fitting in the alien-made seats. Captain Rumann, the most senior Space Marine in the fleet, showed no apparent emotion at the victories he had commanded during the still-raging ground war on the world below. Sergeant Sarik however, sitting on Lucian’s left, radiated steely martial pride at the actions he had personally led.

“I suggest we begin with reports to council. Who will speak first?” the general asked, casting his stern gaze around the table.

“I would address the council.” Admiral Jellaqua spoke up, straightening his jacket and clearing his throat. “My command stands at eight capital vessels and nine escort squadrons’ the admiral stated, his tone matter of fact, but professional pride glinting in his eyes. “In addition, I have three deep space support echelons in place, each with the capacity to carry the fleet to the other side of the galaxy and back.”

Lucian allowed himself a small grin. He saw the truth through Jellaqua’s boast. He knew that the admiral had put in place a formidable auxiliary fleet, a vast force of long-range tankers, freighters, service vessels and transports. It was an impressive achievement, and the admiral had Lucian’s genuine admiration.

“All ships of the line are approaching readiness, and I estimate full capacity within three days. The *Regent Lakshimbal* has undergone a significant refit of her port drive section following the damage sustained during the Sy’l’Kell action. By bringing forward her major centennial service, we have significantly improved her combat potential. In addition, the *Duchess McIntyre* has a full complement following the mutinies she suffered at Garrus. The new crew is veteran and trustworthy and unlike the last lot, they know how the Navy deals with mutinous bastards that try to take over one of the Emperor’s warships.”

As the admiral sat, the council members nodded sagely at his last remark. The admiral referred, Lucian knew, to the fate of the several thousand mutineers who had been ejected, in long, flailing lines, from the *Duchess McIntyre*’s torpedo tubes once the commissars and naval provost parties had regained control of the vessel. Lucian had thought it an imaginative form of execution, and certainly one that would give pause to any more such plots lurking within the fleet’s enlisted ranks.

“Thank you, admiral,” said General Gauge. “Captain Rumann, might we hear of your victories?”

The Space Marine nodded in response to the general’s invitation, and stood. Captain Rumann made for an imposing figure, towering over the table and the other councillors sitting around it.

When he spoke, his baritone voice was cold and mechanical, his vocal cords having been replaced by a bionic vox unit.

“Council,” the Space Marine said, his cybernetic eyes scanning each member in turn, “I have to report that the assault on the target world went according to plan. As you know, the assault on the orbital in which we reside was enacted by my forces, and spearheaded by three squads under Sergeant Sarik.” At the mention of his name, the White Scar grinned savagely. The Iron Hands captain continued. “The station was cleansed within three point five hours, though no significant resistance was met. We believe that only a token defence force was left in place, while senior xenos were evacuated to the world below.”

Sarik snorted at the captain’s assessment of the quality of the resistance, though Rumann showed no reaction.

“The planetary assault operation is still ongoing. Our forces, spearheaded by the Scythes of the Emperor have made contact with a number of xenos troop types that we have not encountered before. It appears this race makes extensive use of anti-grav technology, manifested in heavy armour and jump infantry. Casualties amongst the Guard are running at twelve per cent, with a commensurate drop in combat effectiveness. Casualties amongst Astartes units are at less than five per cent, with no drop in effectiveness.”

The Space Marine showed no emotion as he spoke of the first encounters with the tau armoured units, which had cost the crusade forces dear. The price had been paid in the blood and machines of the 17th Brimlock Dragoons, and Lucian had seen the pict captures of the Imperial Guard tank columns being ambushed by the fast moving tau vehicles. He knew that only the timely intervention of the crusade’s army reserve units had averted the massacre of the entire regiment and a humiliating defeat at the hands of the aliens.

“Having secured the primary drop zone, Sergeant Sarik affected the capture of the tau high command facility. We believe the enemy’s command and control capabilities are rendered entirely ineffectual. The 9th Brimlock Fusiliers are supporting a general advance on objectives 23 delta through 67 gamma. I expect all resistance to have collapsed within twelve hours.”

Polite applause rippled around the council chamber as the captain sat once more. Lucian leaned back in his seat, the reality that the crusade was really underway and achieving its ends beginning to sink in. He knew they had a very long way to go, for they had yet to even breach the Damocles Gulf, yet Lucian could not help but nurture a spark of hope, of ambition and of expectation at what might lie ahead. Yet, he knew too that this first battle would in all likelihood prove little more than an opening skirmish. The crusade had yet to utilise more than a portion of its strength, which included many more regiments of Imperial Guard and the towering, awesomely destructive war machines of the Adeptus Titanicus.

Lucian watched as the orderly who had announced the council session convened approached General Gauge and spoke to him in a muted voice. Lucian took the opportunity to turn to his son, who sat in a second tier of seats behind that positioned around the table.

Lucian leaned in towards Korvane. “Our status?”

“Ninety nine per cent, father,” Korvane replied. Lucian caught the intonation straight away and leaned in closer to speak.

“What is it, Korvane? I need to know if something’s wrong.” As if to prove the truth of his comment, Lucian saw the orderly out of the corner of his eye as he moved from General Gauge and bent down to speak to Inquisitor Grand.

“Well,” Korvane said, “I can vouch for the *Rosetta*, as you can the *Oceanid*, but I fear I cannot vouch for the *Fairlight*.”

Lucian looked his son straight in the eye. He noted as he did so that the rejuve treatments Korvane had undergone, following the terrible injuries he had received at the hands of the tau fleet at Arrikis Epsilon, had not been entirely successful. Lucian knew that his son would bear the marks of that battle for the remainder of his life.

“What of Brielle?” Lucian asked. “Has she not made ready her vessel?” Even as he asked, he knew that even if Brielle had completed the preparations for her ship to cross the Damocles Gulf, she would not have volunteered such details to her stepbrother. She was becoming increasingly withdrawn, and had been for some time.

“I have spoken with her officers, father.” Korvane’s expression became dark and brooding as he spoke of his stepsister. “It appears that she delegated the task to her bridge crew and went aboard the orbital for some length of time. At that point, she had not returned.”

Lucian released a long sigh. This news did not surprise him, yet he could not help but be disappointed. He wished he could get up and leave, to track down his truculent daughter and shake some sense into her. But he could not, for even as he pondered the issue, he heard his name spoken as the general requested he apprise the council of his fleet’s state of readiness.

Brielle would have to wait, he thought, standing to address the council.

“It’s this way,” Brielle said, her voice hushed, but urgent. “Three blocks in from the primary conduit.”

Brielle scanned the dark corridor ahead of her, satisfied that the way was clear, for now at least. She turned her head to the figure trailing her, the man who had got her mixed up in the affairs of the tau back on Mundus Chasmata.

“This had better be worth it, Naal. If anyone catches us I’m not sure even my father can protect me.”

“My lady,” Naal replied, “please, rest assured my masters will reward you for your aid. The prisoners are senior members of their caste, and what they know of the Empire cannot be allowed to fall into the crusade’s hands.”

Brielle paused, momentarily paralysed by the weight of her actions. She was faced, as she had been so many times before, with awful duplicity. She knew that the crusade had embarked upon an evil folly of epic proportion, its course set upon the destruction of a culture it had no knowledge of. She, however, did have some knowledge of the tau, and was rapidly coming to the conclusion that they offered far more even than life as a rogue trader held for her. Yet, she was born and raised a scion of a mighty dynasty, and loath to throw away millennia of prosperity, and the status that came with it.

“I understand that, and I agree that Grand and the cardinal must not be allowed to do to the other prisoners what they did to the first.” She felt her gorge rise as she pictured the tau prisoner after his interrogation, and recalled the inquisitor’s scathing rant about the tau race. “If the inquisitor could extract that much information from just one prisoner, I dread to think what he might find out from all of them.”

“Quite so, my lady,” replied Naal, “and I offer you my personal thanks for your aid.”

Brielle did not reply, concentrating instead upon negotiating the warren of tunnels leading to the detention block. This section of the station was at present ill-lit, the tech-priests having shut down entire swathes of the station’s systems while they installed generatoria of more appropriate, human-made, design. Brielle had noted how the station was already beginning to feel like a man-made, rather than alien-made, installation. Formerly bright-lit passages were now dark. Where the air had been filtered and clear, now holy incense circulated through the conduits, and where clean lines and unadorned surfaces met the eye, crudely draped cabling snaked along the walls, votive parchments fluttering in the camphor scented breeze.

She continued down the corridor, indicating with a glance that Naal should follow. The pair walked openly rather than sneaking in the shadows, yet neither wanted to be noticed. Brielle knew that questions would be asked were she to be observed and reported on. She also knew that Naal would be arrested instantly were he to be questioned by one of the Guard provosts or munitorum bully-boys who maintained order on the station. Naal had no official standing in the crusade, no provable rank or identity, and so would come under grave suspicion were he to be found in the

vicinity of the detention block. Brielle knew that even her influence would do little to aid Naal should he be caught. She had already decided what she would do were that to happen, though she had yet to admit it fully to herself.

The pair came to a junction, and Brielle peered around one corner, while Naal craned his neck around the other. "All clear, my lady," Naal said, awaiting her lead. Funny, Brielle mused, that Naal, human envoy of the tau and therefore traitor to his race, should continue to address her in so formal a manner. They had shared the risks of battle at Arrikis Epsilon, and she had shared her bed with him many times since, yet still he maintained the role of servant or advisor, exactly the role he had performed under his previous human master, the traitor Imperial Commander of Mundus Chasmata.

"Which way, my lady?" Naal asked. Brielle knew that he was fully aware of the route to the detention block.

"This way," she nodded to the left. "We're on top of the conduit now, so get ready."

Brielle saw Naal pat a concealed weapon under his left arm. Brielle drew her own, a laspistol of archaic design and priceless heritage, checked the charge, and returned it to its holster. She would rather settle this by stealth and subterfuge, but if she had to resort to violence she would do so. It was, after all, for the greater good, she mused, setting off along the corridor, the entrance to the detention block visible at its end.

"Thank you gentlemen," General Gauge said, standing as the last of the councillors completed his address. "Now, onto the real meat of the matter," he said, activating a stud on his console, raising a triangle of three large pict screens from the centre of the table that flickered into life as they rose. "Strategy."

The general looked around the table, his scarred face turning to each councillor in turn. Lucian had heard the tales of how those scars had been attained, though he scarcely believed that a man could survive some of the encounters the old Catachan Guardsman was said to have won.

"Our plans to this point have assumed a jump off point here," he said, pointing to a region of local space displayed on one of the screens. "The fleet crosses the Gulf and musters here," he continued, pointing to another grid, "ready for further action. Comments?"

"That plan," Lucian spoke up before the likes of the cardinal could interrupt, "assumes we face no more than a handful of occupied and defended systems. I still say that if we go in all guns blazing and find ourselves up against well-defended systems we will have the worse of it." Lucian saw the cardinal bristle at his words, but continued, "We must offer them terms the instant we cross the Gulf, and give them the impression we're just the spearhead. Then, they'll be ours."

Cardinal Gurney surged to his feet. "Nonsense! To show them mercy is to admit weakness, and thereby to blaspheme the Emperor! I will have no part in a scheme to pacify, where our mission is to decimate."

"And pray remind me," Lucian replied, feeling his blood rise, "where in our charter does it state we are to exterminate the tau out of hand?"

"I care not for legal niceties, Gerrit," the cardinal spat back. "I can see no other course, and believe such an action would be entirely justified and ratified." The cardinal looked pointedly towards Inquisitor Grand as he said the last, who nodded almost imperceptibly by way of affirmation.

Lucian had wondered at what point the cardinal would play his best card: his alliance with the inquisitor. He doubted that this was the last time Gurney would do so. Lucian had gone up against some powerful enemies before, from Imperial Commanders to retired High Lords of Terra, but had yet to cross swords with the Inquisition. He knew that to do so was madness, for the inquisitors had the licence to perform any act in the name of the Emperor, to command entire armies and to order the destruction of worlds. That Grand was apparently so subtle in exercising his power spoke to Lucian of a greater game, perhaps one in which the inquisitor was but the pawn of higher members

of his order. Whatever the truth, Lucian resolved to tread carefully, to engage only the cardinal in open dispute.

“Gentlemen, please,” growled the general, “we agreed at the outset that we would resolve the issue upon crossing the Gulf, for we have no idea what lies beyond it. The tau might only occupy a single system, in which case we can expect little trouble. They might occupy more, perhaps as many as five, but as yet we simply do not know what we face.”

“This is indeed the case.” Magos Jaakho stood as he spoke, the general sitting in response. “This entire region is anathema to my order, for it bears no resemblance to the surveys submitted when last an explorator fleet passed through.” Lucian had read of that last survey, which took place almost six millennia past, but had yet to hear the magos speak of it.

“If it weren’t for the stringent rites and procedures of my order, I would have concluded upon my arrival that those ancient charts were incorrect, for they bear no resemblance to what we see here before us.” The magos indicated one of the pict screens before the council with a sweep of his arm, a metallic finger emerging from a voluminous red sleeve to point out the swirling eddies of stellar matter that made up the entire region. Within that cauldron of stars lay the Tau Empire, and before it, the Damocles Gulf.

“According to the records in my possession, this region should bear no significant dissimilarity to any nearby cluster. Yet, it seethes with energies the natures of which I can only guess at. I would cross the Gulf, and discover what lays beyond, tau or no tau.”

“Well said,” said Lucian, seizing the half of the statement he agreed with. “If we exterminate the tau we may never know what’s behind the phenomenon. No doubt they have studied the matter in some depth.”

The magos nodded, giving Lucian some hope that he might have swung the explorator lord to his point of view, and in so doing, against the cardinal’s.

“So then,” Lucian said, “can we agree that upon crossing the Gulf, the fleet is to muster as previously agreed, whereupon the council will convene to decide the next course of action?”

The cardinal fixed Lucian with a venomous stare. “What possible course of action could possibly face us, other than war?”

“I fully expect war,” Lucian replied, his voice low and dangerous. “I am prepared for it, but I also wish to be prepared for what comes after it.”

Gurney smiled, his face taking on the leer of some daemonic gargoyle. “What comes after, Gerrit? Nothing comes after. All that will remain of them, of the tau, will be bones and ashes.”

Lucian shook his head in silent disgust, looking around the table to judge which councillors might share his views. He saw that some might. General Gauge, Admiral Jellaqua, noble and honourable warriors both, appeared uneasy at the cardinal’s words. Lucian judged the White Scars Space Marine to be a man of honour too, as intolerant of aliens as any of his brethren, but not a mass murderer in the sense advanced by the cardinal. He was less sure of others, and saw that he faced an uphill struggle to persuade any onto a course from which they might all prosper, and away from one in which the cardinal’s hellfire and brimstone would lead to nothing but death.

Lucian’s glance settled upon the figure of Inquisitor Grand, who was conferring with the council orderly, his manner both threatening and surreptitious at once. Taking a deep breath, Lucian went on.

“Council members, I am, as you know, the son of a great line of rogue traders. My family and a thousand others have penetrated the outer darkness for millennia, pushing back the frontiers of the Emperor’s domains, bringing lost worlds back to the fold of humanity, and exploiting all we encounter for the ultimate benefit of all mankind.” Lucian saw the cardinal smirk at this, but carried on anyway. “We do so not by launching ourselves at any and all foes we encounter, but by measured conquest. Those we cannot conquer, we exploit, one way or another. I tell you, we must accept the possibility that the tau might prove too proficient a foe to crush so easily. If we are to have war, a reasoned war with a profitable outcome, then I pledge my support wholeheartedly. But if we are to

slaughter these aliens for no reason other than their existence, at the cost to ourselves, I fear we might pay. Then I cannot, in all truth, promise my unqualified aid.”

Silence followed Lucian’s address, and he sat once more, content that he had spoken his mind truthfully. Whether or not it would sway any of the council remained to be seen. Lucian turned to his son, and saw that Korvane was intently watching Inquisitor Grand, his expression glowering yet unreadable. Even as Lucian looked to the inquisitor, Grand stood, nodded briefly to the council, and left the chamber without a word. Perhaps Grand feared that Lucian had swayed the council, and had left before that power could be mobilised against him. Perhaps not, Lucian mused, for the affairs of inquisitors were best left well alone.

Brielle’s heart raced as she approached the armoured portal, the entrance to the detention block. A heavy, circular door, tau iconography stencilled upon it in blocky white text, barred the way. The passage was dark and they were alone, and for that Brielle was thankful.

“Is it locked?” Brielle asked Naal as he appeared at her side.

In response to her question, Naal consulted a spartan console beside the door. He nodded. “It is, my lady, from within.”

“What now then? Can you get it open?”

“Yes indeed,” Naal grinned, producing a small device of obvious tau manufacture from his jacket. She watched as he placed the device, which was no larger than his hand, against the door console. It adhered to the wall instantly. Lights began to blink across its slab-like surface, at first in apparently random fashion, before taking on a steady sequence. The screen upon the device’s surface lit up, and Naal stepped back with evident pride.

Brielle looked to Naal, and then to the device. She stepped in closer, pushing her way in front of him to look upon the small pict screen. She saw what it showed, and turned her head to kiss Naal upon the cheek.

The viewer showed the scene on the other side of the portal, the device evidently having achieved communion with the station’s native security net. Brielle knew that the tech-priests had yet to fathom the workings of the tau command and control network, and had been more concerned with superimposing their own machinery on the station than with shutting down the old. She was grateful, for it gave her an edge, and a chance of success.

Brielle watched a scene that she guessed was captured by a spy lens in the chamber beyond. The entire station was covered with the small, unobtrusive devices, and this room was no exception. It showed two munitorum guards, both female, both tall and broad, and both armed with shock mauls and protected by the heavy, interlocking plate of carapace armour. They were not the sort of women she would want to pass time with.

“This device communes with the entire station logister network?” Brielle asked, turning her head to look up at Naal, who looked over her shoulder.

“Yes, though the tau terms for what you describe differ significantly.”

“Fine,” Brielle said. “We need to distract them, activate an alarm elsewhere to draw them away long enough for us to get in. Can you do that?”

“I can, my lady,” Naal replied, reaching around Brielle’s shoulders to operate the device. Brielle watched as alien characters appeared on the viewer, Naal working his way through a series of menus and submenus, until he had located the function he sought.

“I have access to the master security net,” he said. “From here I can trigger any alarm in the station. Which would you have me activate?”

Brielle smiled demurely, a sudden thrill coursing through her as she considered the mischief she could wreak with but a single command. She could trigger a core reactor leak alarm, and cause every soul on the station to abandon ship. She could trigger fire retardant in the council chambers; the possibilities really were endless.

But, she knew she had a task to fulfil, and could not risk discovery for so trivial a prank, though the thought of some of the pompous buffoons on the council soaked in foam did have a certain appeal.

“We need to activate something low level and nearby, something that’ll get their attention, but no one else’s.”

She watched as Naal scrolled through a long list of functions. Stopping, he asked, “Localised conduit overheat?”

“So long as it’s just this compartment. We don’t want the entire deck to evacuate. And make sure the threat is coming from our side of the door; we don’t want them plundering right into us.”

Naal smiled, accessed another sub menu, and nodded. “I can activate the alarm in such a fashion that only the guards will hear it. I’ll make it appear as a precautionary, yet mandatory alert so they don’t spread panic wherever they evacuate to. That should give us the time we need, my lady.”

“Do it.”

Naal activated the alert function, and switched the viewer back to the scene within the detention block. She watched as the guards’ heads turned sharply, though she could not hear what they heard. The women looked to one another, and one shrugged, her lips moving in speech.

“Move, you witless bitches,” Brielle muttered, suddenly uneasy that the guards might decide it was more important to stay at their posts than to answer the alert.

Then, just as Brielle was considering increasing the alert level, she saw the guards shoulder their mauls and leave, exiting the detention block through a far exit. Brielle breathed a sigh of relief and turned around to face Naal.

“Come on then,” she smiled. “Open the door and let’s get on with it.”

“My pleasure,” Naal answered, activating the armoured portal, and detaching the control device.

Brielle moved to one side of the opening as the huge door swung inwards, peering through cautiously. The sound of the alarm came from within, its tone shrill and insistent. Naal pocketed the device and followed Brielle’s lead, peering from the opposite side of the opening.

“All clear, my lady,” he said. “Do you wish me to enter first?”

Annoyance flared within her at the suggestion that she might not be as capable as he was at dealing with whatever might await them through the portal. She drew her laspistol and stepped through the opening before he could do so himself.

The detention block was as dark as the passages through which they had approached it, though Brielle was struck by an air of oppression as soon as she entered. The clean lines and unadorned surfaces of the original tau structure were here, as elsewhere, subverted by the presence of man. She saw that the block was not originally intended as a prison, and doubted that the tau even had much use for such institutions. It had plainly served as some form of storage facility, the tech-priests having crudely welded great iron bars across the bays, each of which radiated out from the area in which Brielle found herself.

She looked down each bay, one at a time, catching movement in the darkness behind the bars on either side of the long spurs. She knew that one spur would contain the tau prisoners, but which?

“Look for a manifest, a log, anything that might tell us where they are.” She called to Naal, rifling through the parchments and scrolls piled on top of a bureau nearby. Papers scattered in all directions. “And see if you can deactivate that alarm.”

Naal looked around the chamber, located a section of wall, and depressed a barely discernible panel. A small section of wall lifted up, to reveal a bank of bright-lit controls. Naal reached up and deactivated the alarm with a single motion.

“Thank you,” Brielle said. “That was really getting on my...”

“I have them, my lady,” Naal said. “Cell block Eta.”

“Good,” Brielle replied. “Cover that up when you’re done. Which one’s Eta?”

“This way,” Naal said, indicating one of the dark passages radiating from the area in which they stood.

“Good. Follow me,” she replied, setting off for the cell block. She was soon engulfed in darkness, and she slowed lest she stumble. As her eyes became accustomed to the low light, she became aware of subtle movements within the shadows beyond the bars, and halted to look closer. She noticed too that the air in the block was even closer, the subtle taint of despair drifting upon a stale breeze. She squatted, determined to discover who, or what was imprisoned within.

A low moan emanated from the cell, sending a shiver up Brielle’s spine. It was the moan of the damned, she thought, and had surely not been voiced by one of the tau prisoners. As her eyes adjusted to the dark still more, she began to discern lumpen forms within the cell, the source, she realised, of the movement and the terrible sound.

“Deserters,” Naal whispered from behind Brielle, causing her to start. “Bound for trial, or what passes for trial in the Imperium.”

She turned and looked into his face, her eyes taking in the aquila tattooed across it. “These men are criminals?”

“Who can say, my lady.”

“They refused to fight?”

“According to the records, yes.”

“Then they are criminals.”

“In the eyes of the Imperium, yes,” Naal replied, his voice low and dangerous. “Perhaps they merely refused to fight against the Tau Empire. Perhaps they see what the crusade council, what the High Lords of Terra themselves, cannot.”

“Perhaps,” Brielle replied, “but it matters not a bit. If they refuse to fight, they will die. That’s how it is. That’s how it’s always been and how it always will be.”

“Not if more like them, like you and me, see an alternative.”

“There’s a big difference,” Brielle said, looking back towards the forms within the cell, “between aiding the tau, and actually turning on your own race.”

“No one has asked you to turn on your own, my lady. Though you yourself have asked...”

“Not yet, they haven’t, Naal, but I’m not stupid. I know where this could lead. But know this. If I join, I do so on my terms, when I’m ready to. Do you understand?”

“I understand.” Naal stood as he spoke. “All I can ask is that you do what you think right, for the Greater Good.”

Brielle stood without answering. She resumed her search of the black, peering into the darkness beyond the bars on either side as she passed along its length. As she approached the end of the passage, she knew that she had found what she had come for.

She halted, indicating with a gesture that Naal should do likewise. She saw a row of figures slumped across the deck, through the bars on her right, and by their form, they were obviously not human.

At that instant, a wave of nausea washed over her, and the air around her tasted suddenly tainted. She had experienced that horrible sensation once before, in the presence of...

A whisper, low and laden with menace, rasped from the cell to her left. “My lady Arcadius.”

She turned, sweat appearing at her brow as the cell block felt suddenly humid and stifling.

“And our friend, Captain Delphi, though I doubt Brielle here knows him as such.”

Brielle knew that it was Inquisitor Grand. She felt, on some primal level, the corruption of his presence even before he had spoken. She felt paralysis clawing at her limbs, and knew that the inquisitor used his witchery against her. She tried to look at Naal, confusion at Grand’s naming of him rising within her. She found she could barely turn her head, and through her peripheral vision saw that Naal was likewise afflicted. She looked back towards the inquisitor just as he emerged

from the cell, a dark shadow against an even darker backdrop, only his mouth visible beneath the folds of his black hood.

“I’d hoped to find one of you here,” Grand said, his voice still low and rasping, “but to find you both... surely the Emperor smiles upon me.”

Brielle heard Naal try to respond, but only a pained croak emerged.

“Hush, Delphi,” the inquisitor told Naal. “There’ll be plenty of time for confessions later. There’s much for us to discuss, and much you’ll wish to tell me, in time. You’ll go to your grave, Delphi, but you’ll be unburdened of your many sins against the God-Emperor of Man.”

Brielle heard Naal’s response. Though unintelligible, its meaning was unmistakable.

“And you, my pretty.” Grand turned his attention back to Brielle. “What shall we do with you? Is it even worth my while attempting to extract a confession from you? Or should I just practise my tender arts upon your soft flesh, beginning with your mind, perhaps, and working my way out. Maybe Delphi here would like to watch.”

Brielle spat an incoherent curse at the hooded inquisitor, hate welling within her. She screamed in silent, mental denial, directing all her rage and frustration at her capture.

“Now now, my dear, settle down,” the inquisitor said, turning his back on Brielle and advancing upon Naal. Feeling her rage boil out of control, she pushed with all her might against the mental bonds that restrained her. She focused on Grand’s back, boring her hatred deep into his soul.

The inquisitor turned sharply, his attentions entirely focused on Brielle. She felt a strange sense of triumph; though she would likely die, she would do so with defiance and with honour. That much had been instilled in her by her upbringing amongst the savage nobility of the feral world of Chogoris.

“You are a strong one, aren’t you?” Grand said, reaching out a hand towards Brielle’s face. She felt his caress upon her cheek, reeling at the witch power coursing through it and into her body, the source of the paralysis against which she struggled.

“You can feel me, can’t you?” Grand moved in closer, his hand snaking around to the nape of Brielle’s neck, and grasping the flowing plaits of her hair. The sight of his hooded face filled her vision. She saw into the shadows beneath the hood, witchfire guttering in the depths of his shadowed eyes. “Let me see you.”

As Grand closed in upon her, Brielle felt her soul begin to wither beneath his baleful gaze. Corruption radiated from him, focused and burning through his touch where it gripped the back of her neck. She screamed within against the pain of his touch, pushing against him with all the power her soul could muster, determined beyond reason to expel the paralysis entering her body, to push it back into his.

Alarm appeared in Grand’s eyes, and Brielle was stunned to see him stagger backwards, backing into Naal as he did so. Unable to control his limbs, Naal fell to the deck with a painful crash, knocking him senseless against the bars.

“You think you can resist me do you, girl?” the inquisitor growled as he regained his balance. “What little power you might have is insufficient. Now, you are mine.”

Focusing all her pain and rage, Brielle lashed out in one final effort to break the bonds paralyzing her body. She felt her soul slipping from her, and her vision blurred into blinding white fire. She pushed one last time, feeling something yield beneath her effort. She realised with a start that it was her own flesh that yielded so, movement returning to her limbs. With a rush of sensation, her body was returned to her, and she collapsed to the ground before she could fully take control of her motor functions.

The sudden loss of control saved her life. A deafening report filled the cell block, followed an instant later by the unmistakable sound of an exploding bolt as it struck the bulkhead behind the space she had just vacated.

Brielle rolled, her vision clearing. She looked up and saw the black-robed form of the inquisitor advancing upon her, bolt pistol in hand, his eyes swirling with the ectoplasmic whirlpools beneath his hood.

As Grand lowered the pistol to draw a bead on her head, she lifted her arm and with a single flick of her thumb activated the tiny, one-shot flamer she wore in the guise of a ring. A cone of chemical fire erupted from the weapon, leaping the two metres between Brielle and the inquisitor, engulfing him instantly. The inquisitor's robes caught fire, and he gave voice to a scream that Brielle felt in her soul as much as heard, searing her mind and threatening to knock her out. She clambered to her feet and rushed to Naal's side as the inquisitor staggered against a wall and collapsed. She saw that Naal lived yet, but was still overcome by the paralysis inflicted by Grand's psychic attack. She hooked an arm beneath each of his shoulders, and pulled with all her might. Naal's body was a deadweight, but she succeeded in dragging him along the passageway and back to the entrance to the detention block.

"Come on," she breathed, shaking Naal's shoulders in frustration. She knew that the guards might return any moment, and the conflagration still guttering at the end of Cell Block Eta might trigger a real alarm and bring damage control parties down upon them. "Come on, Naal, fight!"

"My lady... I'm..." Naal's voice was weak, but Brielle felt overcome with relief as she saw movement return to his limbs.

"Don't speak," she replied, standing while lending him a hand in doing likewise. "We have to leave, right now."

With a last glance over her shoulder before leaving, Brielle saw that the fire that had consumed the inquisitor was beginning to spread. She looked around and saw the console that controlled the locking mechanisms for the entire detention block. She slammed her fist down upon the master lock release, hearing the cell doors in each of the blocks swing upon.

Seeing the tau prisoners stir, she drew a breath and yelled. "If you're coming, follow me!" Whether or not they could understand her, she saw that the prisoners were responding, creeping through the shadows to join her.

With that, she hitched an arm behind Naal's back, lending him what support she could as his strength returned, and left the detention block as fire and smoke engulfed it.

CHAPTER FIVE

Lucian winced as a titanic grinding echoed the length of the *Oceanid's* drive service deck, the sound of the fleet tender *Harlot* being made safe alongside, her docking clamps grasping the *Oceanid's* holding points with immense force. A glance to his side told him that Korvane had the same reaction, a poor indictment of the quality of the crews of the crusade's auxiliary vessels.

"Heave, you worthless scum!"

Lucian grinned as the petty officers below bellowed their orders to the press-ganged ratings crowding the service deck, each hauling on the mighty chains that secured the docking clamps.

"Well enough," Lucian said, turning to the red-robed tech-priest at his side. "Commence the operation."

"Yes, my lord," the adept replied, mechadendrites snaking from his back, the grasping claws of each arm operating a lever on the consoles mounted all around the gallery.

Lucian watched as the toiling crews below completed their work, and the petty officers corralled the cursing men from the service deck. The area below the gallery from which Lucian and Korvane observed was a vast, spheroid chamber, dominated in the centre by a mighty column from floor to ceiling that resembled nothing less than a vast stalactite grown so huge it had merged with the stalagmites below. Pipes and valves dominated the column's every surface, clouds of steam and other exhaust gases venting from spitting valves, rivulets of run-off pouring down its flanks to pool in great steaming, oily lakes across the deck.

"I've always hated this," Lucian said, his son nodding in agreement with his words. Of all the practicalities of void faring, replenishing the warp drives had always been the task he loathed the most. It was quite unlike the taking on of the fuel required by the *Oceanid's* myriad plasma generators, although thankfully, it was only rarely required. With the imminent crossing of the Damocles Gulf, all of the crusade's capital vessels had been replenished, with only the rogue trader vessels remaining to be tended.

The wailing of a siren filled the deck, accompanied a moment later by a low crash of the *Harlot's* umbilical probe locking with the service deck's airlock. Warning lights flashed red as the airlock equalised, atmosphere venting from its release valves in angry plumes. Lucian watched intently, for he knew what to expect next. He heard Korvane mumble a low spacefarer's prayer, an imprecation against the perils of the warp, and all the dangers that awaited those who would cross it.

A low ramble filled the service deck, and the airlock's armoured door rose, a cloud of thick mist escaping, to creep across the deck. As the door receded into the bulkhead above, Lucian could just make out the silhouettes within.

A droning canticle emanated from the airlock, as a number of figures emerged from the mist. Soon, a column was snaking its way across the service deck, a funereal procession, the mourners carrying upon their shoulders great lead caskets glittering with etheric frost. Those figures were, even to Lucian who had seen some horrific sights in his time, disturbing in the extreme. Each wore long robes of woven, gunmetal grey metallic thread, and thick, lead gloves upon his hands. The robes were dotted with valves, to which long, pulsing cables were attached, each coiling behind the bearer to disappear into the airlock behind. The head of each bearer was bared, but his eyes, ears, nose and mouth were fitted with the same valves that covered his body. Forcing himself to look closer, Lucian could see that the bearers' hands, though protected by the thick mitts, gave off an oily smoke, as did the side of the face of each bearer that was closest to the casket he shouldered. Small,

humanoid creatures walked at the side of each bearer, vat-grown cyber-constructs, mono-tasked to the whims of their masters.

The contents of each coffin-shaped casket was evidently hazardous in the extreme, for Lucian could see, even from the gallery on which he and Korvane stood, the flesh of each bearer slowly cooking, sloughing from his face to reveal muscle and bone beneath.

As the procession wound its course across the curved deck below, Lucian watched the tech-adepts of his own crew as they worked upon the many dials and levers mounted around the base of the great column at the centre of the chamber. Lucian knew that the tech-priests would have prepared long and hard for their task, for it was the most perilous operation a vessel could undertake, including, Lucian mused, actual combat. The consequences of a mishap were scarcely worth considering, and would cost Lucian and his crew far more than their ship and their lives.

The procession neared the column, and Lucian could see that the body of each bearer was beginning to disintegrate as time wore on, the pulsing of the hundreds of cables snaking behind growing more rapid as, Lucian presumed, some alchemical concoction that prolonged life was fed to them. He mumbled a prayer, as Korvane had minutes before, seeing the open distaste on his son's face.

The scene became even more ghastly as the first of the caskets neared the column. It's bearers visibly staggered beneath what must have been a terrible weight to bear. Singed matter trailed behind the bearers, great chunks of burnt flesh having detached from their limbs as they walked, only the ministrations of the horrific machinery keeping them animated as their bodies, quite literally, fell apart. The small attendants gathered the burnt remains into heavy chests carried between some of their number.

At the last, the bearers of the lead casket lifted their burden high upon arms almost bare of flesh. The casket was pushed forward into a gaping socket in the side of the column, the door of which swung wide as the *Oceanid's* tech-priests pulled levers and voiced their prayers to the Machine God. With one, final heave, the bearers pushed their casket into the waiting maw, the frost encrusting it vaporising in a cloud of mist as it was slid home. With a crash, the door swung shut. The bearers collapsed, each lead robe almost entirely empty. With an obscene, sucking noise, the cables attached to the remains of each corpse tightened, before snaking back to the airlock, the small attendant gathering up the remains of each bearer, before turning back for the airlock.

"Emperor preserve us." Lucian heard Korvane mutter, and turned to see that his son had developed a severe and quite spontaneous nosebleed. He touched his hand to his own nose, unsurprised to see blood upon his palm as he pulled it away.

"I've seen enough," Lucian said, knowing that his duty as ship's master was done by ensuring that the first of the caskets was safely received. Many more would be delivered over the next hours, but he had little desire to watch the scene he had just witnessed repeated over and over again. "Care for a drink?"

"Indeed, Father, I feel I need one," Korvane replied, turning his back on the drive service deck.

Lucian and his son passed through the warren of the *Oceanid's* companionways, trying to avoid the areas most crowded by work crews going about the business of preparing the vessel for the crossing of the Damocles Gulf.

"The last intake," Korvane asked. "Have they given you any trouble?"

Lucian chuckled as he watched a gang of ratings struggle to seal a defective plasma run, which, fortunately for them, had been bypassed lest they fail in their task and incinerate themselves in the process. "Well, Craven's Landing provided some veteran crews, not surprising considering the trouble the port's had with the chartists."

"And what of the Kleist intake?" Korvane asked.

“There weren’t many left, after Gurney’s courts,” Lucian replied, his mood darkening at his son’s mention of the Cardinal of Brimlock. “Just the dregs whose executions were commuted to service. What of the *Rosetta*?”

“The Arrikis Epsilon intake settled down well,” Korvane replied, referring to the massive draft of unskilled crew that the rogue traders had demanded from the Imperial commander of that world, replacements for the hundreds of casualties Korvane’s crew had suffered in battle weeks before. “There’re a handful that have made bridge crew, and one or two potential officers amongst them.”

“Hmm,” replied Lucian, distracted by the actions of the repair crew as they toiled with the plasma ran. He saw that they were making a total hash of their work and their overseer was proving entirely inadequate in his role.

“You!” Lucian bellowed, the work crew and every other crewman in the area standing to immediate attention.

He advanced upon the petty officer in charge of the crew, gratified to see that the man had the decency to go pale at his master’s approach.

“What the hell are you trying to achieve here? You’ve got a dozen unskilled men screwing up a job that a pair of acolytes could complete to perfection in under an hour. Well?”

“Sir,” the man stammered, his uncertainty and fear evident in his voice. “Sir, the adepts are all engaged on the drive service deck, sir. We were ordered to secure this plasma ran as a matter of urgency though, and we...”

“For the Emperor’s sake,” Lucian cursed, “I’m afflicted by fools in all quarters.” Frustration rose within him as he considered that, even though the rogue traders’ fortunes had improved in the wake of the encounters in the Timbra subsector, the flotilla was still being operated at something less than ideal levels. Though his crews were now larger, Lucian knew they still had a long way to go before attaining the experience and professionalism taken for granted in the dynasty until very recently.

“Wait until the adepts are available,” Lucian ordered the petty officer, “but impress upon them the urgency of the task. If that run leaks in transit I’ll hold you, not the adepts, personally responsible. Do I make myself perfectly clear?”

The man could only nod at Lucian’s threat, knowing, as he must have done, the punishment that would await him were any malfunction to afflict the plasma relay. Lucian nodded, and the man took the hint and turned to gather his crew, who skulked off as fast as their dignity allowed.

Lucian watched the work crew retreat down the corridor, and then turned sharply on his heels to continue on his way. As he turned, he almost collided with another junior officer, a member of the bridge crew, though he could not remember the man’s name.

“What the hell do you want?” Lucian bawled, the deck officer standing to rigid attention.

“Message from the bridge, my lord,” the officer replied, his voice steady in contrast to that of the work crew overseer. “Visitor on board.”

“Who?” Lucian replied, knowing it must be someone important for the bridge to send a runner to inform him.

“General Wendall Gauge, my lord. He awaits you in the starboard bridge receiving room.”

Lucian turned to his son, who shrugged, clearly as surprised as he was. “Well then,” Lucian said to Korvane, “let’s see what brings the general on board, shall we?”

“Lord Arcadius,” the general said as Lucian entered the receiving room, Korvane following close behind. “Please accept my apologies for the circumstances of this visit.” Gauge cut an imposing figure, even in the ornately decorated chamber, though Lucian noted that he appeared uncomfortable in his general staff formal dress. Gauge was broad and muscled in common with all the men of Catachan, his face scarred and dour, a dangerous glint in his steely eyes.

“Not at all,” Lucian replied, instantly cautious. “I had hoped we would have the opportunity to talk. I take it, however, that a specific matter brings you here, at this time?”

“Indeed,” Gauge said, turning his back on Lucian and Korvane, to look out of the brass-rimmed viewing port to the busy space beyond. After a moment of silence, the general spoke. “It’s bad news, Lucian, a bad business I’m afraid.”

Lucian caught his son’s glance, before crossing to the general’s side, looking out, as did his guest, upon the blackness of space and the myriad fleet service craft engaged on their apparently endless tasks.

“Tell me,” Lucian pressed, his mind racing to predict what council intrigue might have brought the general to his ship. He loathed the feeling of not being in complete control, of waiting upon another.

“Inquisitor Grand, Lucian. You have not heard?”

“Heard what?” Lucian demanded, his frustration growing. Had the inquisitor pulled rank on the council, he wondered? Had Gurney finally convinced him to use the influence he had, to date, held in check?

“He is wounded, badly,” the general said, looking Lucian in the eye as he spoke.

Lucian felt sudden guilty elation at the news, tempered an instant later by the realisation that such an event might well have serious implications for them all. He turned and lifted a crystal decanter from a polished wooden side table, and poured a hefty slug for himself and another for the general.

“How?”

Gauge took the proffered glass and downed the liquor in a single gulp. “He was burned, eighty per cent of his body. It was a deliberate attack, in the detention block, as he attended to his prisoners.”

“One of the tau? A break out attempt?”

“No, although they did escape.”

“All of them?” Lucian could scarcely countenance that the tau might have succeeded in escaping from an accomplished agent of the Orders of the Inquisition. “They must have been helped. A traitor?”

“The inquisitor’s staff believe so,” Gauge said, helping himself to a second drink, and pouring one for Lucian too.

“Lucian,” the general turned to fully face his host. “What of Brielle?”

Lucian’s breath caught in his throat, for he had not even thought of his daughter for several hours, so busy had he and his son been with the warp drive replenishment. “What of her?” he asked. Though he respected, even liked, the general, Lucian’s guard was fully up, for it was his family of which Gauge spoke.

“Grand’s staff, Lucian. They have made certain... insinuations.”

“Korvane?” Lucian summoned his son. “Find her.” Korvane nodded and left the room in silence, though Lucian noted a familiar glint in his son’s eye. He thought that the old sibling rivalry was rearing its head again, though Korvane’s expression grew darker each time his stepsister’s name was mentioned.

“General,” Lucian said, turning back to his guest, “please, be frank with me. I count you an honest man, and I believe we are both on the same side. I know nothing of the inquisitor, or it seems, my daughter. Tell me all.”

The general bowed slightly at Lucian’s compliment, a gesture the old veteran rarely performed. “Very well. As I said, the inquisitor has been assaulted, and lies in the medicae bay, even now, attended by his household apothecaries. His staff report that the prisoners are gone, and there is evidence of at least one intruder having infiltrated the detention block. Someone entered Cell Block Eta, attacked the inquisitor, freed the prisoners and escaped.”

“What has Brielle to do with this? I see no connection.”

“Neither do I, Lucian, but the inquisitor’s staff wish to speak to her, and she is not answering hails to the *Fairlight*. I know not what evidence they might have to link her with the assault, but I do not believe they would ask unless they were very sure of themselves.”

“Of course they’re sure of themselves,” Lucian spat, before lowering his voice, “they’re the Inquisition.”

“Lucian, I warn you...”

“To silence, general? On my own vessel? On this ship, Wendell, I am Emperor, Primarch, Warmaster and bloody executioner. I will not have some...”

“Lucian!” The general’s voice was cutting, making Lucian look up and meet Gauge’s eyes. “Do not assume the inquisitor, or the cardinal for that matter, is anything less than dangerous in the extreme. We may all hold the same nominal rank, you, I, them and the rest of the council, but we both know what Grand truly represents.”

“Korvane!” Lucian bellowed, a moment before his son returned. “Well?”

“Nothing, father.”

“Explain.”

“She is not aboard the *Fairlight*, her duty officer is quite sure.”

“And she is not aboard the station,” the general cut in. “The inquisitor’s staff are equally sure.”

“Whatever is going on, everything changes from here on in.” Lucian was thinking on his feet, his mind plotting a million potential ramifications of the news. What had his errant daughter done, why, and what might the inquisitor’s response be?

“The council,” Lucian said, turning on the general once more. “Lines will be drawn over this. Can I at least assume that you and I shall stand on the same side of those lines?”

“I would not have come to you like this if it were not so, Lucian.”

“I thank you,” Lucian replied. “What of Jellaqua?”

The general laughed out loud at the mention of his counterpart in the Imperial Navy. “That old bastard? He curses Gurney for a motherless grox, and would oppose him and his allies on sheer principle alone.”

“Good, good,” said Lucian, smiling at the thought of the irascible old admiral voicing such an opinion over an oversized glass of after-dinner liquor. With an effort, he pushed the problem of Brielle to the back of his mind, and continued with his immediate concern.

“I think that Sarik and I see eye to eye,” Lucian went on. The White Scars Space Marine hailed from the world on which his daughter had been raised, and that might provide some common link that could grow to a more solid alliance. “Rumann I’m not so sure of, he’s a hard one to read.”

“As are all his Chapter,” the General replied, “they have something of the machine about them, if you catch my meaning.”

“I do. The same goes for Jaakho, though he appears more disposed to our point of view in council recently.”

The general nodded byway of reply, before Lucian continued, “And the Navis Nobilitate Sedicae?”

“Very hard to say,” Gauge replied, before Korvane interrupted.

“Father, might I speak?”

“Of course, Korvane,” Lucian said, mildly unsettled that his son should feel the need to ask permission to speak his mind. Of course Korvane should speak, Lucian thought, for he had been raised in the Court of Nankirk, studied at his mother’s side the myriad intrigues of its nobles, and his guidance had true meaning.

“I believe the logistician general, Stempf, to be a lost cause. He has sought patronage since the outset, and found it in the cardinal. He has voted in favour of Gurney’s motions on twelve major issues, abstained only once, and never voted against. I believe he is entirely beholden to Gurney, and

will not be drawn away unless the cardinal is thoroughly defeated. Then, he will seek an immediate alliance with the stronger faction.”

“True enough, but let’s not get ahead of ourselves.” Lucian nodded in agreement with his son’s assessment. “What of the Praefect Maximus?”

“Skissor has no loyalty and no great intellect. He is a man of high birth, but the youngest of many siblings and therefore the least likely to benefit from his connections and resources. He is from Kar Duniash, where the youngest born sons are sent to the planetary levy, for the commissions are less dear than those already purchased for the older sons. The fact that he is not serving in the defence force suggests to me that he somehow side-stepped that duty, probably by luck, but possibly through dishonest means.”

“So, he’s out on a limb?”

“In a manner of speaking, yes, father. He certainly occupies a precarious position, despite his airs. I believe he would be amenable to supporting us, but only if we could prove, pre-emptively, that we are the stronger faction, and the one most likely to perpetuate his own, personal, status quo.”

“So,” said Lucian. “Me, you, the admiral and Sarik. That’s four of us against Gurney, the inquisitor and Stempf. We can talk to Rumann and Jaakho, possibly Sedicae, but Skissor is unlikely. That puts us ahead, by my reckoning.”

“Yes, father,” Korvane hesitated.

“What? Out with it, Korvane.”

“It’s Brielle, father,” Korvane continued. “If she is implicated in this attack on Grand, there is no way the council could support you. The general and the admiral are generous in their support.” Gauge bowed his head to Korvane at the comment. “But Grand need only invoke the power of his Inquisitorial Seal. The council might be disbanded. It would certainly be torn apart.”

“You are right, of course,” Lucian replied, inwardly cursing his daughter for any part she might have played in this mess. “Whatever happens, he must not be pushed to do so. I’m sure only a higher authority than the inquisitor stays his hand, a superior with an agenda we are not yet aware of.”

“What will you do, father?”

“Well, my son, I’ve been in tighter corners, but not by much.” Lucian grinned. “We find Brielle, and I face the council. This reminds me of the time I had to meet the prince of the Steel Eye Reavers, having earlier that evening stumbled upon his daughter and her maidservants engaged in an act that I’m quite sure no human had ever witnessed. I got through that, and I’ll get through this.”

Later that evening, Lucian stood alone in an observation blister atop one of the *Oceanid*’s dorsal sensor pylons. The view from his vantage point was nothing short of stunning, even to such a seasoned spacefarer. The heavy cruiser stretched below, hundreds of metres fore and aft, from her armoured prow section to the clustered drives astern. The *Oceanid* was tethered to the tau station, the wounds of the first space battle still evident on the alien structure’s flanks. The fleet tender, *Harlot*, was pulling away from Lucian’s vessel, slow and gravid with her terrible cargo. Lucian recalled with distaste the replenishment of his warp drive, and was thankful such an operation need only be undertaken very rarely. It would take weeks for the stink of cooked flesh to be scrubbed from his ship’s atmosphere, he thought, resenting the mechanicus and their practices, but knowing he had no choice in the matter.

Further out still, Lucian could see the various ships of the fleet: a dozen capital vessels, most of equivalent displacement to the *Oceanid*, some even heavier, some smaller. *The Blade of Woe*, Admiral Jellaqua’s flagship, lay at anchor three kilometres to the port. Her mighty armoured prow gleamed white in the light of the local star, for the irascible and eccentric Jellaqua had ordered a fresh coat of paint applied before the crossing of the Gulf, and press-ganged work crews had laboured triple shifts to carry out his order in time.

A number of escort squadrons were stationed around the fleet, each deployed to screen the larger, more valuable ships from surprise attack at what was perhaps the crusade's most vulnerable point. Each squadron consisted of three, sometimes four, vessels, whose role was to intercept any enemy attempting to close on one of the battle cruisers, and each captain knew that his ship and crew were entirely expendable so long as his task was done and his charge protected. Such was the tradition in the Imperial Navy, and it made Lucian glad he operated outside of its command.

Schools of smaller vessels, service craft and tenders of all classes, were clustered around each ship or moved to and fro between them. Last minute supplies were delivered, vital maintenance performed, and high-ranking officers ferried back and forth for last minute briefings and consultations.

In all, the sight was one to stir the heart of any ship's master, but for Lucian, it was overshadowed.

The crusade stood on the brink of crossing the Damocles Gulf, but Lucian could only ponder his daughter's fate. She had disappeared, and he had been forced to disown her to the council. The cardinal had ranted and raved, calling for the perpetrator of the attack to be hunted down and brought to justice, and Lucian had no choice but to agree with him. The cardinal had stopped short of naming Lucian's offspring as the attacker, but had noted her disappearance, and commented upon it in council. Whilst the inquisitor lay in the medicae centre, recovering from his wounds, Gurney would not press his case, and Lucian remained in good standing. But Lucian knew that things might soon shift dramatically.

In the meantime, the crusade would penetrate the dark region that was the Damocles Gulf. What lay within, or beyond, he had scarcely a clue, but a part of him, the scion of one of the greatest rogue trader dynasties ever to take the High Lords' charter, revelled in the adventure. Another part of him mourned, for he had, in all likelihood, lost his daughter, whatever had become of her.

Lucian crossed to the access hatch set in the deck. He had a ship to captain, fleet to usurp and an empire to conquer. Perhaps things weren't quite so bad, after all.

CHAPTER SIX

Lucian's gaze was fixed on the chronograph's hands as they counted down to the moment when the *Oceanid* would exit the warp. He could not say how long he had sat in his command throne and stared at the clock face; he had lost track of the passage of time, as it was so easy to do while traversing the depths of the Immaterium.

He blinked, shook his head and tore his eyes away from the slowly moving hands. It was just a trick of the warp, he told himself. He had only briefly glanced towards the chronometer despite what his mind was telling him.

"Mister Raldi." Lucian addressed his helmsman. He got no answer.

"Mister Raldi, are you with us?" He caught a number of the bridge crew shaking themselves as if from a trance, looking around in mild confusion, before exchanging nervous glances. They feared the wrath of their master, expecting it to materialise at any moment.

"Mister Raldi!" Lucian called louder. The helmsman slowly turned to look at Lucian. Raldi's eyes were blank and unfocused, his head lolling slightly to one side. Lucian stood from his command throne and crossed the bridge. Facing his helmsman, he saw what his own face must have looked like only an instant earlier. But where he, and the other bridge crew, had shaken loose the fugue, Helmsman Raldi appeared entirely trapped. Saliva dripped down Raldi's chin. Lucian determined to take drastic action.

"Sorry old friend." He threw a thunderous punch at Raldi's jaw, sending the man crashing face down to the deck in a heap. Lucian bent over the crumpled form, his hand on the helmsman's shoulder. Without warning, Raldi's body tensed, and he turned his head to look over his shoulder, almost eye to eye with Lucian. For an instant it was not Raldi behind those eyes, but as soon as the impression came, it fled once more. Lucian's officer shook his head and spat a great goblet of blood upon the deck, coughing violently as he struggled to his feet.

"What?" Raldi gasped through his bloodied mouth, "What happened, my lord?"

"Just the empyrean having its way," Lucian replied, a cold shiver passing through him. "Just the warp calling us home." He shook his head again, knowing that he would not entirely rid himself of the feeling until they were safely out of the Sea of Souls, back in the material universe. The warp was home to all manner of evils, and few ever crossed it without feeling its effects. Whether nightmares, hallucinations or sudden mood changes, every spacefarer was afflicted in some manner.

Lucian looked to the chronometer once more, seeing that its hands had turned quite some way. The *Oceanid* was due to break warp in scant minutes. Satisfied that Raldi was back at his station, Lucian crossed to his command throne and sat back in the familiar, worn leather seat. He consulted the data-slates arrayed to either side, his expert eye taking in a thousand tiny details in an instant. His vessel performed as she should, despite her age and the rough treatment to which generations of the *Arcadius* had subjected her. All was as ready as it would ever be for the translation from the warp to realspace.

He lifted a polished brass cover mounted on the command throne's seat, an action only he could perform, for the cover was fitted with a genelock that responded only to his own touch. His finger hovered over the large stud beneath the cover plate, and after a moment he depressed it. The bridge lights flickered and died, to be replaced an instant later with the crimson light used when the vessel was at general quarters.

With that simple action, Lucian had signalled to his Navigator, Adept Baru, who lay in his warp trance in his navigation blister high atop the *Oceanid's* superstructure, that all was in readiness. Lucian hated the feeling of another having control over his vessel, but had no choice. Only a Navigator could take a vessel into the warp, pilot its capricious currents, and bring it home to safety at the other end. No mere human could hope to emulate such a feat, and to even try was to invite disaster and damnation as the ravenous beasts dwelling within the Sea of Souls tore the ship and its crew apart, body and soul. Lucian forced the notion from his mind. This voyage was affecting him more than any other had in quite some time, perhaps as much as his first run through the Wheel of Fire in fact, or his last journey to the borders of the Maelstrom.

A final glance at the chronometer told Lucian that exit was imminent. He took a deep breath and forced himself to relax. He'd done this a thousand times before, so why was he so...

Lucian's mind suddenly expanded, his perceptions stretched atom thin as the *Oceanid* reared up through the shallows between the warp and the material universe. He felt his vessel caught upon the crashing surf of impossible energies, surging through from the depths to burst into realspace. In less time than it takes to form a single thought, his mind's eye was presented with a swirling cascade of impossible images and impossible concepts: birth and death on a cosmic scale, and a million, billion futures rent from the fabric of time and space and re-knit into a new path. From one strand of fate were sown five, which were plaited back again into a single strand, the sum greater than the parts. A cosmic fate, orchestrated by ancient powers fleeing their inevitable...

Then the wound in the skein of reality snapped shut behind the *Oceanid* as she burst from the warp. Lucian's pulse thundered in his ears, and he forced his breathing back to a normal rhythm. He looked around the bridge, seeing that the crew had evidently been affected in a similar manner, except Raldi, it seemed, who stood at his station at the *Oceanid's* mighty wheel, as he always did.

"Mister Raldi, how's my ship?" Lucian called, noting with approval that the bridge returned quickly and efficiently to a normal routine, despite the trauma of the warp exit.

"Number three's grumbling a bit, my lord, but nothing I can't contain."

"Well enough, keep an eye on it. I don't want us to be the first to call in the support vessels, at least not this soon."

"Also, my lord..."

"What else?"

"The sub-etheric veins are detecting a localised field of some sort. There's some disturbance to station keeping, but again, nothing I can't compensate for."

"Station nine," Lucian said, addressing the servitor at the gravimetrics station, "perform a primary scan as per Mister Raldi's parameters."

"Astrographics," Lucian continued.

"Yes, sir," the officer at station ten replied.

"Patch your readings through to the holo."

The holo-plinth on the bridge deck before Lucian's command throne came to life, a green, spheroid representation of local space projected in three dimensions. The *Oceanid* sat at the dead centre of the projection, and the entire scene was shot through with gently waving tendrils of what appeared to be some gaseous liquid form.

Lucian looked to the bridge viewing ports on either side, but saw no such phenomenon. Evidently the weird, twisting forms were entirely invisible to the naked eye, though the *Oceanid's* various augurs could detect them, and Raldi could feel their effects upon the helm.

Reams of data scrolled across the projection, and across the pict screens surrounding the command throne. The *Oceanid's* logister banks sought to identify the source of the phenomenon, comparing the readings flooding across the screens to records held within the huge crystal memory-stacks. Lucian watched, seeing that the logisters would fail to identify the effect.

Turning a dial upon the command throne's arm, Lucian expanded the view of local space, the symbol representing the *Oceanid* at the centre shrinking as the view zoomed out. He saw, as he had hoped to, a number of augur returns, all within a quarter of a million kilometres, and all holding station. The returns resolved as the augurs locked upon them, Lucian seeing that they represented four capital vessels and an indefinable number of smaller ships, probably two or three escort squadrons. Lucian determined to congratulate his Navigator upon the accuracy of his warp jump, and ordered the ship-to-ship comms channels open.

Hours later, the *Oceanid* was within communications range of the fleet, and Lucian stood at the centre of his bridge, a cluster of pict screens arrayed around him. Each had been lowered from overhead upon thick cables, and upon each static-laced screen were the head and shoulders of a master of one of the other vessels of the fleet to have reached the first rendezvous point.

There were four of them: Master Florian of the Iron Hands Strike Cruiser *Fist of Light*, Natalia of the *Duchess McIntyre*, Captain Jephanim of the *Honour of Damlas*, and Commodore Ebrahim of the *Ajax*. According to their initial communications, each had arrived at the muster point within the last three days, an impressive feat of navigation, and one that belied the great skill of the Navigators selected to negotiate the unknown regions of the Damocles Gulf.

Master Florian was completing his report to the other four ships' masters.

"I can therefore conclude that intra-ship transfers are unwise, given the nature of the disturbance. I shall manoeuvre the *Fist of Light* to a position from which our superior augurs can cover the widest arc, though to be frank, I do not anticipate any contact with enemy forces."

"Agreed," Lucian replied. Although the four vessels and their tiny escort were undoubtedly exposed and vulnerable, the chances of any enemy locating and engaging them in deep space were microscopically small. Mind you, he thought, Lady Issobellis Gerrit had believed the same prior to the Battle of the Hydra, and look what that attitude had gained her.

"My readings confirm your own. There's something deeply anomalous about this region, as we all knew there would be. But still, there's something I can't quite..."

"You feel it too, Gerrit?" Natalia interrupted Lucian. Though her image upon the pict-slate was grainy and blurred, he could see in it an unsettling hesitancy. It was in her voice, too, he thought, a lingering dread that all was not as it should be in the Damocles Gulf.

"I do, Natalia," Lucian replied, "and it's not just the local sub-etheric. It's the immaterium itself."

"You are correct, Gerrit." Lucian scanned the slates, seeing that it was Captain Ebrahim of the *Ajax* that had spoken. He had not met the man in person, though he had heard that Ebrahim was a well-regarded officer of the line. "My Navigator was afflicted by some form of convulsion as we exited the warp. We very nearly didn't make it out. It was the closest I've ever come to..."

"Is he recovered?" Lucian asked.

"He assures me he needs only a day's rest, two at the most. I'm not sure what happened, but my crew are certainly unsettled by it. My provosts are on double shifts, keeping the mutinous bastards in line, but I am assured all will be well before the second jump."

"Well," replied Lucian, thinking as he spoke, "with all of the disturbance in this region, I think it'll be some time before the entire fleet musters. Use that time well, Ebrahim."

It was five days before the entire fleet mustered at the lonely rendezvous point. As each had arrived, the various ships' masters had arranged more ship-to-ship conferences. None would risk a shuttle journey to a host vessel, for the unusual disturbances afflicting the region continued. The risk of losing experienced captains so early in the crusade was unthinkable, and that of losing all of them at once for the sake of a face-to-face meeting was entirely unimaginable.

Lucian had participated in every such conference, taking on the role of chairman with a natural authority. He far preferred the company, even if it was not face-to-face, of his fellow ships' masters

over that of the council. He considered these men and women to be his equals, while he considered many on the council to be his enemies. He listened to their reports with sympathy, for each told of some minor mishap during the first warp jump, and some of more serious incidents during the exit. None, however, suffered as serious an occurrence as their Navigator suffering convulsions during their warp exit. The thought of that still preyed on Lucian's mind, for he appreciated how close the *Ajax* had actually come to being lost in the warp. He knew that the fleet had additional Navigators amongst its complement, should any such event incapacitate one of their number, but in all likelihood, a vessel whose Navigator suffered such a fate would also be lost, with all hands.

The disappearance of his daughter was also troubling Lucian. In the aftermath of the attack on Inquisitor Grand, and the departure of the fleet, Lucian had very deliberately pushed the issue to the back of his mind. But he had spoken to Korvane of it before they had parted, and had been shocked by his son's attitude. Korvane, it appeared, had anticipated his stepsister's fall from grace, and had displayed an entirely dispassionate reaction to it. Lucian refused to write her off as a lost cause, however. In common with many of his standing, he felt that the mores of what passed as society in the galaxy held little sway over him and his clan. He had the curious notion that Brielle was in all likelihood pursuing her own fate, and he grudgingly admired her for doing so. She would be back, though he would certainly call her to account if her actions cost the Arcadius in any manner.

One of the final tasks Lucian and his son had been faced with before the fleet made warp on the first leg of the crossing of the Damocles Gulf had been the issue of Brielle's cruiser, the *Fairlight*. The pair had gone aboard and conferred with Brielle's officers. Lucian had determined that the ship be turned over to Brielle's chief of operations for the duration of her absence, making it clear to the *Fairlight*'s officer cadre, as well as to Korvane, that he considered that absence temporary. He had spoken with the ship's new, acting master, a long-serving officer by the name of Blaaid, whose line had served the Arcadius since the Fall of Kreel, his great grandfather being one of the petty nobles absorbed into the Arcadius officer cadre during that period. He had shared a bottle of svort with the man, and determined he liked him, even if he could not hold his drink. He had issued Blaaid precise instructions regarding the handling of the *Fairlight*, making it clear that he wanted the cruiser kept well out of harm's way unless given specific orders to the contrary. He was one child down on the dynasty already, and could ill afford to lose one third of that dynasty's space borne assets.

And so, on the fifth day after his arrival at the muster point, the last of the crusade's vessels arrived. It was one of the massive, bloated troop transports, each of which carried an entire regiment of Imperial Guard and sufficient supplies to keep it fighting for years if necessary. The transport's captain had immediately reported widespread lack of discipline amongst the troopers of the 12th Brimlock Light Infantry. General Gauge, travelling on Korvane's vessel with his staff corps, had insisted he shuttle over to put the unrest down in person, but had been persuaded against the idea by Lucian, who had convinced the old veteran of the danger presented by the anomalous sub-space disturbances when no other ship's master had succeeded in doing so.

The last captains' conference had been held, and the second rendezvous point confirmed. The fleet would travel another stretch of its journey, this jump somewhat longer than the first, the Navigators having familiarised themselves somewhat with the ebbs and flows of the warp in this region. The *Oceanid* was due to depart in less than an hour, and Lucian was pleased to note that all preparations were complete. He leant back in his command throne, the sudden inactivity not relaxing him, but quite the opposite. He felt an overwhelming tension, despite the years he had been about his business.

"My lord," a voice from behind the command throne snapped Lucian from his reverie. "Please forgive me my intrusion." Lucian felt a mild irritation, for he had not noticed the arrival of anyone on his bridge. He turned to look over his shoulder, seeing that his visitor was the ship's astropath, Karaldi.

"There is no intrusion, adept. To what do I owe the pleasure?"

The astropath shuffled forward into Lucian's view. He was shocked at the man's appearance. Karaldi had, in Lucian's opinion, been burned out years ago, and he had considered petitioning the guild for a replacement when the opportunity presented itself. Somehow, that opportunity had never arrived, and against his better judgement he had come to like the old eccentric. Karaldi cared nothing for his personal appearance, which was at the very least dishevelled. His robes were dirty and tattered, his hair unkempt and his face unshaven. His eyes were empty sockets, in common with many of his calling, for the soul binding ritual that allowed him to exercise his powers safely had also blasted his senses to oblivion. The ritual, Lucian knew, blinded most astropaths, and some lost other senses too. He harboured the suspicion that Karaldi had lost his olfactory senses, either that, or he really did not care how bad he smelt.

"My lord," the astropath said, bowing deeply to his master, "I have communed with my peers, though only with great difficulty."

"Explain," Lucian replied, unsure of Karaldi's meaning, but suspecting he had some idea.

"There is something wrong here, my lord. I cannot explain it."

"You are not the only one to believe that to be the case, adept. The Navigators describe the warp hereabouts in similar terms, and even I feel ill at ease. What of the astropaths?"

"We commune, but in doing so we hear not only the minds of our peers, but of others, or echoes of others. Forgive me, for I cannot easily describe the sensation to a..."

"Try. You cause no offence. I am master of this vessel and warden of countless souls. If I need to understand, please aid me in doing so."

"Our minds, my lord, when we join in astropathic communion, we become entranced, distracted, as if called away from afar. It's as if our song, our astropathic choir, is subtly, but sweetly, corrupted. A note, a timbre, not of any astropath, joins our song, interweaving with our minds. It is so sweet that none will reject it, though we know we should sever the communion at the slightest outside interference."

Lucian's blood ran cold at the astropath's words. If Karaldi was telling him that some entity was working its way into the minds of the astropaths...

"Oh no, my lord! Never that!" Karaldi blurted, evidently having picked up on Lucian's surface thoughts. Lucian let it go, for now.

"I thank you," Karaldi continued, his face a mask of tension. "No, my lord, it is not some dark thing from the immaterium that whispers to the astropath. It is of this universe, of this place." Karaldi gestured around him, suggesting that the phenomenon he described was specific to this region, to the Damocles Gulf.

"If that is so," Lucian probed, "can you ascribe a source?"

"In a manner of speaking, yes, my lord," the astropath said, wringing his gnarled hands together, clearly uncomfortable, though determined to convey his concerns. "It is all around us, in the ether, in the warp, in the weave of space itself. But it emanates from somewhere within the Gulf, of that we are certain."

"So, the... effect... is likely to increase the deeper the fleet penetrates the Gulf?"

"Most certainly, my lord."

"And your ability to communicate with the other astropaths?"

"Oh, my lord," Karaldi said, his face taking on a pained expression. "The note is so sweet, I fear our song might never sound the same without it."

Lucian saw what his astropath was really trying to tell him. Though the ways of the psyker were foreign to him, they were not downright alien as they were to most men. "You are telling me that to commune with your peers is to court disaster. Am I correct?"

"You are, master." Lucian saw relief upon the astropath's distorted face.

"And have you shared these fears with the other astropaths?"

“Not openly, my lord, though I believe we all share an understanding of the nature of the disturbance. Some of my peers know that to commune is dangerous, but cannot help but do so. Others, I sense, long for the crossing to continue, so that they might close with the source. They crave it, my lord, yet know it might harm them.”

“I see,” Lucian said as he leant back in the command throne, thinking. “I shall signal the fleet that astropathic communications should be kept to a minimum, unless absolutely vital. With luck, the effect will be limited to the Gulf. If not, we’ll find ourselves with no long-range communications and at war with an alien empire. That would not do. Thank you Adept Karaldi, you have served well.”

The astropath bowed deeply, his expression suddenly one of gratitude as opposed to the tension he had displayed on his arrival. Lucian sighed deeply and considered what Karaldi had told him. Something called to the astropaths as they communicated, adding its psychic signal to their own, even as the Navigators reported disturbances within the warp, ship’s crews were restive and sub-space was riven with abnormal and unidentifiable fields. Furthermore, the astropaths in some way craved the interference, perhaps being drawn by its call.

“Comms, open a channel to the flagship.” He would at least ensure that the other ships’ masters were aware of the threat, even if it transpired there was very little they could do to avert any impending disaster.

CHAPTER SEVEN

“All stop!” Lucian called. “Mains to idle. Station keeping please, Mister Raldi.”

The *Oceanid* gradually slowed to a standstill. Lucian stood from the command throne and crossed to the forward observation port. A bass growl passed through the vessel as the retro thrusters at the vessel’s prow coughed to life, the deck plates vibrating with the titanic forces at play. Lucian caught the signs of discord within the familiar tones, and he knew that drive number three was grumbling again. Perhaps once this was all over, he mused, he would be able to put the *Oceanid* into space dock for the renovation that was so long overdue.

His mind curiously distracted, Lucian scanned the view from the armoured port. Out here, in deep space, there were few stars, the blackness of the void immaculate. Yet he knew that the stillness was deceiving, for the region seethed with anomalous forces. Ahead, Lucian could just discern the faintest smudge of lurid turquoise, the dense stellar cluster within which, if all went according to plan, the crusade would encounter the alien empire of the tau.

“Astrographics,” Lucian said, turning to the officer at station ten, “give me local.”

The holograph projector powered up, its subsonic hum deepening beyond audible levels as the green, static laced representation of local space appeared above it. Lucian walked up to the three-dimensional projection slowly turning in the space before him, seeing the *Oceanid*’s icon at the dead centre. Once again, slowly undulating tendrils waved across the sphere, invisible to human eyes, but all too apparent to his vessel’s augurs.

Lucian scanned the projection for the other vessels of the crusade fleet. He found none.

“Increase scan range. Boost gain,” he ordered. The projection shifted as the sensors quested further outwards, Lucian seeking what he expected to see at any moment.

“Nothing, my lord,” said the officer sitting at the astro-graphics station. “We must be the first vessel to arrive on station.”

“Yes,” responded Lucian, thinking that he would have bet on that not having been the case. “Increase scan range. Bleed secondary feeds into the main arrays.”

“Aye, sir,” the officer replied, his hands working the many dials and slides clustered upon his console. Lucian watched with growing impatience as three, non-critical functions were almost entirely stripped of power to boost the augurs as they scanned the local region. The three-dimensional holographic map now displayed a region several hundred thousand kilometres across, though great swathes of it were left blank as the *Oceanid*’s mighty augur banks were pushed further and further out.

The astrographics officer turned to address his master. “I don’t think we’re going to...”

“There!” Lucian said. He walked around the globe of light, and pointed to a dimly glowing sensor return right at its edge. “Full power on these coordinates.”

The officer worked his console once more, and three-quarters of the holographic projection lapsed into an indistinct blur as power was bled from three arrays and shunted into the remaining one. The quadrant grew in relative size as the augurs scanned it, the return becoming more distinct all the while. Reams of text scrolled next to the icon representing the return, the *Oceanid*’s logister banks analysing its nature, comparing it to stored data.

“It’s the *Ajax*, my lord,” The astrographics officer called, “and there’s something...”

“I see it,” Lucian replied. “Boost output to maximum.”

Once more, the projection zeroed in on a single region, the return that was the *Ajax* shifting to the centre of the globe whilst the region beyond her became the object of the augur's attentions. A second return resolved itself, but Lucian could see, had already guessed, that this was no starship.

"It looks like some kind of stellar body, my lord," said the officer, his eyes fixed on the data wildly scrolling across his pict screens. "And I'm picking up what must be false returns too, either that or there're a whole lot of dead vessels out there. It's as if there're a hundred other ships out there one moment, and none the next."

Lucian's mind reeled. He dismissed the false returns, but the chances of encountering a stellar body, light years from any star, were so remote it was simply not worth calculating.

"Something's not right here," Lucian said under his breath.

"Sir?" the astrographics officer said, unsure whether Lucian addressed him or was simply muttering to himself.

Lucian got a grip on himself. "Helm, set course for the *Ajax*, but keep it steady and be ready for a change of orders."

"Aye, sir," the helmsman replied, working the *Oceanid's* great wheel as he brought the vessel round on her new heading.

"Comms," Lucian said, addressing the servitor at station three. "Hail the *Ajax*. Bridge," Lucian continued, addressing all of his officers as one, "I want every one of you to keep a weather eye out. Comms, where's that channel?"

The bridge was filled with the sound of the open channel to the *Ajax*. Only static came back.

As the *Oceanid* had closed on the *Ajax*, Lucian had listened intently for any sign of a response to the continuing hailing signal. He had ordered the channel to be kept open, and endured the wailing and static lest he miss the smallest hint that the *Ajax* was alive. He had no reason to suspect anything more serious than a disabled transmitter, but somehow, he knew that would not be the case.

Lucian stood at the forward viewing port, leaning against the brass bulkhead. The *Ajax* would come into view any moment.

"Range?" Lucian asked, not taking his eyes from the view before him.

Silence.

He turned his head towards his helmsman.

"Range to target, Mister Raldi, now."

The helmsman turned slowly to face Lucian, his eyes unfocused as if the man had drifted off into a waking dream.

"Helm!" Lucian bellowed, his patience growing thin. This region was playing havoc with his and everyone else's nerves, affecting each man differently.

"Sir," Helmsman Raldi replied, his eyes clearing as his attention was forced back to the here and now. "Please sir, I'm... I'm sorry. Range? Um... three kilometres, sir."

"Are you sure?" Lucian replied, his irritation subsiding as fast as it had appeared. "Check your readings, Raldi. I have no visual."

Lucian watched for a moment as the helmsman adjusted myriad dials and knobs around the helm, turning his attention back to the view outside. This far from a star, visual ranges were extremely short, but a capital vessel was generally lit up like a...

"All stop!" Lucian bellowed.

Raldi heaved on the mighty lever beside the helm, bracing his legs for a better purchase on the steel deck. Lucian felt the *Oceanid's* main drives die as their titanic output was routed through emergency vents in their flanks. The force of that alone squeezed the drives in towards each other, causing the vessel's vast metal skeleton to shriek in sudden anguish. An instant later and the banks of retro thrusters at the *Oceanid's* prow coughed into life, their force forestalling the vessel's forward motion with a titanic juddering.

Fighting to remain upright, Lucian called, "Bow arcs, full beam ahead."

Looking once more to the view out front, Lucian was forced to shield his eyes when two great, white beams of light stabbed forward through the darkness. As his eyes adjusted, he watched as the two beams began a wide sweep from port to starboard, crossing each other in the middle before resuming their quest of the all-enveloping darkness.

As the *Oceanid* finally ground to a halt, Lucian saw the great beams settle upon the slab-like flanks of another vessel. As they tracked along its length, lettering ten metres tall spelled out the ship's name: *Ajax*. Not a single running light gave any sign of life, and every last porthole and viewing port loomed as dark as the rotten eye sockets of the corpse of some long dead leviathan.

Lucian reclined in his command throne, a half empty glass of asuave in his hand. He brooded, his mood growing ever darker with each passing hour. The *Ajax* appeared, to the naked eye and to every augur trained upon her, to be dead in space. He seethed with frustration for he longed to assemble a boarding party, to cross the insignificantly miniscule distance between the two vessels and ascertain just what had transpired. But he could not do so, for the sub-space augurs warned that the ongoing disturbance in the fabric of the void made even the short hop to the *Ajax* too risky, unless no other course of action presented itself.

Another reason Lucian brooded so was the effect that the Damocles Gulf appeared to be exerting upon his crew. The bridge officers were steady enough, and the servitors obviously entirely unaffected, but of the other stations and ranks he was far less certain. The crew chiefs reported a growing number of infractions, each of which was met with increasingly harsh punishment. Drunken brawls and petty thefts amongst the conscripted ranks were to be expected, but of late the nature of the crimes had escalated, culminating in a number of serious assaults upon low ranked officers. Lucian had ordered the chiefs to impose the very harshest of penalties, for he knew that it was only a matter of time before some rabble rouser got a mob together and went on the rampage. That had not occurred on the *Oceanid* in over a decade, and on that occasion Lucian had been forced to lead a charge into the enginarium that the mutineers had captured. Lucian had taken the thuggish leader on in hand-to-hand combat, executing him out of hand, as was his right as master of the vessel.

But behind the ill discipline was quite understandable superstition. Lucian had no doubt that the Damocles Gulf was permeated with a tangible air of... something he could not quite put his finger on. It was a menace, but not in the sense of that experienced near the Eye of Terror. This was more a sensation of something... alien... permeating the very fabric of space, as if the region were not actually meant to exist at all.

The galaxy was home to many zones where the laws of conventional physics broke down, or offered scant explanation for the phenomena at play within them, regions such as the Eye of Terror and the Maelstrom, where the very stuff of the immaterium leaked into the material universe through great seeping wounds many hundreds of light years across. Others were similar in nature, yet nowhere near as threatening, such as the Storm of the Emperor's Wrath. Other features, such as the Wheel of Fire or Hangman's Void were entirely unexplainable, yet had become familiar, for want of a better word, hazards of spacefaring.

Lucian's mind returned to the question of the *Ajax*. She showed no outward sign of physical damage, and so he was faced with the awful possibility that some tragedy had overtaken her within the warp, or at the point of her exit. If that proved likely, he would be foolish to lead a boarding party onto her, for fear of whatever taint might linger aboard. Lucian doubted that he could muster a boarding party willing to perform the task in any case, and all his experience and every ounce of Arcadius collective wisdom told him that such a course was sheer folly.

Lucian took another sip of the thick liquor. He glowered at the slowly revolving holograph, his gaze moving from the pair of icons that represented the *Oceanid* and the *Ajax*, to the dark shadow beyond. It could only be a small, rogue planet, yet it appeared entirely impenetrable to the

Oceanid's augurs. The body barely even registered with the ship's scanners, but its presence seemed to cast a dour shadow, even though it was invisible to the naked eye, entirely swallowed by the interstellar darkness of the Damocles Gulf.

Lucian forced his train of thought back on to the here and now. The sensors appeared incapable of shedding any light on just what was going on, and there was no sign of any other vessel of the fleet arriving any time soon. He desperately needed to know what had befallen the *Ajax*, lest the same fate overtake his own vessel, or any other of the fleet. He had but one option.

"Summon Astropath Karaldi," Lucian ordered the nearest bridge officer, "and get me another drink."

It was three hours before the *Oceanid's* astropath appeared on the bridge in response to Lucian's summons. Having waited thirty minutes, Lucian had dispatched a junior officer to escort Adept Karaldi, but had been informed that the man was otherwise engaged. "Astropathicus business," the officer had reported. Lucian had waited, but had seethed all the while. He was in no mood for Karaldi's eccentricities.

"My lord," the astropath said, bowing deeply as he entered the bridge, "please forgive my tardiness. I was performing certain rites, my lord. I could not..."

"Well enough, adept. You are here now." Lucian walked to the forward observation port and looked out at the *Ajax*. The mighty spotlights still swept her cliff-like flanks, blindingly bright where they crossed.

"Yes, my lord." The astropath appeared uncomfortable, though that in itself was not entirely unusual for the man. "How might I serve you?"

"Come here, adept."

Karaldi approached the viewing port, wringing his hands in obvious nervousness. He regarded Lucian, before following his gaze.

"The *Ajax*," Lucian said.

"Yes, my lord," Karaldi replied.

"We can't communicate with her."

"No, my lord," the astropath murmured, almost too quietly for Lucian to hear. But Lucian was close enough, so close that he could smell the liquor on Karaldi's breath.

"Yes," Lucian said, his tone flat, yet entirely unequivocal.

"I cannot, my master." Karaldi's eyes were wide as he pleaded. "Please, do not ask me to..."

"To do your duty?" Lucian replied, his voice now icy cold. "If I cannot call upon you to do this thing, what use are you to me? Why should I not petition the guild for a replacement, for one who can do his duty?"

Karaldi nodded, and looked out of the view port once more. Lucian caught the look of dread on the astropath's face as he squinted blindly at the *Ajax*. Karaldi lifted a golden aquila hanging from a chain around his scrawny neck, and cupped it in both hands. He bowed once more to his master.

"Might I have an hour to prepare?" Adept Karaldi asked.

"One hour," Lucian replied, "no more."

Lucian had ordered the bridge crew to vacate their stations, all bar the servitor at the communications console, which monitored the still open, howling channel for any sign of life aboard the *Ajax*. Lucian stood in the centre of the darkened bridge, looking down upon the cross-legged astropath.

"My lord, you have witnessed an astropathic trance, but I must warn you that what I am about to undertake is something different from that. Remote prognostication is not..."

"I do not need to know the details, adept. Just tell me if I need do anything, and I shall do it."

Karaldi sighed, his shoulders sagging. “No, my lord, you need only watch. Though if you would...”

“What?”

“If you would pray for me, my lord. And if it is not me who speaks to you...”

“I know what to do, adept, have no doubt.” Lucian unconsciously patted the holster of his plasma pistol. Although he had but an inkling of what awaited the adept, he knew there were risks in what he had asked Karaldi to do.

The astropath did not answer, for he had already begun the rite. Lucian fought against the urge to prowl around the ail-but empty bridge, forcing himself to stand still and look on whilst the astropath entered his trance.

Lucian recalled the times he had witnessed Karaldi undertake an astropathic communion, and briefly wondered how different this might seem to those uneducated, though not entirely ignorant, in the ways of the psyker. His abiding perception in past instances had been of a sudden and dramatic drop in temperature. Would the remote prognostication be the same, he wondered?

In a moment, he had his answer.

The shadows of the darkened bridge suddenly closed in upon the astropath, flowing as liquid over the deck to engulf his body. Lost in a trance, Karaldi appeared not to notice, though Lucian could barely discern his features amidst the well of inky shadow that surrounded him. Then, the astropath’s body began to sway gently from side to side, and Lucian saw that there was something odd in his movements. The swaying increased as Lucian looked on, Karaldi’s motions becoming slow and languid, impossibly slow, in fact, as if viewed on a pict-slate with the playback set at one tenth the normal speed.

Lucian watched with increasing horror, his neck prickling. Karaldi’s expression slowly transformed, until his face was a mask of terror. The astropath’s mouth slowly opened as if he screamed the lonely wail of the eternally damned, though Lucian heard not a sound issue forth from his throat.

Lucian’s horror mounted still further as he looked on. Karaldi’s body tensed, every muscle pulled taut. Although the astropath’s movements appeared impossibly slow, his face blurred as if in rapid movement. He screamed his silent scream as the shadows all around closed in still further.

Then Lucian caught, at the very edge of hearing, a sound that filled him with primal dread. The cold chill of the void filled his veins, the ashen stink of oblivion cloying at his nostrils. Yet still, he forced himself to look on, though he felt the claws of the warp tug and grasp at his very sanity.

The sound increased in volume as if its source grew nearer all the while. Lucian knew that it came from the astropath’s still screaming mouth, as if it were the entrance to a tunnel along which something from a nightmare thundered ever closer. Karaldi’s mouth filled Lucian’s vision as the cacophonous wail grew louder and louder.

Then, the scream exploded from Karaldi’s mouth and the shadows leapt back. The astropath’s movements ceased their leaden blur, his body released as if he had been struggling against invisible bindings now suddenly released.

Lucian came forward as Karaldi collapsed to the deck, catching the man by the shoulders before he dashed his head against the steel plating. The astropath looked up at him with empty eye sockets, a crimson track running from each. What have I done, Lucian thought, cradling the man in his arms. He rejected the thought as quickly as it formed. I did what I had to, he told himself, for the sake of the fleet.

Lucian bellowed for a medicae servitor to attend the astropath. Blood pooled in Lucian’s hands and spread in a wide pool across the deck.

“Can he speak?” Lucian asked, sitting beside Adept Karaldi’s recumbent form. As he did so he looked around at the medicae bay. Odd memories of the place surfaced in his mind: memories of his

grandfather lying mortally wounded in the very bed in which the astropath now lay; memories of countless others hurt in the course of their duties to the line of Arcadius.

The bay was stark white, a dozen medicae servitors permanently engaged in the simple task of scrubbing its every surface with caustic, sharp smelling antiseptic. Each bed along the bay's rectangular length was crowded with a halo of arcane equipment, the operation of many known only to the tiny staff that maintained them. That staff now clustered around the bed at which Lucian sat.

Adept Estaban, personal physician to Lucian, as he had been to an unspecified number of previous generations of Arcadius, stood at the head of the bed. Estaban was an enigma to Lucian, but he trusted him, quite literally, with his life. The surgeon had administered three courses of life-preserving rejuve, already having prolonged Lucian's life way past the span of a normal man's. The surgeon wore his white rubber smock, smeared with the blood of his patient, and a mask obscured his face. Various analytic probes and sensors were mounted around his head, through which he studied his patient intently. Estaban's staff clustered around him: three female medicae assistants, each adorned in a similar manner to their master, and each smeared in a quantity of blood. A medicae servitor stood beside each assistant, grossly pumping clear tubes and cables snaking from its body, directly into the patient's veins.

Estaban looked up at Lucian's arrival, his bloodshot left eye magnified grotesquely as it focused on him.

Realising that the surgeon had been so intent upon the astropath that he had not heard the question, Lucian repeated himself.

"Karaldi, can he speak?"

"Oh," Estaban said, lifting the glass from his eye. "The patient is conscious my master, though in some state of delirium, I fear." The surgeon reached out a black rubber clad hand and touched the astropath's cranium. "Quite what goes on in the mind of one such as he..."

Lucian took his gaze from Estaban, mildly repulsed, as he always was, by the surgeon's peculiar manner. He looked at Master Karaldi's face, stunned at how old the astropath suddenly appeared to be.

"Adept," Lucian said softly, but insistently, gently squeezing Karaldi's wrist. There was no response.

He heard Estaban mutter to one of his assistants. The woman, her face obscured behind a white face mask, adjusted a series of dials mounted upon the chest of the medicae servitor standing next to her. She nodded smartly as the liquid pumping through the cable from the servitor to the patient changed colour, from a sickly yellow to an actinic green.

"Who..." the patient stammered. A second medicae assistant reached across Lucian and made some adjustment to the catheter inserted into Karaldi's bloody forearm.

"All better," she said primly, smearing Karaldi's blood from her hand across the front of her white rubber apron.

"Karaldi," Lucian said, determined to garner some response from his astropath. He prayed the man's sanity, or what was left of it, even before he had entered the trance, was not shot entirely. "You must concentrate. I need to know what you saw. What's happened to the *Ajax*?"

"The *Ajax*?" Karaldi asked, some degree of lucidity returning as the intravenous fluid flowed from the servitor's body to his. "My lord, nothing. Nothing has happened to the *Ajax*."

Lucian looked to the surgeon, who shook his head slowly. One of the medical assistants leaned across and mopped Karaldi's sweating brow, her eyes regarding him with curious and mildly disturbing intent. "Adept, please listen to me. Something has befallen the *Ajax*, and I need to know what, in case it—"

"No, my lord," the Astropath cut in, "it has not, not yet."

The three medicae assistants shared knowing glances, and the surgeon shook his head yet again. They appeared to Lucian to have given up on the astropath, perhaps believing that Karaldi was in the grip of some fatal fever. Lucian, however, would not give up quite yet.

“What do you mean, adept? What do you mean ‘not yet’?”

Silence followed Lucian’s question, broken only by the low humming of the medicae bay’s equipment and the patient’s laboured breathing. A cold suspicion crept into Lucian’s mind.

“That’s it, my lord,” Karaldi said, his blank eye sockets boring straight at Lucian as if the astropath met his very gaze. “You have the truth of it. You know of what I speak.”

“No,” Lucian said, shaking his head in denial, refusing to accept what he was being told.

“Yes!” Karaldi spat back, the madness so often present in his tone coming entirely to the fore. “Nothing has happened to the *Ajax*, yet!”

Lucian stood, his seat toppling into a bank of medicae equipment as he staggered back. His mind reeled as he looked upon the profusely sweating astropath, yet more blood seeping from his blank eye sockets to run down his cheeks in vile, crimson rivulets. Karaldi described what all spacers dreaded, a warping of time, in which the ghosts of events yet to pass haunted the present.

“Sedate him, for the Emperor’s sake,” Lucian ordered. “Put him out, and keep him out until I say otherwise.”

Adept Estaban fussed around the equipment as he issued terse orders to his staff. Karaldi convulsed as a new concoction of drugs was pumped into his body, a powerful mixture that knocked him out in seconds.

“Better now,” one of the medicae assistants crooned as she wiped the astropath’s brow. “All better now.”

CHAPTER EIGHT

“Master on deck!” the crew chief bellowed as Korvane stepped from the bulkhead portal, passing from the lifter shaft into the very guts of the *Rosetta*.

He paused, appraising the rabble before him. The wide thoroughfare was lined with crewmen, each of whom stood to attention, right arm raised in a perfunctory salute. He had travelled to an area of the ship that was scruffy and ill-kept, unlike the stately corridors he was used to. Korvane saw immediately that these were not the crisp uniformed officers of the upper decks, but the real crew of the rogue trader flotilla, the press-ganged scum, the indentured flotsam and jetsam of a thousand different ports. He hated them, and he was quite sure they hated him just as much.

Korvane cast a glance around the assembled men and women, crew members interrupted in the myriad tasks and toils they engaged upon each day, most of which Korvane had not the slightest knowledge of. Then, he noticed an unfamiliar element amongst the crewmen: tall, dusky skinned men and women, dressed in loose fitting, olive drab fatigues, dog tags clinking around their necks.

The chief had evidently followed his master’s gaze, for he straightened up and puffed out his chest. The huge man, his bulky frame evidence of muscle run to fat with the encroachment of years, advanced upon the nearest group of strangers. Korvane’s interest was piqued, leading him to follow silently behind the crew chief. He guessed what was coming.

Approaching a fatigue-clad figure leaning against a bulkhead, the crew chief raised himself to his full height. Eye to eye with the other man, the petty officer spoke so quietly that Korvane could barely hear him, though he followed close behind.

“When I says ‘master on deck’,” the chief growled, “I actually means, ‘bow down before he who on this ship is second only to the Emperor, praise be his name, you worthless Guard scum.’ Does I make myself clear?”

Silence descended. The Imperial Guard trooper, for it was obvious the strange figures were from one of Gauge’s regiments being transported on the *Rosetta*, straightened, meeting the chief eye to eye.

Korvane felt the threat of imminent physical violence. He fingered his holster, reassuring himself that his las-pistol was close at hand. If the Guardsmen would not be cowed, he knew he would have to defend himself, and though he was well tutored in such matters, it was for the non-commissioned ranks, not for him, to impose discipline upon the crew. He knew that his father would have waded in and distributed summary justice the instant someone spoke out of line, but Korvane, to his own estimation at least, had been raised better than that. He knew his place, and considered it only correct that others should too.

The stand-off continued, the chief evidently allowing the trooper a moment or two to consider his predicament. The man’s eyes darted from side to side, judging, Korvane guessed, the odds of his small group of warriors prevailing against the chief and the crowd of press-ganged scum that edged in upon the scene. A bead of sweat ran from the man’s brow, yet the chief did not even blink. The trooper’s eyes darted around once more, before meeting Korvane’s. He held the trooper’s gaze, before the man looked back to the chief.

“I didn’t...” the trooper began to utter, before the chief unloaded a piston of a right-handed upper cut to his chin. The trooper was slammed back against the metal bulkhead, knocked unconscious by the impact. The man’s form slid to the floor as a number of dislodged teeth clattered

across the deck. The chief did not even look at his victim, his gaze locked upon the trooper's compatriots.

"I will deal with this, my lord," the chief said to Korvane, not turning around. "A little bit of discipline needs dishing out."

"Very well," Korvane replied, looking upon the mess the chief's punch had made of the trooper's face, "carry on."

Korvane passed from this area into one far more crowded, yet thankfully far less unsavoury. The vast, central cargo areas of the *Rosetta* had been turned over to a number of Imperial Guard units, amounting, so General Gauge had informed him, to something in the region of five thousand combatants and a similar number of support personnel. A wide companionway ran the length of the vessel's spine, passing the vast bays in which the troopers were housed. The huge interlocking blast doors had been raised and the entire area was a hive of unfamiliar activity. Korvane saw one cargo bay given over entirely to rows of sleeping mats, so many that they stretched off into the distance along the entire length of the vast space. He had passed another bay in which the troopers practiced unarmed combat, several thousand warriors paired up, sparring with one another, all with blood-streaked faces and swollen lips. Assorted hangers-on, the regimental train as Gauge had called it, were to be found at every turn. Every regiment of the Imperial Guard relied on them as much as they did upon the *Officio Munitorum*. Lay armourers offered to service faulty weapons or patch up worn armour, cooks and peddlers plied their unsavoury wares, and sultry women offered other, vital services to the trooper keen to divest himself of what little funds he held.

Korvane was at once intrigued and repulsed by the spectacle of the Imperial Guard having taken over several decks of his vessel. Intrigued, for they had brought with them an almost entirely self-sustaining economy, complete with its unique cultural and societal mores. Repulsed, for he saw that outside of the disinterested and detached officer cadre, thugs and hoodlums ran this micro-society, with no regard for birth or rank. Korvane himself had been raised in the most rarefied of atmospheres, at the Court of Nankirk, where he had studied under the most refined of tutors. To him, these men and women inspired revulsion, and he would not be able to rest until they were off his ship.

Feeling his gorge rise, Korvane closed his fist over the small package he carried in his coat pocket. Pain shot the length of his arm, the lingering effects of the injuries he had sustained in battle against the tau at Arrikis Epsilon. He need only bear it a little longer, he told himself, striding on through the crowded decks as crewmen halted to stand to attention in his wake.

"My lord," an officer called out as Korvane stepped on to the bridge. "My lord, I must bring to your attention a number of troubling reports."

Korvane regarded the man with weary indifference. He was about to reply when the officer continued.

"It's the Guard sir. We've been receiving some disturbing reports of ill-discipline and petty crime." The man proffered him a data-slate, but Korvane pushed past.

"I don't have time," he sighed, weary of the endless disruptions to his vessel's normally smooth running, weary, he realised, of the voyage across the Damocles Gulf.

"But sir," the officer insisted, "these really are rather urgent. They say it's the warp, sir, and they say it's getting worse. The armsmen fear things might get out of hand if something is not..."

"I said"—Korvane snapped as he rounded on the officer, "I don't have time." He felt an unfamiliar anger rise within him, one he knew his father would have had to fight hard against to suppress. His stepsister would not even have tried. Drawing on all the courtly etiquette with which he had been raised, Korvane steadied himself. The officer waited patiently, his face a mask of professional detachment.

"I shall review your reports presently," Korvane replied. "Dismissed."

With a click of polished boot heels, the officer departed, leaving Korvane to pass across his bridge to the day room at its rear. As he crossed the deck, he could not help but be reminded of the terrible conflagration that had engulfed it during the battle against the tau at Arrikis Epsilon. Large sections of bulkhead had been replaced, often for the first time since the vessel's construction, the gleaming metal stark against the patina of a thousand years. Here and there, the metal had been melted by the intense heat of the battle, to blister and run like mercury across the deck. In places, these run-offs remained, set hard upon the bulkhead like solidified lava. The heat had inflicted a similar fate upon Korvane's body, though thankfully his father's surgeon had worked masterfully upon his scars, rendering all but the very worst invisible. He still felt his wounds though, deep inside, and he raged against the misfortune that had come so close to crippling him.

Passing in to his day room, Korvane sat heavily upon a padded and studded leather recliner, the peerless work, he dimly recalled, of the long extinct Dreyfuss artisan clan of New Valaxa. He slumped upon the recliner, vaguely aware that he should comport himself in a far more appropriate manner whilst sitting upon such a priceless artefact. Yet, he could not bring himself to care about the Dreyfuss, only about what was in the pocket of his jacket.

He withdrew his hand from his pocket, and opened it slowly. A small vial of clear liquid lay in his heavily scarred palm. The man in the enginarium had claimed that it was a potent analgesic, one that could reverse pain and transform it into something approaching pleasure.

Korvane sighed as he recalled the endless treatments he had subjected himself to in the aftermath of Arrikis Epsilon. Though each had lessened his outward scarring, they had in turn heaped upon him a concomitant pain deep within. At first he had taken standard pain killing drugs, then he had progressed to more potent metaopi-oids. Though he refused to fully acknowledge the fact, even to himself, he had developed a taste for the drugs, a taste far in excess of their medical efficacy.

As master of his vessel, not one of the medicae staff had dared refuse him access to the metaopioids. Yet, in time and with prolonged and ever-increasing use, the drugs' effects had reduced and the pain had slowly returned, this time far worse than ever before. He had been driven into the depths of his vessel, to the company of the lowest of the low amongst the press-ganged murderers and rapists, to seek out a source of pain killing drugs. He had found one, discovering to his great distaste that the vast majority of the engine crew were addicted to the stuff. They needed, he had been told, to stave off the crippling pain inflicted by their continuous exposure to the unstable fields that flooded the plasma containment decks. He cared very little for the fate of the scum who worked those decks, yet he ensured that his contact was moved to a safer station in the enginarium, lest he succumb to the effects of the fields.

The new substance, referred to by the crew who used it as "d-sense", had given back to Korvane some of the life he had enjoyed before. The pain went away each time he took the substance, and it did not even begin to return for days at a stretch. He hated it, yet, he knew, he needed the d-sense to function, for now at least.

He closed his fist around the vial, considering whether to take its contents now, or to wait a while longer until the pain increased to the point where he would have no choice but to do so. He looked up sharply as he caught a faint, unfamiliar sound at the very edge of his hearing. The Imperial Guard passengers were no doubt playing havoc with the orderly running of his ship. He opened his palm once more, hearing even as he did so the same faint tone. He felt distracted and annoyed, partly at the very fact of the intrusion, but equally because he simply could not place the sound. It was an eerie reverberation, an undulating tone that promised bewitchment if only he could pinpoint its source.

With a substantial effort of will, Korvane shook off the distraction and focused upon the vial. He would take it now, he resolved, if for no other reason than to throw off the weird fugue no doubt inflicted by the vessel's continued passage through the warp. With sudden conviction, he pulled the stopper from the glass vial and in a swift motion poured the liquid into his open mouth. The d-sense

had no discernible taste, but the effect was almost instantaneous. Pain he had not even registered swept from him as if he were cleansed by the very purest of mountain springs. His spirit soared as he sank into the recliner's soft leather padding.

Even as he felt the last of the pain wash from him, he heard the weird sound once more. Perhaps, he thought, it had not been a product of the warp working upon his strained and overstretched mind. Perhaps, he felt with growing conviction, it was something he really should investigate.

Lifting his head from the comfort of the recliner's tall back, Korvane sought to identify the direction from which the sound emanated. He turned his head slowly, concentrating. As hard as he tried, he could not place a direction upon the sound. His pain quite forgotten, Korvane stood, straining all the while to keep the haunting tone at the very forefront of his attention.

Treading softly so as to avoid his footsteps drowning out the song, he crossed his ready room and, cautiously and deliberately, hauled open the heavy bulkhead door. All was as it should be upon the bridge, the *Rosetta's* command crew busily engaged upon their myriad everyday tasks. The officer who had waylaid Korvane with the report turned, and upon seeing Korvane back on the bridge made to reach for his data-slate. Korvane flashed the man a look that left the officer in no doubt that his master was not to be disturbed, and crossed the bridge and went out of the main portal, on to the wide companionway beyond.

Once in the passage, Korvane halted once more, listening for the distant sound. He picked it up straight away, and could discern variations in its pitch and cadence; it was forming into a voice, giving song to the most heavenly sound imaginable.

He looked around, attempting to discern whether or not any crew nearby had noted the song. A number of junior officers and senior ratings passed by him, each saluting respectfully to their master. A couple appeared distracted, Korvane felt, but none appeared to be intently focused upon the sound. Perhaps, he mused, they too had put the phenomenon down to the tricks of the warp.

Korvane knew, somehow, that the song was no trick. It was real, and he would find its source.

As Korvane had passed along the *Rosetta's* companion-ways, the song had grown clearer and yet more entrancing. After a while, it became clear to him that others of his crew had heard it too, and it appeared that several hundred officers and ratings had found a reason to walk, slowly and deliberately, in the same direction. Korvane had resolutely ignored them. He determined that the song was none of their concern, though he did not go so far as to order them to return to their duties.

As Korvane had passed the central decks, those adjacent to the vast transportation bays, he had noted that the area was almost entirely empty of the thousands of Imperial Guardsmen who had crowded the place when last he had passed through. The cavernous holds were eerily devoid of life, though the warriors' equipment and personal effects were strewn all over the decks, as if cast away and forgotten in an instant.

Only now, as Korvane approached the *Rosetta's* main flight deck did he come across a warrior of the Imperial Guard; and not just one warrior, but every last one of them. The entire regiment, it appeared, was filing onto the flight deck, clearly following the celestial song emanating from somewhere up ahead.

That song now filled Korvane's consciousness so completely that he scarcely cared about the sheer outlandishness of the events unfolding around him. The song was all that mattered to him, for it was so loud as to drown out all other background noise. Even the ever-present drone of the *Rosetta's* plasma core was inaudible.

The wide passage leading to the flight deck was completely crowded with Guard troopers. All were moving towards the open portal that led to the vast space from which the *Rosetta's* shuttles, pinnacles and lighters plied near-space when in orbit around a planet. Korvane joined the tide of bodies, passing along with them, his attention focused only on the song as it grew louder and clearer. As he passed through the portal onto the flight deck, the song grew clearer still, and he

could easily discern a single voice amidst the beatific chorus, a voice that he was quite sure sang to him and to him alone.

The flight deck was several hundred metres wide, its hard pan surface pitted and scarred by the passage of many small vessels over the centuries. One entire wall was a mighty blast door, beyond which lay a small bubble of real space, and beyond that, held at bay by the *Rosetta's* geller field, the raging ocean of souls that was warp space. As the crowds spilled out onto the flight deck, each individual, whether officer, rating or Imperial Guardsmen, dispersed, each seeking the enchantment of the heavenly song.

Korvane slowed as he crossed the centre of the deck, noting distractedly the markings and guidance lights at his feet. He halted, his eyes upon the mighty armoured blast door as the song swept in all around him. It swirled in the very air, the ghostly voice whispering to him as if the singer pressed her lips to his ears and breathed her celestial promises straight into his soul. As Korvane watched, the mighty pistons above the blast door ground to life, a deep rumbling filling the deck as a line of impossibly bright, violet light appeared at its base.

Distant panic welled up at the edge of Korvane's psyche, to be soothed and born away in an instant, by flurries of ghostly voices. Korvane watched the blast door opening, but he knew the shielding that protected it even when the doors were opened to space would contain the atmosphere within the flight deck.

As the door rose, the violet light flooded the deck, casting long, diffuse shadows behind each individual. Korvane's heart leapt as his vision was engulfed, the others all around receding from his mind until he appeared to stand alone in the vast space, the light shining only on him. The song grew to a soaring crescendo, yet a single voice amidst the chorus sang for him and him alone. It was a voice of such sweetness and perfection that he felt he had known it all his life. Or perhaps he had simply sought it all his life, without knowing, unaware that such beauty could exist, yet still waiting for its promise to be fulfilled.

Korvane knew that he would now meet the creature whose voice had drawn him here.

A silhouette resolved itself from the blazing glory that flooded through the raised door to the *Rosetta's* flight deck. Korvane stared into that light, knowing that here was the source of the song that he now heard not with his ears, but in his very soul. The shape became a figure, curvaceous and lithe, swimming through the air as if through water, darting lightly towards him in a series of rapid, stop-start movements. With each halt the figure made, its limbs waved as if caressed by a gentle ocean current, before moving onwards once more.

Korvane squinted, his breath catching in his throat. With a final, sudden movement, the figure glided, languid and sensuous, towards him, the song intensifying all the while. Her shape became clearer as she appeared from the light, the outline of her flawless body etched against the violet behind. He saw rounded hips and a supple back arched in motion. Gentle shoulders and delicate arms lifted as she settled directly before him, as if stepping from an ocean current onto a soft, sea floor.

Korvane knew that he was entirely bewitched. Yet he cared not, for damnation, if this was it, appeared to be a sweet eternity. Even as he watched, the figure resolved before him and he looked upon a kind of beauty never meant to be witnessed by mere mortals.

She stood before him, her beauty so complete it seared his soul. He looked upon a figure of such perfection that he could drink in the sight of but the smallest portion of her body and know complete satiation. She appeared human, yet Korvane somehow knew that such a term could never describe her; that she was so much more than such a word could encompass. He was humbled for a moment, almost shamed in her presence, an intense feeling of unworthiness causing him to cast his glance down to the floor lest his gaze somehow sully her. Then, as the celestial chorus softened, levelling out into a single, gently modulating note, he knew that he was meant to look upon her, that it was his destiny to do so, that he was always meant to do so.

Her hair was black, yet it shimmered with glittering iridescent hues, from pink, to purple, to blue, as scented oil swirls across the surface of dark water. It was cut across her forehead, framing her pale, oval face. Its dark coils tumbled gently down her shoulders and traced the contours of her body, to lie gently against her soft belly and round hips. Her skin was as pale as ivory, and glittered as if dusted with the frost of the void.

His gaze finally settled upon her face. It was the face of perfect innocence, of sublime purity. He could scarcely believe he could look upon it and not somehow soil it with his own, inherent imperfection. Her face was turned down, but her eyes looked upwards into his. They sparkled with the violet light from which she had swum. With what he knew might be his last conscious action, Korvane dared to meet those eyes.

“I can take your pain away,” she told him, her perfect, rosebud lips barely parting as she spoke. The sound of her voice transcended mere human language, so that Korvane felt tears rising in the yawning silence that followed, mourning their passing as if a loved one had died.

“I can give you all you desire.”

Korvane sank to his knees, knowing that she spoke the truth. He raised his head, tears flowing freely down his face, to look up into her eyes. She regarded him with an expression of serenity, even love, and Korvane felt his soul wither before its light.

“How?” he made himself ask, the mere act of speaking a titanic effort.

The ghost of a smile touched the corner of her perfect mouth, before she lifted herself from the floor as if propelling her body into the non-existent ocean current. She propelled herself over him with a single motion, coming to rest at his back. He was afforded an unhindered view of the glorious light spilling through the launch bay, and he was almost blinded by its beauty. He felt lips pressed to his ear from behind.

“Come with me,” she whispered. “Come with me and all will be perfect.”

Confusion welled within him. “Come with you? But where?”

“Out there, my love.” The creature’s lips settled upon the flesh of Korvane’s neck, causing sublime electricity to course through his body. He fought hard to cling to his wits, but knew he was slipping away. Even as he gazed into the light, he felt the creature’s mouth moving down his neck, planting impossibly gentle kisses as they did so.

Then, amidst the light and the sound, the scent of her skin and the touch of her lips, he perceived the faintest insinuation of discord. He turned his head just a fraction, so as to locate the source of the perception. Even as he did so, the creature’s arms snaked around his waist, her fingers working the fastenings on his uniform jacket. Though almost entirely subsumed by the creature’s touch, Korvane felt the disturbance again, and against all his desires, he fought to retain some measure of control. He looked once more to the light blazing through the launch bay doors, some distant part of his mind clinging to reality even as he slipped further and further away from it.

“Out there,” he muttered, barely able to concentrate as the creature’s hands slipped inside his open jacket, “but it’s not safe out there.”

“Shhh,” the creature breathed.

“But it’s not...”

Korvane felt pain flare across his chest as the creature dug razor sharp nails into his skin. He could not help but cry out.

“You like that, don’t you my love.” She withdrew her hands from his jacket, and Korvane caught a glimpse of crimson upon them. He felt her pull back, and an instant later she was before him once more, having flipped as through water in one, graceful motion. She settled on the deck, her legs folded under her body, and leant forward upon her slender arms. She looked up into his eyes, her hair swimming around her and her eyes blazing with violet iridescence. A drop of what he knew to be his own blood was smeared at the corner of her mouth.

“Come with me, my love, and I shall render unto you such secrets. I shall tell of creation and birth, of incubation and potential unbound. You shall walk at my side, amongst the gods of ancient

times and of ages yet to be.” She reached out her hand, holding it palm upwards. “Join me, Korvane Gerrit Arcadius, join us. Come with me.”

Korvane’s mind swam at her words. Yet, a small voice deep within questioned what the creature had said. Did she really expect him to leave his ship, even while it traversed the warp? To do so was madness. Perhaps she had no understanding of such things, perhaps to such as her they were but petty, everyday inconveniences. Yet still, doubt welled up from the centre of his being.

“I cannot come with you,” he said. He choked on his words even as he spoke them, tears flooding down his cheeks. That small part of him that rebelled at what was occurring grew stronger, but still, doubt and grief threatened to drown him. “Couldn’t you stay here, with me?” He sobbed, knowing the futility of his words even as they left his mouth.

“Look upon me, Korvane,” she breathed. “Look upon me and know that you will never again see such perfection should you refuse me. I know you, Korvane, I know you more than you know yourself. I know so much more. I know what she did to you, of the pain you fight everyday, and what you would do, what you have done, to visit justice upon her.” She pushed back with her arms so that she sat upright on her folded legs. She spread her arms wide, her hair swaying around her on the raging ocean current.

“I can help you,” she whispered. “Before we depart, together, you and I, I can finish her for you.”

“But she’s gone!” Korvane spluttered. “For all I know she’s dead!”

“She is not dead, Korvane. She is nearby. I could draw her here, if you like, and visit upon her such pains, or such pleasures, as I desire. What would you have me do with her, my love?”

Korvane’s mind swam in turmoil. He had believed his bitch of a stepsister dead at the hands of Inquisitor Grand, or at least fled far beyond any capacity to return. But the creature claimed she was not dead, but nearby. Hatred flared within Korvane’s soul, quite at odds with the sublime intoxication that had overwhelmed him since first he had heard the creature’s song. The hatred drove out the bewitchment, the voice of reason begging at the back of his skull, screaming loud and clear.

“No!” Korvane bellowed.

The creature froze, her gaze fixed upon him. Though her face was purity and innocence personified and her body soft and curvaceous to the point of sublime luxury, her eyes were impossible wells of unknowable power. The all-encompassing violet light grew sickly, and Korvane caught ghostly motions at the edge of his vision.

With a supreme effort of will, he looked around. The flight deck was populated by half glimpsed apparitions, partly resolved figures growing more and more solid as the violet light dimmed. Even as he watched, the figures became solid. Each was a crewman or a trooper, and before each stood a form. Before each, Korvane realised, stood the creature the individual most desired to see, to be called away by, to die for.

“Korvane!” a rough, male voice called from close at hand. He spun around, to see General Gauge and a group of his staff officers crossing the flight deck towards him. “Korvane, down!”

Without thinking, Korvane threw himself to the deck. An instant later, an explosive roar sounded overhead. He rolled over as the sound passed by, to find himself looking straight up at the underside of one of the *Rosetta s* shuttles. He lifted his head to see the launch bay, the last of the violet light disintegrating into tendrils of slithering energy. The shuttle, its course erratic and uncertain passed out of the bay, through the bubble of the atmospheric shielding, and out.

In a matter of seconds the shuttle had crossed the small space around the *Rosetta* within which the laws of the physical universe still prevailed, held in stasis by the all-enveloping geller field. Korvane saw the blackness of space beyond, stained with swirling violet energies, and realised that the *Rosetta* was breaking warp, forcing its way back to the real, physical universe.

The shuttle was engulfed in raging energies as it breached the geller field. Corpulent faces reared from the swirling clouds, claws and tentacles reaching out obscenely to grasp the vessel.

Even as its engines flared, straining to escape the clutches of the warp, the vessel was ripped apart. A hideous keening went up, causing every individual on the flight deck to fall to the ground, hands over ears to shut out the wailing of the damned as they were dragged to the deepest infernal regions of the warp.

As Korvane's voice joined those of the damned, he felt consciousness slip away, his vision fading to blessed oblivion.

"What were they, general?" asked Korvane as he stared out of the conference chamber's viewing port. The lights were turned low, and he welcomed the encroaching shadows. "How did they get on my ship?"

"I have no idea, Korvane," General Gauge replied. "I have consulted my confessor and his staff, yet none appear able to give me a straight answer."

"What happened, then? To me, to the crew, to you?"

"That I cannot say either, Korvane. It appears that each man and woman experienced something unique to him or herself. Each was drawn to congregate on the flight deck, but then things got somewhat... confused."

"How many gave in to their desires? To the... creatures?" Korvane asked, visions of the creature's glittering body coming unbidden to his mind.

"It seems that around five thousand congregated on the flight deck, mostly Guard, but not exclusively so." The general appeared embarrassed, but Korvane nodded that he should continue. "How many would have succumbed once there, I cannot imagine, though we know some attempted to escape via the shuttle."

Korvane nodded, a shiver coursing through him as he recalled the soul screams of the deserters as the shuttle they had commandeered was swallowed up by the warp at the instant the *Rosetta* penetrated the thin skein between the warp and realspace. "Where did they hope to flee to?" He asked, unsure he wanted to hear the answer.

"Where?" replied Gauge. "Well, I'm told we're only half a dozen astronomical units from a stellar body of some kind. I can only imagine..."

"How?" Korvane interrupted. "How did we come to exit the warp so near to such a body?"

"Korvane," the general continued. "You ordered the *Rosetta* out of the warp."

Korvane was stunned. He had no recollection of issuing such an order. He vividly recalled the creature's promises, her silky skin, and the touch of her lips upon his neck.

"Korvane?" General Gauge leaned forward in his chair, his elbows resting on the polished wooden surface of the conference table. "Korvane, when you issued that order, you saved the life and soul of every man and woman on this vessel. It was only the fact that the *Rosetta* was exiting the warp at the point where the geller field was breached that stopped... what happened to the shuttle happening to us all. You have my profound thanks, Korvane. You cannot know how much we owe you."

Korvane turned back towards the viewing portal. The darkness was all-encompassing, matching the emptiness he felt might consume his soul now that the creature was gone. Somewhere out there, in the utter dark, was a stellar body, and beyond that, the rendezvous point at which the fleet would muster, half way across the Damocles Gulf. Further still, he mused, was an entire empire, but all of that paled into insignificance before one single fact. His stepsister was out there, and, if the creature's words were to be believed, she was not very far away.

It occurred to him that hatred had stolen him from the creature's embrace. His stepsister might have saved him, Korvane mused, but she would pay the very highest price for doing so.

CHAPTER NINE

“Welcome aboard our vessel,” the tall, robed alien envoy said, addressing Brielle. His face was wide and flat, and he lacked a visible nose, yet Brielle could see that his grey-blue skin was wrinkled and worn with age, just like a human’s. “I trust your voyage has been a comfortable one.”

Brielle, Naal at her back, stood in the centre of a wide, oval chamber, facing the envoy and his retinue. Long, scroll-like flags hung from the high ceiling, each adorned with the alien lettering of the tau. Having fled the system aboard a stolen tau shuttle, Brielle, Naal and the prisoners they had released had rendezvoused with a vessel of the so-called “Water Caste”, the arm of the Tau Empire responsible, Naal had explained, for diplomacy and trade.

“I thank you for receiving me,” Brielle replied, as her mind raced with the lessons her father had insisted she undergo years before, lessons in etiquette and courtly manners. She had paid scant attention, reasoning that her native intelligence would see her through any such situations. Ordinarily, it had, but here she was dealing with a representative of an entire xenos race. She knew that the fate of that race and many human worlds besides might hang upon her words.

“It is an honour,” the tau replied, “to have such an august individual as yourself aboard. I trust your voyage thus far was not overly taxing?”

Brielle forced her mind to a semblance of order, mentally filtering the alien diplomat’s words for any sign of duplicity. She acknowledged that she lacked the skill in such matters that her father displayed, or even, she hated to admit, that her brother had learned during his upbringing amongst the highest Imperial courts. As a consequence of her uncertainty, she found herself studying the alien’s flat visage, though she had great difficulty in reading his meaning beyond the words he spoke.

Naal coughed subtly, and she realised that the envoy was waiting for her answer. She felt annoyance at her performance, and her cheeks coloured. Hopefully, she thought, the tau would have little experience at reading human emotions, and she would be able to get through this.

“Please,” the envoy said before Brielle could speak, “forgive me my ill manners. You have travelled a great distance to meet with us, and I have not allowed you to rest now that you are here.”

“Not at all,” Brielle replied, determined not to let any weakness show. “We have undergone a long journey, but we are eager to meet with our new friends, the tau.”

The envoy dipped his head at Brielle’s words, and spread his long, spindly arms wide in a gesture that caused the material of his formal robes to sweep backwards as if upon a sudden breeze. Brielle estimated that the fabric would be worth a small fortune on a number of coreward planets, for its decorative simplicity belied the obviously superior quality of its workmanship. Then, as the envoy raised his head once more, she realised that the role of trader was no longer hers, and might never be so again. She had to forge her own course now, wherever that might take her.

“In addition to welcoming you among us,” the envoy continued, “I must express the gratitude of all the peoples of the Tau Empire for the return of those you released. I have heard only a small portion of the tale, but am given to understand that you have sacrificed a great deal in order to return to us those we believed lost.”

As one, the tau envoy and his retinue bent almost double, bowing in obviously heartfelt thanks. Silence filled the starkly lit chamber, and, all of a sudden, Brielle felt quite alone in the centre of the bright, white space. She felt too the sheer weight of the events unfolding around her, aware that her

actions might ring down the ages in the annals of the Arcadius. If, she mused, her name was ever entered in them again.

After what felt to Brielle like long, drawn out minutes, the envoy and his retinue straightened. She took a deep breath, seeking to impose some order on her thoughts. Finally, she found what she hoped would be the correct words.

“I come to you in the hope that my actions might benefit both my people, and yours,” Brielle said, studying the envoy’s implacable features intently. “I am honoured,” she continued, “to be received in such a fashion. I trust that we shall find common cause to the benefit of all.”

Once more, the envoy dipped his head in obvious approval of Brielle’s words, the simple response filling her with relief. “Indeed, Lady Brielle,” the envoy replied. “I trust that through our actions, the Greater Good might prevail, to the benefit of us all.”

Lucian awoke with a start, gasping for breath as he sat bolt upright in his bed. Brielle... he had awakened from a nightmare in which his daughter had faced some terrible threat, alone in the dark, and there was nothing he could do to aid her.

Forcing his breathing to a normal pace, Lucian cast about in the dark for the carafe of water he kept at his bedside. After a moment of fumbling he located the crystal vessel and drank deep. The cold liquid helped his mind clear, the last vestige of the stark nightmare evaporating as he came fully awake.

The question of his daughter’s fate had been gnawing at Lucian for weeks. As the voyage across the Damocles Gulf had dragged on, he had found himself dwelling upon it more and more. He had spoken of it with Korvane at the last fleet rendezvous point, but his son had appeared sullen and disinterested, as if in the grip of some deeper malaise. As the fleet had moved on, Lucian and his son had parted on bad terms, and that too preyed upon Lucian’s mind.

Realising sleep would not return anytime soon, Lucian cast off his bed sheet, and stood and donned a plain, informal outfit. At such times as this, Lucian would often walk the long, winding companionways of his vessel, allowing his steps to lead him wherever they would as his mind pondered whatever problem was troubling him.

Not that this problem would withstand much pondering, Lucian mused, for the issue was plain enough. Brielle had assaulted an inquisitor, wounding him almost unto death, and she had fled, he knew not where. Even for a rogue trader, who would ordinarily exist far above the laws of the Imperium, such an action was unpardonable. Lucian counted himself extremely fortunate that Inquisitor Grand had not sought to wreak revenge upon the remaining Arcadius, though it had occurred to him that the inquisitor might yet decide to do so.

Where was she, Lucian pondered as he stepped out into the passageway? The ancient wood panelling on this deck appeared like the colour of blood under the red lighting of ship’s night, and the brass fittings lining the bulkheads gleamed in the dark. Only the ever-present rumble of the *Oceanid’s* warp drive disturbed the silence, and few crew were to be seen at this hour. It was Lucian’s favourite time, when the third watch were the only men on duty, the remainder fast asleep, or gambling and whoring in the lower decks.

He chose a direction at random and set off along the companionway. As he walked, he considered the problem at hand. Brielle, his daughter whom he loved dearly, had undertaken a course of action that he had no understanding of at all. It appeared that she had taken it upon herself to free the tau prisoners, but why would she do such a thing? Though he loved her, Lucian knew that Brielle could be selfish in the extreme, so he could not fathom what had caused her to attempt to free the tau prisoners. More to the point, what had she hoped to achieve in doing so?

As he passed through a wide bulkhead door into the *Oceanid’s* central thoroughfare, a thought occurred to Lucian. Had his daughter hoped to use the prisoners to gain some leverage within the crusade’s command structure? Perhaps she hoped to help him, seeking some advantage that the Arcadius might bring to bear upon their rivals.

No, Lucian thought with a wry smile. He knew his daughter better than that. Though she would act for the benefit of the Arcadius, he did not believe she would have acted quite so selflessly as to put herself so squarely in harm's way, not unless she stood to gain enormous benefits from doing so.

And what of her fate now that she had fled the crusade? She was out there, somewhere, far beyond his capacity to aid her. She had fled in a tau shuttle, not even attempting to regain the *Fairlight*. That in itself posed yet more questions. How had she piloted the alien vessel—had she coerced the aid of a tau pilot not captured in the initial assault upon the station? Did she intend to return at some point, and if she did, what could Lucian do to protect her against the wrath of Inquisitor Grand?

The thought of the inquisitor brought a silent shiver of revulsion. Lucian had met with the agents of the Inquisition before, indeed, he had worked closely with the Ordos of the Emperor's Holy Inquisition on several occasions, but Grand somehow stood out amongst its widely individual men and women. There was something deeply... unwholesome about Inquisitor Grand. For a start, he was clearly a political creature where many of his peers considered themselves far above such petty concerns. Grand, it seemed, was content to work within the crusade's power structures, lending the weight of his authority to its ends without bringing to bear the full power he was entitled to wield. Clearly, Lucian mused, the inquisitor and Cardinal Gurney shared some agenda, had some arrangement, or were perhaps both enamoured of some higher power. There were not many above a cardinal and an inquisitor, but the parent organisations of each man were notoriously complex, so anything might be possible.

Lucian wandered on, drawn along the central spine of his vessel. The companionways were still deserted, though he did catch sight of the occasional servitor engaged upon the endless tasks the constructs enacted upon his vessel. Many such tasks, routine maintenance of non-essential systems, were best performed at such a late hour, so as not to inconvenience the crew as they went about their duties during ship's day. Passing the central armoury, Lucian felt a faint tension in the air, and realised that the feeling had been with him for quite some time.

Lucian halted in the centre of the passageway. He told himself that it was the warp and the Damocles Gulf. He'd seen men driven mad by even the briefest voyage through the weirdling depths of the empyrean, and this journey had been particularly taxing. The entire region still pulsed and writhed with formless energy, entirely beyond the understanding of the fleet's most learned tech-priests. What effects, both physical and spiritual, those energies might be exerting upon the hundreds of thousands of crusaders none could tell. What Lucian did know, was that he, and others, were growing steadily more concerned as the crossing of the Damocles Gulf proceeded.

A distant sound drew Lucian's attention, breaking his chain of thought. From a junction up ahead, one passage from which led to the *Oceanid's* cargo decks, he heard an odd chanting. The song was atonal, the voice cracked, but he recognised its owner straight away. He set off in the direction of the sound.

Turning starboard at the first junction, Lucian climbed down a short ladder, taking him onto the main cargo deck. There was a long corridor before him, which receded into the distance as it ran the length of the vessel. Large blast doors mounted in the bulkhead every twenty metres or so denoted the entrances to the smaller cargo holds. In front of him, the blast door leading to the primary hold was ajar, the wan crimson illumination of ship's night spilling forth. The chanting was clearly audible; it was coming from the primary hold.

His curiosity piqued, Lucian stepped through the open portal and out onto the vast cargo space. The bay was so large that its ceiling was lost to darkness, and even the outer hull doors were shrouded in distant shadow, several hundred metres away. The hold was virtually empty, the goods that the *Oceanid* transported kept in the many secondary holds, or held in deeper storage in the stasis chambers. Lucian fully intended the hold to be entirely filled on the return however, whether with trade goods or with booty.

As the chanting grew clearer, Lucian saw its source. A spindly, emaciated figure sat cross-legged in the very centre of the hold. It was, as Lucian had guessed, his astropath, Adept Karaldi.

Lucian approached cautiously, wary of the man's mental state following his encounter, and not entirely certain that Karaldi should even be out of the medicae bay. As he approached, he saw that the astropath still wore the blood-specked surgical gown that he had worn the last time they had met. Furthermore, catheters trailed from his twig-like arms, which were bruised and pinpricked with all the syringes that had impaled them.

Standing over the cross-legged astropath, Lucian cleared his throat. The man's chanting ceased, and after a long, drawn out moment, Karaldi craned his neck to look up at his master through empty eye sockets.

"My master," the astropath said through dried and cracked lips.

"Adept. What is occurring? Why are you out of the medicae bay?"

The astropath's mouth worked soundlessly for a moment, before he replied. "Please, my master, sit with me a while."

Hesitating to do the bidding of a man obviously pushed way past the boundaries of sanity, Lucian squatted in front of the astropath.

"Speak, Karaldi. What ever transpires, I am your master, and you are my astropath. This vessel needs us both or all is lost."

"Indeed," Karaldi replied, a smirk creasing his purple lips. "Right now, you need me more than you could know. That's what I was trying to tell them..."

"Tell who, adept. Please, speak clearly." Lucian suppressed a growing impatience, knowing that the astropath could read his surface emotions only too well.

"The surgeon and his sisters of mercy," Karaldi replied, his cracked voice straining with a fear that Lucian could not place. "Something's coming, master."

"Something's already here, and I don't think I can do anything to keep it out."

"What's here, adept? What's among us?" Lucian fought to keep his voice steady, feeling the strain of the voyage weighing down upon his shoulders as never before. "What can I do, adept. How can I help you?"

At that the astropath merely smiled, though his expression was entirely devoid of mirth. "It is not me you must help, my lord, not me."

"What must I do then, who must I help?"

"You will know, my lord, when the moment is upon you. You will know what you must do."

With that, the astropath lowered his head and resumed his chant. Lucian lingered a moment longer, before standing up straight and slowly looking around the vast cargo bay. The shadows appeared all the darker, as if formless horrors lurked within each, ready to snatch at any who passed too near. He shook his head, as if he might shake off the weird feeling that had stolen over him with the astropath's words. He could not of course, for only when the *Oceanid* had crossed the Damocles Gulf would he be free of the oppressive taint that enshrouded his very soul.

In the meantime, he had the astropath's warning to contend with. Some new threat evidently stalked the corridors of his vessel, or awaited it deeper within the Damocles Gulf.

CHAPTER TEN

“May I?” Brielle asked her tau host, indicating the bowl of purple fruit on the low table between them.

“Please do,” the envoy replied. “The Tau Empire is both bountiful and generous.”

Brielle smiled demurely, though inside she considered the alien’s words hollow and unsubtle. She took one of the round fruits and bit deep into it, considering her situation as she chewed. She cast her eyes around the chamber. It was the same, stark white she had come to associate with the tau. The lighting was diffuse and the furniture low and typically spartan. The only visible decoration was a round icon dominating one, otherwise plain, white wall; an icon she had seen repeated across the ship, and one she had come to regard as some form of national emblem.

This was her fourth meeting with the Water Caste envoy. He had introduced himself with a long and intricate name consisting of many interlinked parts, but she had come to call him by the first segment of that name, Por’el, and he had appeared quite content with that. After the initial, highly formal meetings, Por’el had appeared to take a more relaxed approach to his dealings with her. The envoy had appeared content merely to talk, to enquire informally on a whole range of subjects, but had not, as yet, made any solid proposal or proposition. Brielle knew that would not last; the tau wanted something from her, that much was obvious, and at some point she would have to decide exactly what it was that she wanted from them. Circumstance had driven her here, but, she knew, fate still had a lot more to reveal before her course would become clear.

“Por’el,” Brielle said as she finished her fruit, “I am, as ever, grateful for your ongoing hospitality. May I enquire how I might serve you today?”

Por’el bowed his head, his black, oval eyes glinting in the stark white light of the small, but comfortably furnished chamber. Brielle had found him incredibly well informed regarding human social mores, though she suspected he had only the somewhat quaint, by high court standards, manners of the eastern rim sectors to go by. Nevertheless, Por’el seemed highly skilled at assimilating new social forms, and had adapted quickly to Brielle’s more relaxed style. She knew that it was the sign of a highly accomplished diplomat, and she had resolved to be especially cautious in her dealings with him.

“Today, Lady Brielle, I had thought to tell you some more of our empire, that you might be more informed of our ways, and of our intentions.”

Brielle’s guard was instantly up. She had guessed that the envoy was building towards something, and perhaps now, she might get some idea as to what. Perhaps, after weeks aboard the Water Caste vessel, there might finally be some form of deal on the table. She sat back in the recliner, catching herself before she placed her feet on the low table before her.

“I would be honoured to hear your words,” Brielle replied, determining to listen very carefully indeed to what the envoy had to say.

“I would tell you,” the envoy began, “of our society. I and my masters wish you to see some of the perfection that comes from the Greater Good, that you might spread such knowledge amongst your own people, for the profit of all.”

Brielle nodded, her mind analysing Por’d’s intentions even as he spoke. Did he expect her to return to the Imperium and proselytise the Greater Good?

“You see,” Por’el continued, “the Imperium, as encountered by my people, appears to us fractured and disparate. It is spread across a wide area of space, so I am informed, yet each small

group of worlds is almost entirely cut off from the greater community, or at least cut off from it for long stretches.”

The envoy looked to Brielle as if affording her the opportunity to correct him should he prove misinformed. She nodded that he should continue, for his words were true, even if he appeared more than a little ignorant of the Imperium’s size.

“You enjoy mastery of many technologies still unknown to us. Yet, you have little understanding of the elementary forces at work in the universe. Instead of seeking such understanding, you indulge in needless ceremony and superstition, believing the cosmos populated by creatures that, in fact, exist only in your nightmares.”

Brielle raised an eyebrow at this, but allowed the envoy to continue without interruption.

“When you make contact with other races, you rarely open any form of dialogue with them. Instead, the human race sees enemies in every corner of the galaxy.”

Again, the envoy paused, giving Brielle the chance to correct him. She considered his words, judging them essentially true, even if they did not necessarily apply to rogue traders such as her.

“There exists among the ranks of humanity, however,” Por’el went on, “those who do not share this view. Others such as I have established links with a number of planetary rulers, each of whom appeared quite content to have dealings with us, even though such a thing was proscribed by their own laws.”

“Those rulers,” Brielle interjected, “have been replaced.”

“Of that I have no doubt,” Por’el replied, “but the seed has been planted, for you are here, now, are you not?”

“I am,” Brielle said, “though I am doubtful as to how that might serve your aims.”

The envoy smiled, though Brielle suspected the expression was for her benefit, for his wide, flat mouth appeared unfamiliar with the movement. “Therein lies the path to the Greater Good we must all follow. Lady Brielle, it is quite beyond my station to decide how you might serve the aims of the Tau Empire. I am merely a servant, whose role it is to facilitate your journey. Therein lies the dialectic through which a resolution may be found.”

“Might I ask, Por’el, how you intend to do so?”

“Indeed, Lady Brielle. I propose to bring you before a council of my masters. I propose to take you to my homeworld, to show you everything the Tau Empire has built, that you might compare its glory to that of the Imperium, and make your own decision as to your true calling. Should you decide to act on behalf of the empire, then you will have all the support you require to do so.”

Brielle took a deep breath, seeking to steady her nerves lest she show any outward reaction to the envoy’s words. What Por’el proposed could lead her to a position of enormous influence, perhaps one from which she could profit enormously. But it might also lead to her being labelled a grand heretic. The Damocles Gulf Crusade might throw its entire effort into bringing her to justice. But, she considered, perhaps there was a middle way. Perhaps, she could accomplish her original aim and stymie the insane ambitions of Cardinal Gurney and his tame inquisitor. Perhaps she could do so in such a way that she might return to her clan in a position of power, one from which her rant of a stepbrother could never assail her. Perhaps, she smiled as the idea formed, she could lead the Arcadius to glory, forcing her father to hand the dynasty to her, and her alone.

She realised that Por’el was watching her, his face returning to its normal, inscrutable expression. “I thank you for the opportunity to serve,” Brielle said.

“That,” Por’el replied, “is all any of us can ask for.”

Lucian was reaching for the decanter to pour a third glass of svort when the intercom by the cabin door buzzed. He considered ignoring the irritating sound, but decided to answer it. Too many unsettling events were occurring on his vessel for him to ignore even a routine communication.

He stood, and crossed to the intercom.

“What!” He spoke into the brass horn protruding from the ornate console. This had better be good, he thought, casting a glance back at the half empty decanter.

“My lord,” a female voice he did not recognise came from the horn, “this is the medicae bay.” It was one of Estaban’s assistants. “The chirurgeon, sir, he requests your presence, urgently.”

Lucian could hear an obvious element of panic in the woman’s voice. “What’s the matter?” he asked. If the chirurgeon was unable to speak, then something very wrong was occurring.

“It’s Master Karaldi,” she continued, her voice cracking even more. A voice raised in obvious anger interrupted her, before she continued. “My lord, Master Karaldi has gone mad! He’s ranting and raving that something is on the ship, that you are in great danger!”

“Well enough,” replied Lucian, the last effects of the two glasses of svort vanishing entirely. “Inform Chirurgeon Estaban that I’ll be with him shortly.”

“Thank you, my lord,” the woman replied, relief evident in her voice.

“And please,” Lucian added, “ensure that no harm comes to Master Karaldi. Do you understand?”

“Yes, sir, but he does not respond to any of the sedatives we have administered, we fear he may...”

“Good!” Lucian cut in. “We may need him, mad or not. Do not, under any circumstances, attempt to sedate him, that is a direct order.”

“Yes, my lord,” the woman replied, raising her voice over a background din of shouting. “Please hurry!”

Lucian cut the channel and made to open the door. Something gave him pause, and he looked back into his cabin. He saw his holster lying over a high backed chair, and considered for a moment taking up his arms. No time, he thought, and besides, he would hardly have need of his plasma pistol or his power sword in the medicae bay, no matter how out of control the astropath had become.

Giving the matter no more thought, Lucian hauled open the heavy cabin door. Stepping through, he hurried down the corridor that led to his bridge, his mind rapidly filling with a thousand concerns as to what might await him when he reached Chirurgeon Estaban’s medicae bay.

He was so distracted by such thoughts, that he was entirely unprepared for the scene that awaited him on his bridge. He came to an abrupt halt as the bridge door swung open, all thoughts of the astropath having fled his mind entirely.

The bridge resembled a slaughterhouse. Bodies and parts of bodies were cast across the deck, and blood dripped from every surface. The metallic taint of blood was in the air, as was the foul stink of stomach contents. It took Lucian a moment to take all this in, before he raised his head to meet the gaze of the one figure still living on the bridge.

It was his helmsman, Mister Raldi.

“My lord,” whispered the helmsman, his voice sounding distant, as if muffled by dense rolling fog. The man’s body was drenched in blood, and he stood as if supported by a puppeteer’s strings. His neck, it seemed to Lucian, was not supporting the man’s head, for it lolled to one side, drool slowly pouring from his slack mouth.

“What in the Emperor’s name...” Lucian started, before he saw Raldi’s eyes. There was no point finishing the question.

“Daemon!” Lucian spat, knowing as he looked into his helmsman’s eyes that the man he had known was far, far away. Whatever stood before him, clothed in the flesh of his officer, was not human, but some fiend from the depths of the warp.

“Please, my lord,” the whisper continued, sounding yet more distant, “don’t let it...”

The helmsman’s body lurched forward, its movements grotesquely jerky as if me entity that controlled it had yet to master control of the unfamiliar form. Lucian was shocked into action, reaching instinctively for his holster.

“Damn it!” he spat, cursing himself for a fool for his decision to leave his weapons in his cabin. Knowing that he had no choice but to face the creature down, before it got loose on his vessel, he hauled on the bridge door and ran back down the corridor towards his cabin.

Once there, he retrieved his weapon’s belt, and immediately unholstered the heavy, plasma pistol. Depressing the activation stud, he was profoundly grateful to hear the whine of the pistol’s war spirit as it awoke. Pausing only to take a deep breath, Lucian returned to the passageway, steeling himself for the confrontation ahead. Checking one last time that his weapon was primed, he hauled open the bridge door and stepped into the opening, pistol raised.

The bridge was empty.

“Bastard!” Lucian cursed, seeing that the opposite door, the door leading to the *Oceanid*’s central thoroughfare, was ajar. Knowing that the entity was loose on his ship, Lucian saw no alternative but to hunt it down. He cursed the fate that had brought such a cruel turn of events upon him. Lucian knew that once a creature from the warp had control of a body within a vessel crossing the empyrean, that ship might be damned for all eternity. If he did not isolate the creature now, it would turn his ship into a charnel house.

Lucian crossed his bridge, cautiously, for entrails and unidentifiable organs were scattered across it, and all was drenched in steaming blood. Reaching the far door, he peered out warily, seeing that the companionway beyond was empty. Leaning back against the bulkhead, he slammed his fist into the intercom console, activating the ship wide address system.

“All hands,” Lucian said into the horn, feedback howling as his voice boomed from a thousand speaker grilles. “This is your captain. Adopt protocol extremis. I repeat, extremis.”

He leaned back against the bulkhead, scarcely believing that he had issued an order that none of his line had been forced to give in over three millennia. He knew that incursions by the things that dwelled in the warp could occur, it was his duty to know and to prepare for it, but he had never actually been faced with such an occurrence, and had prayed he never would be. He turned his face towards the console by the door, and punched the alert control. Instantly, the lighting of ship’s day flickered and was gone, plunging the bridge into darkness, punctuated only by flickering pict-slate and flashing consoles. Seconds later, the red light of ship’s night flickered on, indicating that the *Oceanid* was at general quarters.

Even as the bridge was bathed in light the colour of the blood that covered its every surface, a distant siren began to wail. The sound was taken up by another, this time closer. Within moments, Lucian could hear the apocalyptic wail start up all over his ship. At the last, the speaker grill over the bridge door came to life, almost deafening Lucian as it did so.

Focus, Lucian told himself; do what old Abad would have done. Not that Abad had ever faced down a fiend of the warp on his own ship, Lucian thought. Checking once more that his pistol was at full charge, he took a deep breath and stepped out into the corridor.

The flash of alert lights accompanied the wail of general quarters, and over it, Lucian heard the distant sounds of the crew rushing to their stations. But this was not ship-to-ship combat. This was something that every spacefarer dreaded far more than the clean death afforded when one’s body was spat into the cold void or incinerated by plasma bolts as powerful as suns. This intruder should not exist, having infiltrated a weak soul and become real aboard his ship. The order he had issued, “protocol extremis” was a desperate reaction to a situation few expected to survive. Those who could would close on his location. Those who could not, would lock themselves away in the darkest, deepest corner they could find and not come out until the alert was ended.

Lucian reached a junction, the flashing alert light directly over his head. He looked left, and saw nothing. He spun around, pistol raised, as if an enemy lurked in the shadows at his back. None was there, but as he lowered his pistol he saw a crumpled form sprawled across the companionway, one half of its head several metres from the other, and the body, further away still.

Stepping over the bloody mess, Lucian pushed on down the corridor until he reached another intercom console. "To me!" he almost screamed. "Command deck forward, passage delta one-one-one!"

Where were they? Lucian thought, feeling utterly alone despite the comforting weight of the heavy plasma pistol he held before him. A scream answered his question. They were in the service tunnel leading to the torpedo decks. He started running forwards along the corridor once more, his boots clanging on the metal deck plates all the way. Reaching another junction, he found the source of the scream.

A group of armsmen, the bully boys employed primarily to keep the press-ganged crewmen in line, stood in a wide utility area. Each carried a heavy gauge shotgun, but by Lucian's estimation, only a couple had found the time to don the crimson and gold armour they were issued. Before them, his back to Lucian as he entered the area, was the helmsman, or what used to be the helmsman, Lucian thought.

Lucian came to a halt as he took in the scene. He saw the creature spread its arms wide as in some mockery of benediction, its head lolling to one side. The uniform that Helmsman Raldi had worn was ragged and singed, as if contact with the skin the creature wore was toxic in itself.

A scream issued from the beast's mouth. Lucian bent double and dropped his pistol as he covered both his ears with his hands. Despite his best efforts, the terrible sound leaked in, forcing him to fight for consciousness lest it overcome him entirely. Raising his head, he forced himself to focus on the scene ahead, gritting his teeth against the infernal cacophony that filled the air.

The creature stood frozen before him, its arms raised above its head. In front of it, the armsmen had been caught in the full onslaught of its hellish assault. All had collapsed to the deck. One was coughing up his guts, almost literally, in a fountain of blood and bile. One bled from every orifice, his ears, eyes, nose, mouth and groin streaming red. Those armsmen marginally further back scrambled across the steel deck, made slick with the blood and vomit of their compatriots.

Drawing on reserves of strength he had no idea he possessed, Lucian raised himself to his knees as he reached out to grab his plasma pistol. He missed, sending the weapon clattering across the deck to land nearer the creature. The screaming died, and Lucian realised with stark horror that the creature was slowly turning to face him.

"My lord..." The creature's head lolled as it spoke. Its eyes rolled in their sockets, each facing in a different direction, before focusing on him. "Please my lord, don't let this happen."

The voice brought a choke of despair to Lucian's throat, for he knew it belonged to Helmsman Raldi. He guessed that the creature was yet to establish total control over Raldi's body, but knew that surely, it must soon do so.

"I promise," Lucian said as his groping hands found the plasma pistol, his voice riven with anguish, "I won't..."

Even as Lucian raised the pistol, the creature reacted. Its movements, though jerky as before, were impossibly fast.

The creature was in front of Lucian in the blink of an eye. He found himself on his knees before the wrecked form of his erstwhile helmsman, fighting to raise his pistol before the beast from the warp rent his body asunder.

"He's gone now," said a new voice, little more than a whisper, but laden with all the pain and suffering of the abyss. "Gone."

"Get... off... my... ship," Lucian spat, raising the pistol in both hands as its war spirit sang its high-pitched tone. He pulled the trigger, turning his head, squeezing shut his eyes and gritting his teeth. The weapon spat its payload of incandescent plasma straight into the creature's head, at point blank range.

The creature's head disintegrated as the plasma bolt passed through it to strike a conduit mounted overhead. As gas flooded the utility space, the body crashed to its knees, and tumbled to one side. An instant later an arms-man was standing behind it, proffering his hand to Lucian.

“Sir? Are you...?”

The hair on the back of Lucian’s neck stood on end as he saw the dead creature’s arm shoot out, the distended claw taking hold of the armsman’s wrist.

“Get back!” Lucian bellowed as he staggered to his feet, but he knew he was too late.

The armsman threw back his head and screamed, sickly light shining up from his throat as the daemon from the warp took over his body.

Despair threatening to overcome him, Lucian raised his pistol once again. But he never had the chance to pull the trigger, for the armsman, his body under the sway of the warp beast, flung out his arm and sent the pistol flying across the space.

It was gone a moment later, disappearing through the gases venting from the conduit overhead. Lucian looked up at the discharging pipeline as if only just becoming aware of it. He coughed, and looked around for his pistol. He could not see it. He risked losing the beast if he wasted time looking for the weapon. Throwing an arm over his face to shield his lungs from the gas, he plunged through the billowing clouds, after the beast that was slaughtering his crew.

All was darkness for an instant as Lucian passed through the cloud of gas, followed by nauseous disorientation as he emerged, to find himself in a narrow passageway that led from the utility area to the forward torpedo decks. He had no difficulty discerning the creature’s path, for another two bodies lay up ahead; at least it looked as if the constituent body parts amounted to two people.

As the shock of the confrontation with the beast wore off, Lucian felt a primal rage well up within him. No Arcadius, to his knowledge at least, had ever lost a vessel to a warp beast, and he was damned if he would be the first to suffer such a fate. His anger grew as he considered that he had been forced to destroy the body of a man he thought of, if not as a friend then as a companion and a valued crew member. Even if he died in the event, which he thought entirely probable, Lucian determined that he would take this bastard of a creature with him. If he were to be dragged to hell by this beast, he raged, he’d make sure the beast went with him.

Passing the bodies, Lucian came to another junction, and was greeted immediately by the boom of a shotgun being discharged very nearby.

“Hold!” he called, rounding the corner cautiously.

He stepped towards a wide chamber, machinery clustered upon its every surface. A single armsman stood at the centre, and nearby a cringing group of ratings. The body last possessed by the creature lay before the arms-man, its chest blown through by the force of a shotgun blast.

But Lucian dared not believe it had been defeated so easily.

The armsman with the shotgun turned towards him, his head tipping to one side as he did so. The mouth fell open and bloodstained drool pooled forth. Lucian met the armsman’s eyes, experiencing a stab of despair as he saw that those eyes were filled not with the lucid gaze of the creature from the warp, but with sheer, unadulterated terror. Those eyes were the eyes of a man being dragged beneath the surface of the ocean by a voracious predator, knowing all the while that a quick, clean death would be denied him.

“Not again!” Lucian spat, casting around for something, anything he might use as a weapon. He did not care what; a pipe would do, if it would allow him to bludgeon the creature to death, to stave in its skull so that it could possess no more of his crew.

Before he could find a weapon, however, fate took a hand in events. One of the cowering ratings took the opportunity to flee, crossing the chamber and running behind the creature as he did so. The creature spun around to rake the man with its hands, its fingers split apart and the bones protruding to form wicked claws. It turned back towards Lucian, as if deciding which prey to pursue. Lucian judged that the beast was trapped, if only he could force it back to the next chamber. Summoning all his courage, he stepped forward, just as a group of armsmen arrived behind him. The beast stood motionless for an instant, before it evidently saw that it was outnumbered. The fleeing man dived for the access portal behind the beast, and the creature made its decision. It dived after him, through the small opening.

Lucian reacted in an instant. He knew that there was no exit from the chamber into which the creature had passed. As the creature overtook its prey, a terrible scream spilling forth to be cut off an instant later by the sound of rending flesh and bone, Lucian surged forward and hauled the portal shut. He spun the heavy wheel that engaged the locking mechanism, and sank to his knees with exhaustion.

As the chamber filled with armymen and ratings responding to the emergency, Lucian raised his head, and laughed the laugh of one who has come far too close to the abyss. He saw his crewmen recoil in horror, and realised that he must appear a madman.

“Someone,” he said, forcing his voice to its normal tone, “get me Karaldi.”

“It’s in there, my lord?” asked Master Karaldi. Lucian was unsure whether the astropath asked a question or made a statement of fact. The man was impossible to read, the wild madness he had displayed on their last meeting now entirely gone. He nodded.

“It’s sealed, and there’re no other exits,” Lucian replied, finding his eye drawn, as he spoke, to the small armoured porthole in the heavy bulkhead door. He could see nothing beyond, which made him even more uneasy.

“Apart from the tubes, my lord,” Karaldi said.

Aye, Lucian thought, the torpedo tubes. The creature was trapped on the loading deck for the forward torpedo tubes. There were no torpedoes in the area however, for the fortunes of the Arcadius clan had been so dire this last century as to preclude their replenishment. Lucian knew that the astropath referred to the possibility of voiding the chamber, in the hope of blasting the creature through the tubes and into the warp.

“No,” Lucian replied, “that’s not an option. “The internal bulkheads aren’t up to it.”

“Then what?” Karaldi asked, his blind gaze fixed on the small porthole.

“That’s why I called you here,” Lucian replied, knowing he had no choice but to trust the mad old astropath. “I have an idea, but I need your advice.”

“Please, my lord, go on. I am your servant.”

Lucian looked into the man’s time-worn face, haloed as it was by his wispy grey hair. Lucian fancied he detected a change in the man, as if the astropath was prepared to face up to his duty in a way he had appeared reluctant to on prior occasions. Lucian had considered Karaldi burned out or washed up, of late, and had seriously intended to petition the Guild for a replacement. Something now gave him pause. Something in Karaldi might have changed, Lucian thought.

“Good,” Lucian began, “I have a question for you, and I want you to be sure of your answer.”

“Of course, my lord.”

“I intend to destroy the body the creature inhabits, totally: to incinerate it to atoms.”

“Go on, my lord.”

“What then of the creature, with no new victim to claim?”

“Oh,” Karaldi replied, his hand reaching up to grip his chin, “I see...”

“What then, without the body?” Lucian pressed.

The astropath hesitated, visibly considering his words before continuing. “With no Rite of Warding, which would take many hours, I could not say, not for sure. It has certainly feasted upon enough souls to sustain it for some time, even in incorporeal form. But I know we do not have the luxury of time, so I say please do it, master. For the sake of us all, please do it.”

“You’re sure?”

“Quite sure, my lord,” the astropath replied, his hands fumbling with the beads around his neck, an old and tarnished Imperial aquila hanging upon them.

Lucian turned and nodded to a tech-priest manning a console near the bulkhead door. The hooded figure bowed, and turned to the large array of levers, dials and meters before him. Lucian turned to the porthole once more, feeling the tension grow.

The tech-priest worked a series of levers, lowering each in succession and mumbling prayers to the Machine God all the while. The effect was immediate. The air in the chamber charged, the hairs on Lucian's body standing up, accompanied by a distinctly unpleasant sensation of something crawling over his body. The air pressure rose dramatically for a moment, before a bank of equalisation pumps mounted overhead started to life and quickly returned it to normal.

Then, Lucian heard a great commotion from the torpedo deck, and he approached the bulkhead door, cautious all the while. Peering gingerly through the porthole, he could make out only a small area of the bay, for the illumination was inactive, yet he caught an actinic flash to one side, followed an instant later by a great arcing bolt of energy that crossed the deck at the speed of light, grounding itself in the centre of the chamber in an explosive shower of sparks.

"Reactor bleed at optimum, my lord," the tech-priest announced, monitoring his dials intently. "Output shall remain constant until you order core flow resumed, but I advise against maintaining the output at the expense of primary systems."

"Understood," said Lucian, peering through the porthole for any sign of movement within. Another flash, and another arc, and a great whining went up from beyond the bulkhead door. The conduits that would have charged a plasma torpedo were discharging their raw power into the chamber. Lucian could tell that the system was straining to maintain the output that was even now scouring the bay with lashing arcs of raw power.

"There!" Karaldi shrieked, his voice almost drowned out by yet another burst of lightning from within the chamber.

As Lucian's eyes recovered from the massive blast, he caught sight of a figure standing in the centre of the torpedo bay. Its body was charred and smoking, the armsman's uniform incinerated entirely. Despite the apparent injuries done to its stolen body, the creature stood tall, though, as before, its head lolled to one side as if its neck muscles were weakened, and its mouth hung open, bloody drool pouring forth. The arms were held out wide, almost as if to welcome Lucian to him.

Lucian tore his gaze from the porthole, and turned to address Karaldi.

"The beast lends the flesh unholy vigour, my lord," Karaldi said, evidently anticipating Lucian's question. Lucian suppressed his annoyance at having his surface thoughts read in such a manner.

"My apologies, my lord," Karaldi said, his face deadly serious as he contemplated the creature.

"How long can it last?" Lucian asked. "We cannot keep up the output indefinitely."

"I feel," the astropath said, his voice straining and cracked. "I feel... it fights... it draws such power."

Lucian turned to the tech-priest. "Can you increase the core bleed?"

The tech-priest cast his mechanical eyes over his instruments, mumbling prayers beneath the hood of his crimson robes. Then he raised his head and addressed Lucian. "I can, my lord, but to do so I must control the bleed manually."

Lucian knew he was asking a great deal of his crew and of his vessel, yet he saw no alternative. If he did not get this creature off the warp off of his ship, he would have no ship, and no crew to man it. He knew that entrusting the core reactor flow to the tech-priest was incredibly risky, for the function was normally controlled by a hundred different, triple redundant cogitators. He scarcely believed a single, human mind could perform such a task, but he knew that the tech-priest would not have made the suggestion were it not true. The servants of the mechanicus might be taciturn and unimaginative, but such traits were, in times such as these, a benefit.

"Proceed." Lucian ordered the tech-priest, gripping the frame of the bulkhead door as he turned his gaze back within.

The whine of the conduits venting their guts into the torpedo bay grew louder still, their pitch shifting upwards to a shrill howl. Lucian could faintly detect the touch of the tech-priest within the sound, a subtle modulation indicative of the workings of a human mind rather than that of a machine.

The creature still stood in the centre of the loading deck, but it was now bathed in stark, flickering white light. Around it danced a cage of arcing power, crawling up and down its body. That body blackened and blistered before Lucian's eyes, the skin slowly vaporising even as Lucian looked on, horrified, but knowing he must witness the creature's death.

"It fights," Lucian heard Master Karaldi mumble at his side. "It draws yet more power from the infernal planes."

Lucian turned his head to regard the astropath, and was struck by the expression on the man's face. It was not the normal, crazed visage that Lucian had become used to. There was an unfamiliar calm upon Karaldi's face, he was almost placid.

Looking back to the chamber, Lucian could see that the creature was absorbing a staggering amount of energy. The body it wore should have been vaporised in an instant as soon as the reactor bleed was turned upon it, yet somehow, it was keeping the body together.

Then, Lucian saw that the creature's mouth was no longer hanging slack. It was smiling, and it was looking straight at him. Though he met its gaze for but a fraction of a second before violently turning his head away from the porthole, Lucian felt his soul seared by the raw stuff of the warp. He fought to remain standing, bracing himself with both arms against the frame of the bulkhead door.

"Increase bleed!" Lucian shouted, gasping as the air pressure increased and the equalisers overhead fought to remain online.

"My lord," the tech-priest replied, an edge of uncertainly creeping into his normally even voice. "Such a thing is—"

"Do it, damn you!" Lucian bellowed. "Do it or so help me..."

"I obey, my lord," replied the tech-priest. "I can maintain point three variance for no more than forty seconds."

"Understood," replied Lucian, knowing this must surely be his best, and last hope. He dared to raise his eyes to the porthole once more, this time ready to avert his gaze should it meet that of the creature. He saw immediately that the core bleed output had increased even more, and that the creature's body was entirely black, a vile, greasy smoke rising from it in eddies. Yet still, it smiled, and held its arms out wide as if welcoming its fate.

"It mocks us." Lucian scowled, hating the intruder with a depth of feeling he had not realised he could summon.

"Its power fails, master." Lucian heard Karaldi at his back.

"How can you be sure?" he asked Karaldi smiled, a trace of his former mania returning to his face. "I can hear its thoughts, my lord."

How could the astropath bear such a thing? Lucian thought. Just meeting its gaze had brought Lucian to his knees.

"I am soulbound, my master," Karaldi whispered. "It cannot hurt me. Not the bit that counts, at least."

Lucian turned to look at the astropath, and saw that Karaldi held his hands across his chest, the thumbs interlocked and the palms spread wide. It was the sign of the aquila, and Lucian knew that it was meant as far more than a formal salute.

"The soulbinding, in which I received but a portion of the Emperor's infinite grace, warded me against the likes of this beast. Though it cost me my sight, I gained far more than I can tell you, my master."

Lucian nodded slowly, and turned his gaze back to the torpedo bay. The creature's flesh was steaming from its body, blackened muscles visible as the skin peeled back and fell away in ashen fragments. A weird, guttering light flickered deep within the rapidly disintegrating body as its scorched bones became visible.

Even as Lucian watched in stark horror, the creature's body began to crumble. As power arced all around it, it stood as a rigid, petrified and charred statue, its arms still spread wide. A last great

arc leapt across the chamber and grounded itself on the creature's form, and the remains of its body shattered into a thousand blackened fragments. All that was left was a retinal after image, seared across Lucian's eyes, as he looked on, not able to tear his gaze from the porthole.

"It is too powerful." Lucian heard Karaldi mumble behind him as the whine of the core bleed died away. "It is too near its home."

"What?" Lucian began, blinking to clear his eyes of the retinal burn of the creature's death. "But it's dead."

"No, my lord, it is not."

"Lucian blinked once more, realising with mounting terror that the ghostly image floating across his vision was not in fact the after-effect of the creature's violent death. What he saw was a glowing form standing exactly where the creature had stood, and it was there, in the torpedo bay, looking back at him.

"It's still..." Lucian never completed his sentence, for he felt himself shoved to one side, to slam into the frame of the bulkhead door.

"What..." he began, looking up as he caught himself, to see Master Karaldi struggling with the great locking wheel at the centre of the door. "What the hell are you doing man?" he shouted, raising his voice as a shrill wail escaped through the door's seams as Karaldi pushed it open.

"Master," the astropath called over one shoulder as the other leaned into the door, "I have no choice. I cannot let it remain unbound."

"It'll eat your soul, man!" Lucian shouted, pulling himself upright with one hand, and gripping Karaldi's arm with the other.

"No, my lord! You must let me do my duty!"

Karaldi turned his eyeless face on Lucian, and although the astropath's eyes were nothing more than empty sockets, Lucian felt that a fierce light had arisen within, where previously the astropath had radiated an aura of madness and despair. Karaldi shouldered the bulkhead door open, and Lucian relaxed his grip on the man's shoulder.

As the door fell fully open, an acrid stink assaulted Lucian's nostrils and scoured his throat. It was the scent of metal, ceramic and plastic ravaged by unholy powers. And mixed in with the chemical taint was something far worse. Lucian knew that it was the taint of the warp, made real through the destruction of the body in which the creature had infiltrated his vessel.

And that creature, shed of its mortal shell, stood in the centre of the torpedo bay. It was mighty, standing ten feet tall, its form an ever-shifting mass of dancing energy. It was, Lucian could only assume, made of the very stuff of the warp; souls coalesced in damnation, their eternal anguish giving form and energy to the being that stood before Lucian.

Even as Lucian watched from the portal, barely able to stand so cacophonous was the sound that roared from the creature's body, he saw Master Karaldi step before it. The astropath's steps were at first shaky and uncertain, yet with each, his stance became surer, and he stood more erect. Lucian looked back to the creature, and saw that it was looking around the chamber, as if acquainting itself with a new and entirely foreign environment. Yet, Lucian was astonished to note, it paid no heed to the man that walked straight towards it.

The creature turned its attention towards specific features in the torpedo chamber. It looked to the array of tubes, the massive hatch over each locked tight against the void. Its gaze swept upwards and across the ceiling, and then down and across the deck. Lucian realised then that it was not actually looking at the features in the chamber, but through them, sensing, he suspected, the souls of those in the decks above and below.

Then, the glowing, undulating apparition looked towards the portal in which Lucian stood. Lucian could not help but look back, his gaze drawn with shock and disgust to tiny, wailing faces swimming across the surface of the creature's insubstantial body. Each soul wailed its pain and anguish, adding its sundered voice to the thunderous cacophony flooding the chamber.

Raising its arms high to its sides, the creature started towards him. Yet, Master Karaldi stood in its path, his head held high.

“Karaldi!” Lucian bellowed. He was barely able to hear his own voice above the din, and had no clue if the astropath would hear him. “Karaldi, beware!”

If Karaldi heard Lucian’s warning, he made no reaction, other than perhaps a slight tilt of the head. The creature glided on, as if held aloft by the wailing souls of the infernal regions of the warp, its gaze entirely focused upon Lucian.

Then, Lucian saw Master Karaldi hold up his right hand, as if to bar the creature’s way. Despair welled up within Lucian, for he knew that the astropath must surely be blasted to ashes at the creature’s touch. Yet, the warp beast continued, apparently uncaring of the astropath’s gesture, intent, it appeared on Lucian.

As it bore down upon Master Karaldi, Lucian turned his head. He would not look upon the astropath’s death. He made to haul the armoured door closed, knowing all the while that there was no point in doing so. This thing would devour every soul upon his vessel, and there was nothing he could do to stop it.

Even as he made to slam the door, Lucian became aware of a change in the tone of the creature’s wailing din. He looked back through the half closed portal, to see that the creature towered over the astropath. He watched as Karaldi’s hand came into contact with the thing’s ghostly body, and as it did so, the wailing cut off entirely.

The chamber was flooded with sudden, and complete silence.

Lucian dared not breathe. He strained his ears and became aware of a low mumbling. It was Master Karaldi, mouthing the words of the prayer every spacefarer knew, even if he knew no other.

“We pray for those lost in the warp,” the astropath said aloud, and a new sound rose from the silence. It was the sound of the creature, thrashing in a wild frenzy, its ghostly appendages distorting and stretching, its body arching as the souls trapped within fled from it, one by one. Each was a tiny, guttering spark that sped from the prison of the creature’s form, across the bay to plunge into, and somehow through, the outer hull.

As the creature’s form dissipated, its thrashing grew more violent, yet still Karaldi maintained his posture, arm held high as if to block the beast’s progress and hold it in place. Though it screamed its unholy death scream, the astropath kept up his recitation of the prayer, his lips working as he mouthed the sanctified words. The creature shook, casting its ethereal limbs about it. Lucian saw that it was seeking, desperately, if it could possibly know despair, to escape the astropath’s touch. At the last, it did, breaking free in an explosion of etheric lightning.

In the silence that followed the creature’s departure, Lucian was blinded, so dazzling was the sight of its death. Yet he heard a sound any spacefarer knew, and dreaded above all others.

“Hull breach!” Lucian bellowed. His vision still slow to return, he stumbled through the portal in which he was standing, onto the metal deck of the torpedo bay. As his vision returned, he saw that one of the torpedo tubes had been ruptured, its loading hatch hanging from it, bent and twisted. He all but stumbled over the crumpled form of the astropath, and fell to his knees at Karaldi’s side.

Bending over the man’s body, Lucian took him by the shoulders and shook him violently. Even as he felt the air pressure drop, and heard sirens beyond the bulkhead door, he gasped in relief to see that the astropath lived yet.

“Up, damn you, Karaldi,” Lucian cursed, heaving at the astropath’s limp form. “You don’t go and,” he struggled for breath as the air rapidly fled the chamber, “do something like that,” he gasped, “and then... die on me.”

As Lucian felt consciousness slip away, he felt hands grab at his own shoulders, lifting him up as the cold of the void flooded the chamber. “Karaldi,” he mumbled, barely able to form the words as the vacuum stole the last of the air from his lungs.

“He is with us, my lord.” Lucian heard the voice, barely registering the flat tones of the tech-priest. “He is safe.”

“Good.” Lucian managed as he felt himself dragged through the portal and heard the door slam shut behind him. “I think I’ll keep him around.”

CHAPTER ELEVEN

Lucian stood at the wide viewing port, his arms folded before him. An area of space entirely new to him was arrayed beyond the centimetres-thick armoured glass. And not just new to him, for this was virgin space. To his knowledge, no human had travelled its depths and returned to tell the tale of what lay within.

“Range to fleet?” Lucian asked, stifling a wince as he spoke. His lungs had yet to fully recover from the vacuum effects suffered on the torpedo deck, but he had no time for extended treatment now.

“Three. Three. Two.” Intoned the servitor at the Navigation station. Regret stabbed at Lucian’s heart, for Mister Raldi, the *Oceanid’s* long-serving helmsman should have answered him instead of the servitor at station one. Lucian could still scarcely believe what had occurred during the warp beast’s attack. The effects were still being felt across the vessel. His bridge crew, for starters, would need rebuilding from the ground up, for all bar Mister Batista, the veteran ordnance chief, were slaughtered. The bridge still reeked of blood, despite the attentions of the maintenance servitors. Lucian knew that no amount of antiseptic decontamination would cover that smell. It would linger on his bridge, just as the sight of Raldi transformed into a slaving beast would linger in his memory.

With an effort, Lucian shoved such thoughts to the back of his mind. He had the here and the now to worry about. He turned his attention once more to the sight beyond the viewing port.

The region was dominated by vast gaseous nebulae, clouds of stellar matter dozens of light years across. The entire region was cast in the hazy blue light that emanated from deep within the formations. Even though they were many light years distant, Lucian could discern churning energies deep at the heart of each cloud. It was as if the very act of creation were being played out within the nebulae. Lucian felt something he had not experienced for many years, something akin to wonder.

Lucian also knew that he was not the only one to have reacted thus. He lifted the parchment he held in his hand, scanning its words for the third time since he had received it. Adept Baru, the *Oceanid’s* Navigator, had submitted his initial report of the voyage across the Damocles Gulf, and his first impressions of the region they had arrived in.

The first part of Barn’s report, concerning the Gulf, made for unsettling reading. If Lucian’s experience had been traumatic, his Navigator’s had been truly horrific. For long weeks, the Master Navigator had guided the *Oceanid* through the raging torrents of the warp, assailed all the while by forces the like of which none of his kind had ever encountered. The more Lucian read the report, the more respect he had for the man. Brau said that the Gulf was quite unlike any other place in the galaxy. It was as if the Gulf was some barrier or boundary placed, entirely deliberately, to keep intruders from penetrating the region in which the Tau Empire lay. Beyond it, amongst the blue nebulae, lay something even more incredible.

The blue clouds of the region were, according to Brau, not entirely natural in their origins. Even to the naked eye they churned with stellar forces, yet to Baru’s third eye, that organ the Navigators uncovered only when traversing the tides of the warp, they boiled with forces both physical and spiritual, both natural and positively unnatural. Such were the terms the Navigator used to describe the phenomenon to Lucian, and Lucian was well aware of the shortcomings of language when a Navigator attempts to explain such concepts to a normal man. It was akin to Lucian attempting to

describe conventional space flight to a native of one of the Imperium's many feral worlds. In this case, it was Lucian who spoke only in grants, and whose horizons defined the extent of his world.

It was the last portion of the report that gave Lucian pause. Baru's description of the region they had entered hinged on one word. It was, according to the veteran navigator, a "young" region, as if time was turned back or the fabric of space cleansed of the passing of aeons. It was as if the region was a place out of time, still existing in the pristine state that would once have applied to the entire galaxy. It was charged with potential, as if the void just waited upon some wondrous event, as if it in fact existed purely to facilitate that event.

Lucian felt it too, as he raised his eyes from the parchment to look out upon those lambent nebulae once more. He knew, as only a rogue trader could, that the drifting clouds must be seething with life. He almost envied the tau their place in the galaxy... almost.

"Channel. Signus. Signus. Delta. Open." The servitor's voice cut into Lucian's reverie. He tore his attentions from the viewing port.

"All stations stand by."

The bridge became a hive of activity as the officers and servitors manning each console, from communications to astrographics, prepared for action. Lucian paced the length of the central walkway and sat in the warm leather seat of his command throne. An array of flat data-slates, clusters of fat cables trailing from each, closed in around him as he pulled on a lever. Each lit up with green static, before bursts of data began scrolling across the screens.

"Open long range channel."

The comms channel shrieked into life, a wailing feedback bursting from the speaker grilles before settling down into a gentle, modulated burbling. It was the quietest Lucian had heard the comms system, despite the odd background field. Makes a change, he thought.

"This is Rogue Trader *Oceanid*, calling crusade fleet," Lucian announced. "Repeat, this is Lucian Gerrit of the *Oceanid*."

"Receiving you," said a female voice, the channel clear apart from the sweeping background tones. "This Natalia of the *Duchess McIntyre*. Glad you could make it, Lucian."

Lucian grinned. He liked Natalia. "How was your voyage?"

A moment of silence was followed by Natalia's reply. "It was... eventful, Lucian. I suggest we hold a masters' conference."

Understanding her tone, Lucian answered in the affirmative, and ordered the channel closed. Within three hours, the *Oceanid* had closed to medium range with Natalia's vessel, and Lucian had activated the three dimensional holographic display. A green, static laced globe was projected from the unit's base, filling the air before the command throne. The *Oceanid* sat at its centre and nearby a group of icons clustered together, representing the other vessels of the fleet that had, thus far arrived.

Aside from the *Duchess McIntyre*, the *Honour of Damlass*, the *Regent Lakshimbal* and Admiral Jellaqua's own flagship, the mighty Retribution-class battleship the *Blade of Woe* were present. So too were three escort squadrons, which patrolled the fleet's outer perimeter lest any unexpected enemy appear. The *Rosetta* was not present, but Lucian had faith in his son's Navigator; he would arrive, soon. As Lucian had read off the label next to each icon, one name had halted him in his tracks.

One of the icons identified the *Ajax*. Less than thirteen thousand kilometres from the *Oceanid*'s current position lay at anchor a vessel that Lucian had last seen deserted, drifting in the cold interstellar space of the Damocles Gulf. She had been a ghost ship, yet here she was, safely across the Gulf, and station keeping with the rest of the fleet. Lucian felt cold dread grip his heart as he had looked upon the *Ajax*, all the superstition and fear bred into his spacer's soul threatening to overwhelm him.

As the *Oceanid* had approached the other vessels, Natalia had called her conference, each captain appearing in one of the pict-slates arrayed around Lucian's command throne. All had

appeared to Lucian to be visibly relieved to be across the Gulf, but it was Commodore Ebrahim of the *Ajax* who held his attention. Ebrahim had reported that his Navigator, who had suffered some form of seizure at the very outset, had recovered. Yet, Ebrahim had reported, the man had been afflicted by terrifying nightmares, and had been assaulted time after time in the waking trance in which he guided the vessel. The navigators of the other vessels had attempted, upon their arrival in this region, to convince Ebrahim's Navigator to relinquish his duties to a lower ranked individual. Yet he had refused, locking himself away in his Navigation blister and refusing to accept any visitors. The commodore had been visibly shaken, his face, even reproduced on the grainy, flickering screen appearing ashen. His eyes had been rimmed with dark circles, and Lucian had scarcely been able to bring himself to look into them, for it was akin to looking upon a ghost, or a man, who should, by all rights, be dead. Part of him knew that Ebrahim was already dead, despite what Lucian saw on the pict screen before him.

Then, as the masters had conversed, a message of the highest priority had been received. Its sending had immediately interrupted the masters' conference, a fact for which Lucian had, at first, been grateful. The message was from the remaining portion of the crusade fleet, which was, even as the conference broke up, closing. Lucian had scanned the sensor returns for any sign of the *Rosetta*, yet before he could locate his son's vessel, Cardinal Gurney had come on the channel. He had called an immediate council of war. His experiences crossing the Gulf were such that he was convinced the entire region was populated by devils that must be wiped out in short order for the good of mankind. If the cardinal were not insane before, Lucian sighed, surely his experience crossing the Gulf had pushed him over the edge.

Lucian had stood from his command throne, and stalked off towards his cabin, without a word to his bridge crew. It was only as he made to close the bulkhead door behind him that word of the *Rosetta* came over the comms channel. It was Korvane, and he was safe.

"This is getting us nowhere," Lucian spat. He turned in his council seat to regard his son. Korvane, however, appeared to have his mind on other things. His eyes were raised to the incense clouded vaults of the richly appointed conference chamber aboard the Admiral Jellaqua's *Blade of Woe*.

"Korvane!" Lucian hissed through clenched teeth. "What's the matter with you, boy?"

Lucian remained twisted in his seat. He watched with mounting impatience as Korvane continued to ignore him, his head turned upwards, but his mind evidently light years away. Just as Lucian was about to turn his attentions back towards the council, Korvane's attention returned, his eyes coming into focus as they locked with Lucian's.

"Father?" Korvane asked.

What the hell was wrong with him? Their reunion had been stilted and awkward, and in the brief few minutes they had talked, Korvane had appeared distant and preoccupied. He clearly had no wish to attend his father at the council meeting, yet would not talk of whatever bothered him.

"Nothing. If you don't want to be here then lose yourself," Lucian hissed, turning his back on his son. Seething, he turned his attention back to the council. Gurney appeared to be reaching the conclusion of his thirty-minute rant.

"...drown the tau in oceans of their own blood! We have the Emperor's will as our weapon. What have they?"

Though it was clearly a rhetorical question, Lucian took the opportunity to intercede. "What have they indeed?" he rejoined. "We have just words, extracted under torture, to go on. Do we commit on those words alone?"

As the cardinal turned on Lucian, Inquisitor Grand leaned forward: Inquisitor Grand, whom Lucian's daughter had assaulted, wounded almost fatally, who even now moved as one afflicted by terrible pain: Inquisitor Grand, who was the primary ally of Lucian's greatest opponent on the council. Despite mourning his daughter's unknown fate, Lucian cursed her actions, for she had

made him an enemy powerful beyond reckoning. It just remained to be seen whether Grand would choose to exercise his full powers.

“Might I remind the council,” the inquisitor said, his voice the characteristic dry whisper, “that the information extracted from the tau prisoners hardly took the form of a signed and witnessed confession.” Grand’s words were laced with spite, his gaze sweeping the assembled councillors before settling on Lucian. “The information we have was extracted directly from the prisoners’ minds, and was thus quite free of deception.”

Lucian scowled, knowing full well the manner of the prisoners’ interrogation. He knew that the inquisitor had used some vile form of torture on the tau captured at Sy’l’ Kell. He had his suspicions that the inquisitor or one of his retinue had been utilising the psyker’s arts to tear the information from the tau’s brains, foregoing the need to study their language or risk them lying.

“And so,” Cardinal Gurney continued, casting a smug glance Lucian’s way, “we must devise our plan of conquest.”

“We know precious little of this region.” Admiral Jellaqua spoke up. “We have entered an area of space of a quite singular nature, and have little idea where our foe lies within it.”

“Then he must come to us!” Gurney replied, leaning forward across the table as he spoke. “We must compel these xenos filth to commit their entire force against us.”

Lucian sighed in outright disgust. What had started out as an opportunity to lead a glorious conquest was rapidly turning into a chance to commit suicide following a megalomaniac on a vainglorious xenocide. Prior to Brielle’s attack on the inquisitor, he had been gathering council members to his cause, garnering support for his own approach to the crusade. But now...

“And how do you propose to draw them out?” Lucian asked. He made no attempt to disguise his contempt for Gurney’s plan.

“We find the nearest population centre and descend upon it. We visit upon them the full extent of the Emperor’s wrath. Leave no stone standing upon another.”

“You hope,” Lucian replied, “to draw the tau into launching an all-out counter-attack.”

“I do, Lucian,” the Cardinal replied. “Surely, you can see how this must work?”

“We do not yet comprehend,” Admiral Jellaqua interjected, “the full extent of the tau’s holdings. They may be limited to a single star system, though I doubt that, or they might occupy every system out there.”

The council fell silent for a moment, as each member appeared to mull over the admiral’s words. Then, a voice spoke up. Lucian turned, though he knew from the voice’s mechanical tones that it was Captain Rumann who spoke.

“Though I accept the view that the region is an unknown,” the captain said, nodding first to Jellaqua and then to Lucian, “I do believe that a sudden strike with all available force is a doctrinally sound course of action. It is consistent with the mission of the Adeptus Astartes on this crusade, and may win a war before it has truly begun.”

“I agree.” It was Sarik of the White Scars, his eyes alight with feral glee as he spoke. “My men and I have been cooped up for too long. We need the ground beneath our feet, a bolter in hand and an enemy to the fore.”

“Nonetheless,” replied Lucian, “we must perform a proper reconnoitre first.”

“I agree!” said Admiral Jellaqua. “I will not order my command into harm’s way on the word of a captive. There is simply too much at stake.”

Gurney rounded on Jellaqua, leaning forward over the polished wooden table. “Admiral, might I remind you that I am granted titular authority—”

“And might I remind you,” the stout admiral bellowed as he struggled to his feet, “that I command the Imperial Navy. If any wish to continue without the support of my vessels, then they are welcome to do so!”

The admiral stood, red faced with rage, locked in confrontation with the cardinal. The council went silent, many around the table simply looking elsewhere for fear of setting either man off again. Lucian saw his chance.

“Gentlemen,” he said as he stood and walked around the table to stand between them. “Clearly, this will get us nowhere. “Such division plays into our enemy’s hands, and we can scarcely afford to squander any edge we might have.”

“Quite so,” Jellaqua replied, nodding his thanks to Lucian.

The cardinal, however, was less magnanimous. “To withdraw now would be treason,” he growled, his voice dangerously low where Lucian was more used to it being shrill. Jellaqua stiffened.

“No one is accusing anyone of treason,” Lucian interjected.

“Who among us,” the cardinal replied, “is more fit to judge such a matter?” Gurney turned to his compatriot seated next to him. Inquisitor Grand nodded, his face barely visible beneath his dark hood.

“Indeed,” Grand rasped, “treason is a word so easily applied, and yet one so difficult to take back.”

Lucian felt the inquisitor’s gaze boring into him from beneath the hood, a queasy sensation rising in his stomach. A vision flashed across his mind’s eye, a vivid image of his daughter, in pain and in desperate need. He knew stark dread for a moment, and knew then that he had made a terrible enemy in Inquisitor Grand. He recognised the touch of the psyker, and knew that Grand had placed the vision within his mind. The inquisitor, he had no doubt, was a psyker of some ability.

From where Lucian stood, interposed between the cardinal and the admiral, he noticed that Korvane was staring right at Inquisitor Grand. Had his son shared the vision? Had the bastard inquisitor shown to all of the council that he might truly crush any power that remained within Lucian’s grasp? He looked around the various faces, but saw nothing unusual. It was just him and his son, then.

“How shall we settle this matter?” Admiral Jellaqua asked, sitting once more with evident frustration.

“I’ll do it,” said a voice from across the chamber. Lucian’s heart sank. It was Korvane who had spoken up.

“What?” asked Jellaqua, seeking to locate the speaker.

Lucian saw his son rise and approach the council table.

“Korvane, please sit,” Lucian started.

“No,” interjected Inquisitor Grand, his relish all too evident. “Let him speak.”

Korvane nodded his thanks to the inquisitor. Lucian felt a bitter stab of resentment. “I propose,” Korvane continued, “that I lead a scouting mission to locate a suitable target.”

“And why would you do such a thing?” Inquisitor Grand rasped.

“Because I believe such a course of action is in the best interests of the crusade,” Korvane replied.

“The *Rosetta* is no scouting vessel,” Lucian said, hating that circumstance had set him against his own son in such a manner, yet knowing he must intervene. “She’s not fast enough and she’ll be detected within hours of breaking warp.”

“I know that, father,” Korvane replied, an unfamiliar edge in his voice. “I’ll lead a Navy deep space recon patrol. If there’s a decent target within range, I’ll find it.” He turned to the council at large. “You have my word.”

“Can this be done?” Gurney asked no one in particular.

“Aye,” Jellaqua replied, “it can be done, if it is agreed.” Here the admiral looked to Lucian. Lucian caught the hint of sympathy in the other man’s eye, and appreciated it for the gesture it was no doubt intended to be. Though he seethed inside, Lucian knew that now was the time to show

unity, to shore up what influence he still had within the council. To oppose his son's proposal would spell the end of any such influence, of that he was quite sure. Just what his son hoped to achieve by absenting himself from the crusade fleet at such a vital juncture, he had no clue.

"I propose," Korvane went on, "to proceed rimward thirty-eight by one-one-seven." As he spoke, Korvane touched a polished brass control console mounted in the great wooden table. The vaulted ceiling space was filled with light all of a sudden, which gradually resolved itself into a representation of the surrounding space. The blue nebulae glowed serenely, casting their luminescence over the councillors as each craned his neck to look up. Lucian sighed inwardly, realising that his son's proposal had not been as spontaneous as it had at first appeared. No, Lucian mused bitterly, his son had planned this, and kept it from him.

The heading Korvane had prepared was scribed across the projection as the council watched, warp time differentials labelled at each waypoint. He's wasted no time, Lucian thought, seeing that the course led towards a system that Lucian would have chosen were he proposing the course of action, and not his son.

"This system," Korvane announced, "is, I believe, a viable target."

"Not according to my data." All eyes turned from the swirling blue eddies above, to Magos Explorator Jaakho, who had spoken. "That cluster was subject to a delta seven survey when last my order passed through this region. I do not believe the tau would settle there, for it holds no worlds capable of supporting life."

"And yet," Lucian said, supporting his son's choice of target despite himself, "the tau have developed into a highly proficient spacefaring race, capable of crossing the Gulf and spreading Emperor only knows how far into the stars. With respect, lord explorer, that cluster occupies a strategically important position within the region. It provides an ideal staging post for expansion across the Gulf, or a bridgehead for any wishing to invade. Were we in the tau's position, we would occupy in force."

Lucian's statement caused Gurney to simmer with barely contained outrage at the comparison of human and tau. Let him choke on his own bile, Lucian thought.

"Thank you, father," Korvane said, nodding his head towards Lucian.

"You will need a strong recon element," Lucian said. Though uncertain of his son's agenda, he was already calculating ways in which the situation could be turned to the Arcadius' advantage, "Admiral?"

"Indeed," replied Admiral Jellaqua, who had remained thoughtful as the discussion had taken this odd turn, "I would not be averse to detaching a deep space reconnaissance wing to your son's command. I believe the 344th will suffice. I can order the necessary arrangements, if the council agrees."

"You formally propose this course of action, admiral?" Explorator Jaakho asked.

"I do," replied Admiral Jellaqua, tabling the motion that Korvane be allowed to lead a scouting mission to ascertain the crusade's first target.

"Who here will second this motion?" The explorer lord asked.

"I will," replied Lucian. "I will second the motion."

Lucian and Korvane stood upon the vast crowded main flight deck of the *Blade of Woe*. A navy lighter waited nearby to shuttle Korvane to the scout wing patrolling the crusade's outer perimeter. The whine of the small vessel's idling engines was almost lost amidst the clamour of the bustling deck.

Lucian watched as his son's effects were loaded onto the waiting lighter, waiting for Korvane to offer him some form of explanation. He had been waiting since the council had broken up some hours before, and had yet to hear Korvane's account of his actions.

“So, you’ll leave without telling me what’s going on?” he finally asked, growing impatient with his son’s silence.

“I believe it’s for the best, father. I can do this.”

“Whether you can do this or not is beside the point,” Lucian growled, turning his back on his son and looking out across the busy flight deck. Small vessels arrived and departed by the minute, ferrying personnel and equipment between the capital vessels of the crusade fleet. “That you chose to inform me of your plan of action in the manner you did was unforgivable.”

“I intended no disrespect, father. I sought merely to take the initiative in council.”

“That you did,” Lucian replied, turning towards his son once more, “and you may have done our cause enormous benefit in the process.” Lucian grinned, unable to bear any malice towards his son, and certainly not when Korvane was about to depart into an unknown and hostile region of space.

Korvane however, remained impassive, his features dark and sullen. “You would not have heard me out were I to propose such a course to you, in private.”

Lucian was stunned. “You think…”

“I know,” Korvane said. “I saw the council turning against you, and I acted.”

Not entirely true, Lucian thought, for Korvane had evidently prepared a plot of the region prior to speaking up in council. He decided to leave it. “What’s done is done, Korvane. I do not wish us to part on ill terms.” He spread his arms wide, inviting his son to embrace him at his departing.

Korvane turned his head, his rejection of Lucian’s gesture all too obvious and painful to behold.

“Go then,” Lucian said. “Prove whatever it is you need to prove.”

Korvane turned towards the lighter’s lowered access ramp and took a step up it.

“But Korvane,” Lucian said, his son halting, and turning his head towards him.

“Yes, father?”

“Try not to get yourself killed.”

“Yes, father,” Korvane said, and ducked into the lighter’s small passenger bay.

CHAPTER TWELVE

The tau shuttle touched down with a barely perceptible jolt. Brielle looked across the small passenger bay at Naal, who nodded back at her. She touched the clasp holding the acceleration harness across her body, and it disengaged before retracting into its mounting on the wall behind her.

“Will there be much...” Brielle began.

“Ceremony?” Naal finished for her. “No. Our host will wish to keep things low key, at least to begin with.”

“Until he’s decided how much use I might be to him,” Brielle said. She really did not care that she sounded like a petulant child. She felt like one.

Naal smiled in a manner Brielle was coming to find somewhat patronising. “To a point, yes, but don’t forget, Brielle, that the tau do not mount grandiose ceremonies for the glorification of individuals. They may do so for the benefit of all, but this is not such an occasion.”

Brielle stood from the acceleration couch, stretching as she did so. The interface had taken less than an hour, and was far gentler than an atmospheric entry in many human vessels, but she felt cramped and tense nonetheless.

“So, I’m not important enough to make a fuss over?” she asked, a sly grin at her lips.

“Quite the...” Naal began, before he realised Brielle was toying with him.

“So, who is important enough?” she continued. “Who’s in charge around here?”

When Naal failed to answer her, Brielle turned and regarded him squarely. “What?” she asked, instantly suspicious.

“The tau govern in a manner quite unlike the Imperium,” Naal answered. Brielle noted that he did not meet her eye as he spoke. Her suspicion was piqued.

“I know that, Naal,” she responded testily, “the envoy briefed me. But I could tell that there was plenty he didn’t tell me about.”

“It’s true, Brielle, there is much more to learn,” Naal answered, ducking past her towards the boarding hatch. “Please, be patient. The tau are in, many ways a straightforward people, they shun affectation and pretence and are entirely selfless in the pursuit of the Greater Good.” Naal turned and looked Brielle straight in the eye. “But there are some things they entrust only to friends. If you become their friend, you will be rewarded greatly.”

And if I don’t? Brielle thought to herself as she held Naal’s gaze for a long moment.

“As to your other question,” Naal continued, his tone light and conversational, “no one is ‘in charge around here’.”

She gave him her best incredulous look, and he continued.

“The tau practice a form of collective government. It’s complex, but you’ll come to see that it works.”

“Wait,” Brielle said, “you mean too tell me there’s no single tau in charge?”

“I do,” Naal replied. “Various individuals may attain preeminence, enjoying great influence for a stretch, but they always accede to others when appropriate. Therefore, no one individual has total control, and he who may do so best exercises his influence while he may.”

“And this works? Brielle asked, genuinely incredulous.

“It does, and very well,” Naal said, smiling. “You’ll come to realise, Brielle, that the tau display a distinct lack of ego. It takes some getting used to, but once you do, it all makes sense.”

Taking this in, Brielle gave Naal one last look, just to ensure that he was not toying with her. His continued smile told her that he was not. It all seemed incredibly implausible, but then, the tau was an alien race, quite outside the human frame of reference. She approached the hatch, and stood at Naal’s side as he reached out to activate the control at its side. With a barely audible hiss, the hatch began to open outward. The shuttle’s small passenger compartment was flooded with the light that appeared around the lowering ramp.

Such moments always reminded her of a lesson she had been taught upon her first planetfall. Standing at her father’s side in the equally cramped passenger bay of a human shuttle, he had told her that nothing could match the first breath of a new world. The memory was a precious one from her early adulthood, but it was sullied by the fact that the world in question had been Nankirk, where she had been introduced to her future stepbrother. Korvane had come into the Clan Arcadius that day, the result of a perspicacious joining of dynasties. Brielle, however, had lost her position as heritor of the clan, and, in her view, had lived in Korvane’s shadow ever since.

Forcing such thoughts to the back of her mind, Brielle repeated the ritual she had first carried out on that day years before. She closed her eyes, and felt the gentle breeze on her face of the outside air as it rushed into the shuttle. Her eyes still closed, she took a deep breath. She savoured, as her father had taught her, the myriad subtle tastes and scents of this new world. The air was clean, with a faint undertone of some exotic spice. Something else was carried on the air too, the scent of artificial compounds, plastics, resins and the like. However, they were not the raw, harsh fumes belched out on many worlds of the Imperium, but something far more integrated into the society it served.

She breathed out and opened her eyes, to find the ramp entirely lowered before her. The bright light of the world’s sun dazzled her for an instant, before the photochromatic lenses she wore in her eyes adjusted the light to tolerable levels. As her vision resolved, the view settled into a sight of breathtaking proportions.

The shuttle in which she had arrived was perched upon a small landing pad, which was itself an offshoot of a far larger, narrow, fin-shaped structure. A narrow walkway led from the landing pad to the larger building, although Brielle could see no obvious entrance in its surface. She looked around the landing pad for any form of welcoming party, but saw none. Despite what Naal had said about the tau not standing on ceremony, she felt mildly snubbed. Perhaps that was the point, she thought. It would hardly have been the first time a host had attempted to put an unwelcome guest at a disadvantage by affecting disinterest in their presence.

Looking beyond the landing pad, Brielle saw that they were a very great height above the ground. The structure from which the pad protruded appeared to be part of a far larger city, consisting of a great many such buildings. Each was linked to the next by walkways that soared high above the landscape, which appeared, from Brielle’s vantage point, to consist of featureless, arid wastes as far as the hazy, distant horizon.

“No welcoming committee,” Brielle said, looking to Naal. “You’re the expert in these people,” she said. “So what’s next?”

“Please,” Naal said, gesturing forward, “you are the guest, not I.”

She looked at him for a moment, not entirely convinced that all was well. No matter, she told herself; whatever happened, she would turn it to her own advantage soon enough. She had to, she mused; she could hardly go back and apologise to the council for killing one of their number.

Taking a deep breath, Brielle stepped down the ramp, steeling herself against whatever might await her on this world.

Having left the tau vessel on the landing pad, Brielle had allowed Naal to lead the way. He knew what he was doing, and had obviously been here before. She welcomed the opportunity to take it all in, to observe this new place, and to glean any advantage she could. She had followed Naal across a

series of walkways, each of which passed through one of the soaring, off-white, fin-shaped structures, before continuing through the air to the next. At first, she had experienced vertigo, for the walkways had no hand holds, but she found that they were wide enough so that if she passed down their exact centre the effect was minimised. She had no idea who used these walkways, for the pair did not pass a single tau.

After a while, the walkways converged at a structure even taller than the rest. Brielle halted as it came into view, taking the opportunity to marvel in its construction. It must have been a thousand metres tall, and it rose in sweeping lines to a sail-like peak. Small clusters of what appeared to be sensor or communications gear were connected to its spine, and a great, gleaming spike pierced the sky at its very top, dancing blue lights chasing up and down its length.

Then, Brielle saw that small, floating machines were moving up and around the structure. She knew them straight away for the drones that the tau utilised at every level of their society, though these were far larger than the small utility drones she had witnessed onboard the tau vessel that had brought her to this world. The drones took the form of a flat, armoured disc, about a metre in diameter. Beneath the disc was a small sensor block, with its unblinking machine eye, and beside that, what was obviously a weapon of some sort. As she studied the drones, one detached itself from its orbit of the building, and approached her and Naal on a long, graceful arc through the air that brought it, hovering, before her.

The drone was so close she could almost have reached out and touched it, yet she sensed from its movements that such a gesture would not have been wise.

“What is it doing?” Brielle asked Naal.

“What you’d expect of any guard doing his duty,” Naal replied. “It’s determining whether or not we are a threat.”

“It’s relaying back to someone in the tower?” Brielle asked, keeping an eye on the drone as she spoke.

“It is perfectly capable of making the decision on its own, Brielle.”

Brielle felt her hackles rise as she watched the drone begin a circuit of the pair. She knew that the tau utilised highly developed machine intelligences, but to see one close up was something else entirely. The teachings of the Imperial Creed warned against such things, and those admonitions had been drilled into her from a very early age. As she regarded the single lens mounted beneath the armoured disc, she felt that there was indeed some manner of intelligence at work within the machine, and the thought disturbed her to her core.

“When will it be done?” she asked Naal through gritted teeth.

“Please, Brielle,” Naal answered, “such things are commonplace on tau worlds. You must get used to them.”

Now he was really starting to annoy her. She cast him a glare that told him the drone had better hurry up its examination or mere would be consequences. But, before she could say any more, she heard the gentle sound of the door in the side of the structure before them opening.

A group of tau stepped through the opening.

Brielle quickly counted five of them. One, obviously the most senior, stood at the head of the group. He was tall and thin, and wore long, shimmering robes, but it was his face that made the greatest impression on Brielle. Although she had found it hard to read the expression of the envoy on whose vessel she had been brought here, she had at least found some similarities between tau and human facial expressions. This tau appeared maudlin to Brielle, as if he greedily regretted his role. To Brielle’s understanding, the tau were born into their station, and all she had encountered to date had appeared quite content with their lot. Before she could ponder the matter further, the tau spoke.

“I welcome you, Mistress Brielle Gerrit of the Arcadius, to the Sept of Dal’yth. My name is Por’O Dal’yth Ulor Kanti. Please,” he continued, “call me Aura. The translation is close enough for our purposes.”

Even his voice seemed sad to Brielle, almost wistfully mournful. Was this some affectation on his part to gain some advantage in their dealings? Not wishing to cause offence, she hastened to answer.

“Please accept my sincere thanks for the kindness you have shown me,” Brielle said.

“We have shown you no kindness beyond the spirit in which the Tau Empire approaches all the races it encounters. We do find ourselves, however, in a unique position.”

Brielle’s guard was immediately up. She had been warned that the tau would not stand on ceremony, yet she sensed something more unfolding before her, something serious enough to disrupt the familiar course of any such meeting.

“Mistress Arcadius,” Aura said, “you have arrived at Dal’yth not a moment too soon. Even now, the human fleet closes on this system.”

So soon? Brielle had assumed the tau vessel on which she had crossed the Damocles Gulf would have arrived a long way ahead of the crusade, affording her some time to turn the situation to her advantage and find some way of averting the disaster that would ensue if Gurney’s plan was enacted. Now, she would have to think on her feet to turn things around.

“Might I ask,” Brielle said, “how far out are they?”

Aura did not answer Brielle’s question. Instead, one of the tau standing behind him took a step forward. Like his fellows, this individual was shorter and of more stocky build than the diplomat. The robes he wore were made of a far simpler, deep red, fabric, yet they did not disguise the tau’s more muscular frame.

Aura made a shallow bow, before introducing him. “Mistress Brielle, my colleague, Commander Puretide, will answer your question.”

“The human fleet is thought to lie only a few days travel gulfward of Dal’yth,” Commander Puretide said, his voice resonant and steady. “The deep space pickets of the Air Caste have detected their communications, though the main body of the fleet appears to be mustering still, following its crossing of the Gulf Brielle considered this information, regarding the commander as she pondered. She was struck by the air of calm wisdom he radiated. A breeze whipped up, causing the top knot on the commander’s otherwise shaved head to stir. She felt a brief moment of vertigo, but forced her mind back to the issue at hand.

“Have they made any attempt at communication?” Brielle asked the commander.

“They have not,” replied the commander, transfixing her with his glare.

“And neither will they,” said a third tau, stepping forward as he did so. Brielle could tell that this individual was younger than Commander Puretide, and he stood taller and more erect. Something in the way the tau carried himself gave Brielle pause. This one was dangerous, she thought.

“Mistress,” Aura continued, “please forgive me. These others are the commander’s companions. I believe a better word, in your tongue, might be pupils or students, though neither word is entirely satisfactory.” Aura indicated with a graceful sweep of a long arm each of the tau as he spoke their names. “Farsight, Shadowsun and Icewind.”

Each of the three nodded to Brielle as their name was spoken. Farsight was the tau who had spoken a moment before, and Shadowsun, a female tau stood next to him, her expression calm and unreadable. Next to her stood the tau introduced as Icewind, his expression one of calculated study of everything that transpired around him.

Brielle nodded in greeting to Puretide’s pupils, before addressing the commander once more. “The fleet will send out scouts to identify its first target. Tell me commander, which system lies closest?”

“Mistress Arcadius,” Commander Puretide replied, “this very system lies closest.”

“Have you attempted to communicate with them?” she asked, a sense of dread mounting within her.

“We have not,” Aura interjected. “We require that you do so on our behalf.”

Now Brielle's dread threatened to well up into panic. "No!" She turned from Puretide, to Naal. "I cannot, they will kill me before I..."

"You will have the might of the Tau Empire behind you," Aura cut in. "They will not dare harm you."

"You don't know them," Brielle said, her mind racing for an alternative even as she spoke.

"Nonetheless," Aura said, "you must do so, for the Greater Good. If you do not wish to join the tau, then you are free to return to your people." The breeze whipped Brielle's plaited hair into her face, causing her to flick her head in irritation. "But if you choose to do so, you do so alone. Join us, or return to them. The choice is yours."

That's no choice at all, Brielle thought as Aura's words sank in. Return to the fleet as a traitor in the service of the tau, or do so as a cornered renegade with nowhere left to run.

"I need time to think," Brielle said, desperately stalling for time.

"You have until sunset, Mistress Brielle," Aura said, his mournful voice barely audible over the mounting breeze. "Time is against us all, and I must have an answer before war comes to the Tau Empire."

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

The cramped bridge of Korvane's scout vessel was dark and silent, every member of the bridge crew intent upon the operation of their sensor equipment. Korvane sat at the rear of the bridge space, the crew arrayed to his side and the pilot occupying the station below him. He stared out of the multi-faceted cockpit canopy, brooding at the system before him.

His hand trembled, and he gripped the seat's arm until his knuckles turned white. He forced his mind onto anything other than the pain and the substance that would mask it.

The crusade's charts listed this place as the Kendral subsector. It was a meaningless appellation as far as Korvane could tell, in all likelihood named for one of the explorators who had passed through six millennia before. Whoever Kendral was, he had not returned to settle the region named after him, and so no one would ever know what deed had earned him the right to have an entire region of space share his name. The system had no name, just a designation within the sub sector: KX122. Even now, Korvane's scout wing was edging into the system's outer reaches, each vessel on silent running lest they give away their presence to any tau in the locality.

"Report," ordered Korvane.

A crewman, hunched over a glowing terminal, answered, "Passive readings confirm the presence of at least a dozen stellar bodies, my lord. We are approaching the nearest as ordered."

"Good," Korvane replied. Looking through the canopy, he caught his first glimpse of the world in question. KX122'13 was expected to be a small, dense world consisting of little more than rock and ice. With only the passive sensors to rely on, the scouts would need to make a close pass in order to gather much more information, and this they would do as the world came into view.

Very little light fell upon KX122'13 this far from the system's single, cold white stare. Only the blue of the surrounding nebulae glinting from its icy surface caught Korvane's eye.

"Take us in low, pilot," Korvane ordered. "I doubt there's anyone about, but if there is, I don't want them to see us coming."

"Confirmed," replied the pilot. "Activating ground following radar in point..."

"Denied!" snapped Korvane. "I ordered passive sensors only and I meant it." Korvane's rage was growing as the pilot turned to look up at him.

"Sir, without the..."

"I said," Korvane said through gritted teeth, "denied. You will follow my orders to the letter, or you will stand down. Do you understand?"

Correctly deducing that the question was entirely rhetorical, the pilot turned back to his task. Korvane stared at the back of the man's head for a moment, before looking out of the canopy. KX122'13 was coming into view, its blue, cratered surface dimly visible against the blackness of space. The pilot instigated a change of course that levelled the small vessel out. The horizon reared up from below, filling half of the view, the light of the distant star casting a ghostly halo above. Korvane leant back in the acceleration couch and scanned the readouts around the bridge.

It felt both liberating and frustrating to be in command, not of a mighty cruiser with thousands of crew, but of a scout wing of four vessels, each with only a few dozen crew. It was the first time in his career that Korvane had undertaken such a mission, though he felt supremely confident in his ability to carry it through. He sighed as he admitted that in truth, he was glad to be away from the crusade fleet, from the myriad demands of running his vessel. He knew that he was also eager to escape his father's shadow, to ply his own course, for a while at least. He reflected ruefully how his

stepsister had attempted to do something similar, and made such a mess of it. Well, he would prove that he was fully capable of making things work on his own, and to bring honour and profit to the Arcadius through his own actions.

In the meantime, he mused, if Brielle was out there, on the run, he would ensure that she never returned to the crusade fleet and to the Arcadius. Thinking of his stepsister brought a dark cloud down upon him. When he had learned of Brielle's assault upon Inquisitor Grand and her subsequent disappearance, he had been gladdened, though he had struggled to hide his reaction from his father. Recently, however, as the crusade had pushed on towards tau space, it had occurred to him that she must still be out there, somewhere. And so, he had seen the opportunity to place himself in a position of power, from where he could react should Brielle reappear. He had no idea exactly what he would do should he locate her, but, he brooded, he would worry about that if and when it happened.

"Sir?" The pilot said, breaking Korvane's reverie.

"Report," he snapped back.

"Descending at your command."

"Do it."

Korvane felt an immediate change in the pitch of the scout vessel's drives as the pilot altered course, bringing the small ship's nose down towards the distant surface. Almost immediately, a series of small tremors passed through the vessel. Korvane looked to a pict-slate over the pilot's station, and saw from the readings scrolling across its blue screen that they had hit the outer edges of a very thin atmospheric envelope. A second series of shudders jolted the scout vessel, and Korvane checked that his harness was properly secured. The sound of the drives grew more intense, building to a deafening roar, as the angle of descent grew more acute. Looking from the pict-slate to the canopy, Korvane saw small trails of gas dancing across the armoured glass, the leading edge of the shuttle's blunt nose glowing faintly orange with the heat generated as it plunged through the atmosphere.

"Sir!" a crewman behind Korvane called out, raising his voice over the cacophony of atmospheric entry. "Vox transponders are picking up a faint signal."

Korvane's heart pounded as he read the data patched through to his console screen. He felt an exhilaration quite different to that he experienced at the bridge of the *Rosetta* in similar circumstances. Now, he sat not aboard a might cruiser able to take fearsome punishment from other vessels, but in a tiny scouting vessel that could take none, relying instead upon stealth and guile to survive. He struggled for a moment to make sense of the data, before realising that it represented not a weak signal, as the crewman had reported, but a very tightly focused one. And that, he surmised, could mean only one thing: a small tau presence, perhaps an outpost or research station, and the perfect target for his first action.

"Take us in, pilot," Korvane ordered, thrilling to the prospect of an easy victory to report back to the fleet. "Lock on to the signal source. Bring us in low and fast."

The pilot hunched over his controls, driving the scout vessel lower. As Korvane watched, the view through the canopy became entirely obscured by superheated gases, and the ship bucked and jolted violently. Korvane saw that the pilot was flying entirely by the passive sensors, and by the uncanny instinct with which the pilots of the Navy pathfinder squadrons were rightly famed.

A moment later, the view through the armoured canopy cleared, and Korvane saw that the vessel was coming up on the end of an impossibly steep dive. He resisted the urge to order the pilot to arrest the descent, and an instant later the pilot hauled back on the control column with all his might. Korvane was forced back into the acceleration couch as the gravitational forces at work on the vessel mounted. Even as he felt he might pass out, the pilot brought the vessel out of the dive, and on to an even trajectory less than a hundred metres from the cratered surface. Korvane gasped for breath as gravity returned to normal, and released the harness strapping him into the couch. He

leaned forward, over the pilot's shoulder, to gain a better view of the ground as it passed rapidly by below.

The surface of KX122'13 was cratered and scarred. Ice glistened dimly in the faint starlight, but Korvane could make out nothing obviously artificial or out of place. He checked the readout above the pilot's station once more, and saw that they were closing in on the source of the signal.

"Sensors, I want a full, active scan the moment we reveal ourselves, understood?"

The crewman at the sensor station at Korvane's side turned and looked straight at him. "Sir, standard doctrine is to..."

"I gave you an order!" Korvane spat, anger once more welling up. He felt his frustration growing steadily as the Navy crew felt it reasonable to question his orders. He would not have accepted such a lapse in discipline on the bridge of the *Rosetta*, and he was damned if he would do so here.

"But sir," the crewman continued, evidently prepared to risk Korvane's ire, "if they have any local defences they'll be able to lock onto us in seconds."

"I am fully aware of that," Korvane replied, barely able to keep his voice steady as his anger threatened to boil over, "but an entire fleet is relying on us. We need only confirm the tau's presence, and then we can return to the fleet and report our findings. Do as I order, now, or your career is ended."

"Understood, sir," the crewman replied, turning from Korvane and working the controls at his station. Korvane watched for a moment, satisfying himself that the man was in fact preparing his instruments to perform a full, active scan the instant the scout vessel came into range of the signal source.

"Range?" Korvane asked. He felt a growing tension, but was damned if he'd let the Navy crewmen detect it.

"Three seventeen," the pilot responded, not taking his eyes from the view outside.

"Descend to fifty metres," Korvane ordered. He was determined that the scouts would have the advantage of surprise. If the tau did have any local air defence, then coming in so low might gain precious seconds in which the active sensors could scan the outpost. Any intelligence that Korvane could bring back would be invaluable in furthering the cause of the Arcadius against that of Cardinal Grand and his faction.

Korvane braced himself once more. The pilot pushed forward on his control column, the vessel descending so that the craters and ridges flashing by below lurched up into close proximity. Korvane could make out individual boulders on the surface, and could see that the deep blue colouration of the ground was caused by large dunes of drifting blue particles. A low, mountainous spine reared up on the horizon.

"Twenty seconds, sir," the pilot intoned.

"Good," Korvane replied. "Sensors, prepare for..."

"Contact at three-three-six!" called out another crewman. Korvane spun to his right, looking over the shoulder of the man who had spoken.

"Identify," Korvane replied.

"Four, belay that, five fast moving class fives, range... three kilometres and closing."

Korvane forced down a mounting panic. "Heading?"

The crewman turned to look Korvane right in the eye. "They are inbound on our position, sir."

Before Korvane could answer, the pilot spoke. "Five..."

Korvane's mind raced to keep pace of events. He took a deep breath and forced himself to steady his nerves. He thought fast.

"Pilot, perform one pass and then break for orbit. Sensors, get as much as you can, while you can. Understood?"

Neither man answered him. As the countdown reached zero, Korvane felt the scout vessel lurch suddenly upwards, the low mountain range sweeping by beneath.

Then, Korvane saw the source of the signal. Beyond the ridge lay a wide depression, an ancient crater, the flanks of which were all but obscured by the drifting blue particulates. A tall, sail shaped structure soared into the sky at the centre of the crater. Korvane had only tau starship design to go on, but he knew instantly that this structure was of tau manufacture, the clean lines already familiar to him.

“Scanning,” called the sensor operator as the pilot brought the vessel down into the crater, skimming a mere twenty metres above the ground before bringing the ship upwards in a wide, banking roll.

“Comms,” Korvane said, addressing another crewman, “I want a short burst transmission ready the instant we get clear.” Even as he spoke, Korvane tapped his report into his command terminal, sealed it with his personal cipher and shunted it on to the comms operator’s station.

“Contacts closing at seven fifty kilometres per hour!” the sensor operator called out.

“Sir,” the pilot said, “at this speed and heading I can’t evade. We need to get clear, right now!”

Korvane forced down the urge to snap back at the man, knowing that the pilot was correct. He knew that they would not obtain a full scan if they pulled out now, but at least they would escape with their lives. “Take us home, pilot,” Korvane ordered, hearing sighs of relief from the bridge crew behind him as he spoke.

“Hold on,” the pilot warned, before hauling back on the control column. The horizon dropped and the black of space hove into view through the canopy. Korvane felt his body forced back into the acceleration couch and straggled to fasten the harness.

“Contact closing,” the sensor operator announced, an edge of alarm in his voice. “Speed increasing...”

“Incoming!” called out another crewman. Korvane looked around desperately for the cause of the warning, before the pilot heaved upon his controls and the vessel lurched violently to port. An instant later, what was obviously a high velocity missile streaked past upon a billowing contrail, before veering off and disappearing from view.

“It’s coming round!” a voice called in outright panic. Korvane looked to his tracking screen, and saw that the missile was indeed beginning a wide arc that would bring it back on to the scout vessel’s tail.

“Pilot,” Korvane called, “bring us back around on heading seven six nine.”

“Towards the contacts, sir?”

“Towards the contacts. They clearly outmatch us for speed and reach. Call in the rest of the wing and close on enemy contacts.”

Korvane tightened the lock on his acceleration harness. If it’s a fight they want, he thought, then it’s a fight they’ll get.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

“Signal?” Lucian asked, not taking his eyes from the view through the forward viewing port.

“None as yet, my lord,” replied the newly appointed communications officer. “All commands at alert status alpha crimson. We’re on track for the assault when the *Blade* gives the word.”

“Thank you, Mister Katona,” Lucian replied, grateful that a flesh and blood human was manning the comms station. Lucian had petitioned Jellaqua for an intake of seconded officers following the disaster that had decimated his bridge crew during the crossing of the Damocles Gulf. The admiral had obliged, and not a moment too soon, in Lucian’s opinion, for things were about to get very serious indeed.

Lucian continued his vigil at the armoured port. The scene was quite spectacular, even to one with the heritage of a rogue trader line behind him. The entire battle line of the Damocles Gulf crusade fleet was arranged against the lambent blue nebulae, ready and waiting to begin its attack on the tau system into which it had arrived. The *Blade of Woe*, Admiral Jellaqua’s four thousand year old Retribution-class battleship lay mere kilometres to the *Oceanid*’s prow. Several kilometres long, the vessel was slab sided and sharp-prowed, and bristled with weapons turrets and sensor arrays. She bore the scars of hundreds of battles. Lucian knew the battleship to be a fearsome opponent in a fight, her broadsides easily the match for any tau vessel he had yet to witness. Furthermore, Lucian had spoken with the admiral several hours earlier, and knew he would be taking a direct hand in his ship’s operation when things got heated. Jellaqua might be a senior admiral of the Imperial Navy, but Lucian knew he would not be able to resist the urge to captain his flagship in person, leading from the front in a glorious example to the other captains of the line.

A kilometre off the *Blade of Woe*’s starboard bow lay the *Niobe*, an Overlord-class battlecruiser captained by one Captain Joachim, whom Lucian had met once at council and had taken an instant dislike to. Joachim, it transpired, was the youngest son of the Cabiri dynasty, a rogue trader clan that Lucian’s family had clashed with over trading rights three centuries earlier. Though Lucian bore the man no ill will, Joachim evidently felt that some form of feud existed between the two. Lucian had been in no mood to pander to Joachim’s folly, and had given him no more thought since. He had decided, however, to keep a weather eye out, lest the son of Cabiri decide to renew his imaginary feud at some inopportune moment in the coming battle.

A pair of cruisers, the Gothic-class *Lord Cedalion*, and the *Duchess McIntyre*, which was commanded by Captain Natalia, lay to the *Niobe*’s starboard side. Lucian had gained a solid respect for Natalia, viewing her as one of the most proficient and reliable captains of the fleet, and a definite ally in the incessant political manoeuvring that went on, even amongst the ships’ masters.

The Lunar-class cruiser the *Honour of Damlass*, and her consort, the Dauntless-class cruiser *Regent Lakshimbal* rested at a distance, forming a pair of spiked, black silhouettes against the glowing blue backdrop of the region’s nebulae. This pair would form a cruiser squadron tasked with guarding the fleet’s port flank while the heavier vessels engaged the enemy head on.

Lucian’s vessel sat at the rear of the formation, the *Rosetta* and the *Fairlight* in echelon to port behind her. Though he could not see her, Lucian knew that his stern was covered by the *Centaur*, a newly commissioned Lunar-class cruiser yet to fire her first shot in anger.

The nine escort squadrons that the capital vessels would rely on to provide close protection against enemy vessels seeking to get in amongst their formation were scattered throughout this

impressive armada. Each squadron consisted of three or four sword frigates or destroyers of various types, and each was led by a squadron leader proven in battle many times over.

Yet, even as Lucian looked out at the fleet, each of its vessels bristling with mighty weapons and laden with crew eager to fight for the cause of humanity, his mind drifted back, weeks before, to the encounter he had had with the derelict battlecruiser *Ajax*. Following Master Karaldi's prognostication trance, Lucian had been left in no doubt that the vessel was lost in the warp. Yet, when the fleet had mustered at its fourth waypoint during the crossing of the Gulf, the *Ajax* had been there too, intact and fully operational. He had heard tales of such things, read cautionary accounts passed down generations of rogue traders from father to son, but never before had he been so close to witnessing such a phenomenon first hand. Lucian had withheld his account of his encounter with the *Ajax*, lest the morale of the fleet be adversely affected. He could not, and would not, tell anyone that he had seen the *Ajax* dead in space, before she had been seen alive and well and operating as part of the fleet, before disappearing once more at the final muster. The warp had inflicted some terrible fate upon the vessel, and he would keep his own counsel on the matter. He knew, however, that the event would stalk him in nightmares for many years to come.

For now, the position in the line normally covered by the *Ajax* would be covered by the *Oceanid* and the *Rosetta*, with the *Fairlight* in close attendance. Lucian was perfectly able to fulfil the role of a captain of the line, and he had briefed officers placed in temporary charge of the *Rosetta* and the *Fairlight*. Both were capable men, eager to prove their worth, and both had served the Arcadius for many long years. Though it pained him to entrust the two vessels to any other than his own blood, Lucian was glad that they were in good hands.

As he watched, Lucian saw the mighty plasma drives of the *Blade of Woe* flare to life. The armoured glass of the viewing port dimmed automatically, affording Lucian a view of the final jostling for position before the fleet moved to attack the tau world towards which they were ploughing.

"Any moment now, sir," Katona said, anticipating Lucian's question. "All commands have called in their final telemetries."

"Well enough, Mister Katona," Lucian replied, affording himself a wolfish grin at the prospect of the coming scrap. Turning from the port, he strode the length of the bridge, taking the time to look over the shoulder of each of the Navy bridge crew. All was well, each officer going about his duty as if born to it. They probably were, he mused, knowing that each man would hail from a naval line as old as the Arcadius.

"Let's get things moving, shall we?" Lucian asked no one in particular. "Mister Ruuben," Lucian addressed the seconded navy helmsman, "you have control of my vessel. I care for her very deeply. Treat her well, understood?"

The helmsman, evidently a veteran of several calamitous battles by the terrible burn scars that marred his bald pate, turned at his station and bowed to Lucian. "I'll take care of her like she's my own, my lord. You have my word."

"I'll hold you to it, Mister Ruuben," Lucian replied. He liked the man already, though he deeply mourned the loss of Raldi, and above all the manner of that loss.

Settling in to his command throne, Lucian savoured the feeling that few others could understand: to command a warship, to order her into battle, to hold in one's hand such awesome destruction as she could unleash, and to bear the responsibility of thousands of lives. It was his birthright and his burden, and he would not trade moments such as this for all Macharius' gold.

"Signal from fleet command," Mister Katona called out.

"Patch it through," Lucian ordered.

The bridge was suddenly filled with the open master command channel, the echoes of a thousand communications bleeding through the signal to produce a cacophonous riot of distorted and unintelligible noise. Then, the channel cleared, and a single voice rang out.

"Masters and officers of the Damocles Gulf crusade fleet."

Lucian smiled, recognising instantly Admiral Jellaqua's proud and authoritative voice. Gurney might exercise control over the council, but out here, in the cold of space and the heat of battle, it was Jellaqua and the ships' masters that wielded true power. "We have come a long way, all of us together, but we now stand at the point of decision. Soon, we shall do battle with the tau. Where previously these xenos have infiltrated our systems and skirmished with our patrols, now we shall truly show them the might of the Imperial Navy. We know not what we might face here, but I know this: every one of you, I have no doubt, will give his all in the service of our cause. Whatever they throw at us, we shall counter them, with fire and shell, with blood and honour, with hatred and bile!"

Lucian saw the men and women of the seconded Navy bridge crew smile, as he had a moment earlier. Though they maintained an appropriate formality and discipline, he saw in the eyes of each a heartfelt respect and affection for the admiral, a genuine love of their master and commander. Such a thing was rare indeed in a Navy that relied as much on indentured or outright press-ganged labour as it did on the noble lines from which these officers were drawn. Many a ship's master was a figure of hatred and fear amongst his crew, and admirals even more so, for they wielded, and frequently exercised, the power to condemn thousands of souls to cold oblivion with but a word.

"The order is given, loyal servants of the Throne," Jellaqua's voice continued. "I charge each of you with this sacred duty. Bring the tau to heel. Show them the fire in your souls. Do so with nobility. Be glorious in victory, and show honour to the defeated. Do this, and live forever at the right hand of the Emperor!"

"And one more thing," Jellaqua continued, just as Lucian was sure he must be done, "good hunting."

The bridge crew erupted in cheers, even old Batista, Lucian's ordnance officer, joining in the impromptu show of emotion. Lucian caught Batista's eye, and the old man appeared suddenly guilty. Lucian smiled, and the man nodded. It was not Lucian's place to share in the moment, but he welcomed it. He realised with a heavy heart that it had been too long since such a crew had served on his bridge. Over the past decade he had become too used to a station occupied only by mute servitors.

"Now then!" Lucian said, raising his voice to restore order to his bridge. The bridge fell silent. "Jellaqua might be the master of this fleet, but I am master of this vessel."

Lucian watched with a glint in his eye as the crew returned to their stations, each with a face stricken with guilt, apart from old Batista, who was clearly well aware of what his captain was up to.

"If we're to get through this, we all need to understand one thing. I'm in charge here, and you do as I order, the instant I order it."

Lucian looked to Mister Batista. "My Master of Ordnance here will tell you what happens to bridge crews on the *Oceanid* when they fail to do as I say. Mister Batista?"

"They get turned into servitors," Batista grinned.

"Aye," Lucian said, nodding his thanks to Batista, pleased that the man had discerned his intention so well. "And what type of servitor do they get turned into, Mister Batista?"

The ordnance officer's face twisted in grossly exaggerated concentration. "Waste ingestion servitors, my lord."

Very good, thought Lucian, very good indeed. "So, any of you wishing to avoid such a fate had better ensure that your station is one hundred per cent battle ready."

Lucian leaned back in his command throne, enjoying the scene on the bridge before him. The Navy crew were all veterans, and set to their task with efficiency bred of endless hours of training. Outside, he watched as the *Blade of Woe's* plasma drives flared to full power, and the massed banks of manoeuvring thrusters that lined her cliff-like flanks brought her to her final heading. Within minutes, the other capital vessels of the line were orienting themselves to Jellaqua's flagship, whilst the escort squadrons of smaller vessels moved to their own positions around the armada.

"Helm," Lucian said. The bridge went silent in anticipation. "You have your course laid in?"

"Aye, sir," Ensign Ruuben replied, "awaiting orders."

Lucian grinned, letting the moment stretch out. Then, “All power to mains, Mister Ruuben, ahead full at best speed.”

The Navy helmsman worked the mighty brass levers, opening up the plasma core and bringing the main drives to full output. As the power mounted, the deck plates beneath Lucian’s feet vibrated jarringly, then settled as the drives stabilised. With a shudder that passed down the length of the entire vessel, the *Oceanid* came around, taking her position in the fleet.

“Incoming signal,” Ensign Katona said. “It’s the *Nomad*, sir. Patch through?”

“Please do, Mister Katona,” Lucian replied.

“Gerrit?” asked the unmistakable voice of sergeant Sarik of the White Scars.

“Go ahead, Sarik,” replied Lucian. He recalled the last time the *Oceanid* and the *Nomad* had fought side by side, and wondered whether Sarik would warn him off or welcome his presence in the line. You could never tell with Space Marines, Lucian thought.

“Lucian,” Sarik continued, “I owe you a debt of honour for your aid at Sy’l’Kell.”

Lucian was surprised to hear a Space Marine make such an admission. He allowed Sarik to continue.

“Should you find yourself in a position whereby I might repay that debt, you have but to ask, whether in the coming battle or at any point in the future.”

Lucian felt deeply honoured by Sarik’s words, knowing that they bore the weight and authority not only of Sarik and his small band of Space Marines, but of the entire Chapter of White Scars.

“Brother Sergeant Sarik,” Lucian replied, “you have my word that I shall do so.”

“Good then.” Lucian detected a shift in Sarik’s tone, as if the Space Marine’s mood had lifted. “With that out of the way, we have some fighting to do.”

Lucian chuckled. “Aye, Sarik. I’m with you. Just try not to find too much trouble!”

The bridge crew went silent at Lucian’s words, but he felt an understanding with Brother Sergeant Sarik. He knew he could say such things, where other men might fear terrible retribution.

“Lucian,” Sarik’s voice came back, rough humour evident in it, “what you and I consider trouble might differ considerably.”

Lucian laughed out loud as Sarik terminated the communication. He saw the *Nomad* heave into view through the forward port, before the smaller craft veered across the *Oceanid*’s path and powered on towards the fleet’s very spear tip.

“Holo,” Lucian ordered, and the holographic came to life as the bridge lights dimmed. The revolving globe of green light mapped out the immediate area of space, each of the fleet’s capital vessels clearly visible as glowing white icons, the names of each projected nearby. Lucian saw that the fleet had spread out in a broad and shallow arrowhead formation. The escorts and destroyers screened the larger cruisers, which in turn were to protect the *Blade of Woe*. The rogue trader flotilla, the *Oceanid* at its fore, was positioned to the rear of Admiral Jellaqua’s battleship, from where Lucian’s vessels could respond to the situation as the battle unfolded.

Studying the fleet’s disposition and composition, Lucian was convinced it would take a major tau presence in the system to challenge it. His only concern, which he had expressed to Jellaqua at the crusade’s outset, was the fleet’s comparative lack of attack craft. It could not be helped, the admiral had responded, explaining how the only carriers within three sectors were laid up for major refits, or otherwise engaged in long-range patrols. Lucian reached up to a data-slate suspended from the ceiling above his command throne. He depressed a control stud, and the slate’s pict screen came to life. The text of Kor-vane’s hasty report was displayed upon it.

Although he had done so a hundred times, Lucian read over the report once more. The system into which the fleet was attacking was host to a small tau outpost. Kor-vane’s scout wing had located this presence, before coming under attack by a small force of tau patrol vessels. Korvane was convinced that no major tau forces were in the system, and before moving on he had recommended that the fleet move in to consolidate and stage for the next phase of the campaign.

The council had agreed, deciding that a hammer blow assault upon the small tau presence would serve as a suitable demonstration in the fleet's power, and intentions. If the tau mounted a defence of the system, or decided to counterattack, then they would be drawn into a war that they were ill-prepared to fight, one mounted entirely on the Imperium's terms.

Lucian sighed inwardly as he read over his son's words. Korvane was certain that the system was ill defended, yet Lucian knew better than to rely on such assumptions. As far as he was concerned, the fleet was moving into hostile territory, and should be prepared for any eventuality. Fortunately, Admiral Jellaqua was of the same mind, hence the fleet's disposition as it ploughed on towards its target.

That target was the small satellite designated KX122'13, a moon of a larger, though reportedly unoccupied body. Even as Lucian watched, the planet appeared at the very edge of the globe, projected into the centre of the bridge by the holograph. Very little of its nature could be discerned at this range, and no enemy activity could be detected. The task of flushing out and engaging enemy vessels would go to the Space Marines of the various chapters that accompanied the fleet, from the Iron Hands in their strike cruiser *Fist of Light*, to the varied escort and destroyer equivalents of the Scythes of the Emperor, Ultramarines and White Scars Chapters.

"Signal from 27th Squadron," called out Ensign Katona. "They have a sensor return on KX122'13. Stand by."

If all was well, thought Lucian, it should be the tau outpost that Korvane had reported. He watched the holograph as the three Sword-class frigates of 27th Squadron peeled off from their position ahead of the line.

"Confirmed," continued Ensign Katona. "The 27th reports corroborate the scout wing's report. Fleet has ordered 27th to locate and engage tau outpost. Remainder of fleet to continue on present heading."

"Well enough," replied Lucian. "If we continue on our current heading we'll pass by the satellite and skirt KX122. I want every station ready for anything."

Lucian felt the old, familiar tension that had preceded every space battle he had ever been engaged in. The bluster was passed, and total concentration was required lest the enemy gain an advantage that proved fatal. He watched the holograph as 27th Squadron bore down upon the small moon, before disappearing amongst the background noise of the satellite and its parent world. He traced the fleet's course forward, guessing that Jellaqua intended a slingshot of KX122, a manoeuvre that would flush out any enemy vessels lurking in the lee of either stellar body. Reaching for the control panel mounted in the arm of his throne, Lucian adjusted the holograph, panning forward, zooming in on the area between the satellite and its parent. The image blurred for a moment, before resolving once more, focused on the two planets and the static laced area of space between them. Something itched at the back of Lucian's mind. It was a feeling he had experienced before in similar circumstances, and one he had long ago learned not to ignore.

"Comms, signal the *Blade of Woe*," Lucian said, his suspicions mounting as the fleet ploughed on.

"Sorry, sir," Ensign Katona replied, "receiving a signal from 103rd Squadron."

It took only a second for Lucian to locate 103rd on the holograph. The two Sword-class frigates were running seventy-five thousand kilometres ahead of the fleet's spear tip. With 27th dispatched to deal with the outpost, 103rd was the leading escort squadron.

"They have a return, in stationary orbit around KX122. The telemetry's coming through now."

"Main screen," ordered Lucian. He had a dreadful sense of premonition as the pict-slate mounted above the forward portal came to life in an angry wash of static.

The screen showed the sensor returns gathered by the leading frigate of 103rd Squadron. Less than a thousand kilometres to the frigate's fore was a large, solid return that was all too familiar to Lucian.

“Ensign Naveen,” Lucian said, addressing the Navy officer who had taken over station ten, “consult the archives. Compare that return to the tau defence station the fleet encountered at Sy’l’Kell.”

“Working,” Naveen replied, reams of text scrolling up the data screen before him. Lucian waited impatiently, his eyes on the main viewer all the while. Though undoubtedly more use in a fight, these men of flesh and blood communed far less efficiently with the *Oceanid*’s data stacks than did the servitors he had become accustomed to.

“Well?” he said, resisting the urge to cross to the station and stand at the man’s back.

“Data probe reporting, sir,” Naveen said, turning in his seat to face Lucian. “It’s the same return, sir, only the power output is off the scale.”

“I knew it,” Lucian spat. “Comms, get me Jellaqua, now.”

Lucian watched the holograph as Ensign Katona spoke, opening a channel to the *Blade of Woe*. Even as he watched, he saw the lead capital ships veer towards the return. Fools, he cursed inwardly. “Comms, where’s that channel?”

“The admiral is otherwise engaged, my lord,” replied Ensign Katona. “He is in closed conference with Cardinal Gurney.”

That explains it, thought Lucian. Gurney must have overridden Jellaqua’s authority, somehow, causing him to launch an immediate attack on the station.

“I want a masters’ conference, now!”

Lucian stood and paced the length of the bridge as he waited for the other ships’ masters to come on line. It felt like hours, but within a few minutes the pict screens clustered around the bridge’s ceiling were filled with the faces of the other captains.

“This had better be good, Lucian.” It was Captain Natalia of the *Duchess McIntyre*, and she appeared distracted. “We have attack orders coming through.” A chorus of terse agreement went up from each of the other captains.

“Listen to me for me Emperor’s sake!” Lucian snapped. “That station is a major threat. We need to approach it with caution or someone’s going to get hurt, badly.”

“That’s simply not true.” It was Captain Joachim of the *Lord Cedalion*. It would be, Lucian mused, but he suppressed any response, for now. “The station we faced at Sy’l’Kell was only lightly armed. We can take this one on without any danger. To suggest otherwise is to admit that the tau are superior to us, and that borders on treason.”

“It might appear the same to you,” Lucian responded, forcing himself not to rise to Joachim’s insult, “but I’ve faced the tau in ship-to-ship combat before, and I recognise the signature of their weapons. I’m telling you, that station is upgunned.”

Lucian looked to the screen bearing Joachim’s image, only to see that the captain had cut the audio and was speaking to a subordinate. He looked to the other ships’ masters, to see that several were obviously listening in on some other channel.

“Lucian,” Natalia began, “I’m sorry. We have to...”

The pict-slates suddenly died, flickering to life again moments later. The distorted image resolved slowly, until Lucian saw what he had dreaded. It was Cardinal Gurney, and behind him stood Inquisitor Grand and Admiral Jellaqua. The trio stood on the command deck of the *Blade of Woe*, the flagship’s massive bridge a hive of activity in the background.

“This is Cardinal Gurney and these are my orders.” Lucian stood stunned as the image was repeated across a dozen pict screens. “The fleet will engage the xenos station immediately.”

Lucian could no longer restrain himself. “By whose authority do you presume to make such an order?”

The cardinal’s face took on a twisted leer. Lucian made a fist, imagining what he’d do to that face, were they in the same room. Gurney stepped aside to afford a full view of the inquisitor standing behind him. For the first time to date, Grand was wearing his Inquisitorial rosette, a large

red seal emblazoned with the “I” of the Emperor’s Inquisition. Grand said not a word; he had no need to.

So, thought Lucian, Grand had finally decided to exercise the full extent of his power as an inquisitor. Lucian had known he would do so at some point, when he felt the circumstances matched some agenda known only to him, and probably to Gurney. No doubt the old bastard had been waiting for this moment for weeks, and had timed it to do the maximum damage to his enemies’ influence and credibility. Lucian looked to Admiral Jellaqua, seeing from his expression that he felt as Lucian did. Lucian knew that the admiral could not countermand the inquisitor’s authority, and although Lucian’s position as a rogue trader theoretically made him the inquisitor’s peer, that relied entirely on the circumstances of any dispute. No, there was no possible way Lucian could fight this, not here, not now.

“All commands,” Gurney continued, “will acknowledge receipt of this order.” The cardinal’s face bore the expression of one entirely convinced that he had won. Lucian swore that the cardinal would pay for this. At some point in the future, perhaps when the inquisitor was no longer around to provide his support, Gurney would pay.

Lucian listened as each of the ships’ masters and squadron commanders acknowledged the order. Most did so in clipped tones. When it was Lucian’s turn to respond, he allowed a long, tense silence to precede his answer.

“Acknowledged,” he said, hating the cardinal all the more for the expression of victory that passed across his face as Lucian gave his response.

“New heading coming through, sir,” said Ensign Ruuben. “We’re to follow the fleet in to engage the station.”

“Do so,” Lucian ordered, his mood black. “Ensign Sumiko?” The woman stationed at the shields station turned as her name was spoken. “I want the shields ready at a moment’s notice. If, or when that station opens up on us, I’m going to need one hundred per cent output, no matter the drain, do you understand?”

“I understand, sir. I’ve operated this mark of projector before. I know how to get the best of her.”

Lucian smiled, though his mood did not lift. “Well enough. Helm, take us in.”

The next hour felt like an impossible span of time to Lucian. He watched the holograph as the fleet closed on the tau station, looking for any sign of the attack he knew must surely come. If only the fleet had a strong enough complement of attack craft, he cursed. He was sure that one of the capital vessels would pay the price for Gurney’s pride, when a fighter attack ahead of the main line might have crippled the station’s weapons before they could cause the fleet any damage. As the spear tip of the fleet passed the five hundred kilometre mark, Lucian saw the energy spike he had anticipated. He looked to the holograph, and spat a colourful blasphemy when he saw which of the fleet’s vessels was to the fore.

“Sarik!” He surged to his feet as Ensign Katona patched him through to the *Nomad*.

“I see it, Lucian,” said the Space Marine sergeant. “I’m not as wet behind the ears as you seem to think, rogue trader, and I don’t need warning twice. *Nomad* out.”

Coming to the viewing port, Lucian watched as the distant speck of light that he knew to be the *Nomad* altered its course sharply to starboard. A second later, a brief, blue light flashed for an instant and was gone, its source invisible at this range.

“The enemy has opened fire,” Batista called out.

“General quarters,” said Lucian, calm, despite what he knew was coming.

“Disposition orders coming in, sir,” called out Ensign Katona over the wail of the alert klaxon. “The *Honour of Damlass* is being ordered to engage.”

“She’ll be savaged,” Lucian snarled, knowing he had no time to intervene.

“Reading a second spike,” Batista called out.

Lucian braced himself against the bulkhead, though he knew that *Oceanid* was unlikely to be the target of the second shot.

A second wink of blue light appeared in the darkness up ahead. An instant later, a bright spark appeared as the ultra high velocity projectile struck its target.

“*Honour of Damlass* hit!” Batista said calmly. “Damage reports coming in. Main shield array out of action.”

“Fleet are ordering the *Honour* to withdraw,” Katona said. Seeing a third flash of light flaring against the blackness, Lucian knew that it was too late. An instant later and a second explosion blossomed, describing the fate of the *Honour of Damlass* better than any damage report ever could. Even from this distance, Lucian saw the light of the *Honour*’s main drives gutter and die, leaving her crippled and doomed.

“We have to do something,” Lucian spat. He turned from the viewing port and strode across to his command throne.

“Signal Jellaqua, in person.”

“Aye sir,” Katona replied, understanding the order fully. “Channel open.”

“Gerrit?” Admiral Jellaqua’s voice filled the bridge, the channel flooded with distortion and crackles. “Gerrit, I’m somewhat busy, make this quick.”

“Admiral,” Lucian said, “I know you have your orders, but you have to break off the attack on the station. At least send in the escorts first, you know the cruisers are sitting targets.”

“I agree, Lucian, but I must... Standby...”

The channel fell abruptly silent. Lucian looked quickly around at the various readouts, hoping to discern the cause of the interruption. His blood ran cold as he looked to the holograph. There, at the very edge of the three dimensional projection, was a cluster of sensor returns, edging out from the lee of KX122.

“Jellaqua! You have to redeploy the fleet, right now. If those cruisers outflank us, we’re all done for.”

“Agreed,” replied the admiral. “I’m switching to fleetwide command broadcast.” The channel was filled with distorted comms chatter, followed by a burst of angry machine noise. Then the signal stabilised and the admiral’s voice rang out, this time addressing the captains of each vessel in the line.

“All commands, this is *Blade of Woe*. We have multiple contacts closing from zero-zero seven two nine. All main line capital vessels will move to engage immediately. All escort squadrons to close on tau station and silence it. Form up on my lead and good hunting.”

“You heard the man,” said Lucian. “Helm, bring us around on the *Blade* and match her speed. Echelon to port, two kilometres by fifty.”

“Aye sir,” responded Ruuben, hauling on the *Oceanid*’s wheel. Lucian felt the gravity fluctuate as the vessel was subjected to the forces put into play by the change of heading. His head was forced back into the command throne for an instant, and he looked to station nine, one of the few manned by a servitor.

“Grav, I want those compensators online, or so help me I’ll...”

He let the threat tail off. It was pointless threatening the servitor, for it had no independent will and felt no emotion. Besides, he was more intent on studying the holograph and its representation of the unfolding battle. The fleet was slowly moving to its new heading, though Lucian’s practiced eye saw immediately that the arrow head formation was losing its former cohesion, the vessels becoming strung out in a long line, with the *Oceanid*, the *Rosetta* and the *Fairlight* at its centre. It felt to Lucian that the manoeuvre was taking far too long to complete, the tau vessels closing on them all the while.

They were closing on a single vessel that had drifted too far ahead of the formation. The Dauntless-class cruiser the *Regent Lakshimbal* was isolated at what had previously been the extreme

port flank, but was now the head of the line of vessels moving to intercept the tau. With no escort squadrons to picket the fleet's perimeter, the cruiser found the enemy bearing right down upon her.

As the range between the two fleets closed, the *Oceanid's* sensors began to gather more data on the enemy vessels. There were eleven of them, and as the readings flooded across the pict screens above his command throne, Lucian sought out the configurations he had observed in his previous encounters.

He did not find them. At his previous battles against the tau, he had faced huge, lumbering starships with modular bays underslung beneath a central spine. He had come to discern that these bays might be swapped out for weapons, cargo or carrier duties, but that was not what he was seeing here. Instead of the comparatively vulnerable configuration encounter before, these vessels were smaller, yet evidently intended to carry out a far more aggressive role in ship-to-ship combat. Instead of a single weapons battery mounted to the fore, these bore multiple batteries. Lucian's professional eye saw immediately how the interlocking field of fire of each battery might combine with devastating effect. Even as he watched, he knew that the *Regent* was perilously close to entering those fields of fire.

"Full power to mains!" Lucian bellowed. "Break formation if you have to, Mister Ruubens."

"Aye, sir," the helmsman called back as the roar of the *Oceanid's* main drives was transmitted her entire length.

We can make it, Lucian thought, if only the *Regent* can hold out against the first tau volley.

As Lucian's vessel swung gracefully to port, breaking formation with the main battle line, a mournful wail went up from somewhere deep in her bowels.

"What the hell was that?" Lucian spat. "Report!"

"It's drive three, my lord," responded Ruuben, even as he struggled with the great wheel in an effort to maintain the *Oceanid's* heading. "Something's wrong with—"

"Not now!" Lucian cursed. Drive three had been a concern for several years, but had never failed him when actually needed. He had delayed an overhaul, knowing that the Arcadius could ill-afford such an extravagant expense, and had intended to attend to the matter after the crusade had sufficiently lined his pockets.

Lucian's mind raced as he looked helplessly on at the *Regent Lakshimbal* as the tau vessel bore down upon her. "Shut drive three down."

"Sir?" replied Ensign Ruuben.

"I said shut it down, Emperor damn it! I want a full purge cycle, right now!"

"Aye sir," replied Ruuben, before relaying Lucian's orders to the drive stations to the *Oceanid's* aft.

Even as he watched, Lucian saw that the tau were in range of the *Regent*. He knew from bitter experience that the hyper velocity projectile weapons utilised by such vessels would outrange anything a Dauntless carried. Evidently, the captain of the *Regent* saw this too, for he brought his light cruiser around to face her armoured prow towards the enemy, and to present as small a target as possible against the inevitable salvo.

As the range closed, Lucian saw that the *Regent* had raised her shields. He knew the ship's master would be channelling every available reserve into the shields, for he would not be able to return fire until the tau vessels were within range of his forward lance batteries.

"The foremost tau vessel is powering up for a shot!" Batista called out, as Lucian had known he would.

Once more, the familiar wink of blue light appeared, marking the launching of one of the tau's projectile weapons. Though he knew he was not the target, Lucian gripped the arms of the command throne. An instant later, and the attack struck the *Regent* square across the frontal shield arc, unleashing a blinding explosion as the shields converted the attack to energy and bled it off into space.

“She’s holding!” Batista said. “Shields maximal. Second shot incoming.”

This time, Lucian saw several of the tau vessel’s weapons batteries open fire, and he realised that the first attack had been nothing more than a ranging shot. The *Regent* was struck a glancing blow across her armoured prow, and it was immediately evident that the shields had not absorbed the full force of the projectiles. A mighty wound was gauged along the starboard flank of the *Regent*’s prow, raging fires bursting forth and roiling black clouds billowing out into space.

“Ruuben?” Lucian called. “What’s the status of drive three?”

The helmsman took but an instant to consult a data-slate mounted above his station. “Purge cycle at fifty per cent, my lord.”

“Not good enough.” Lucian knew that the *Regent Lakshimbal* was dead if she continued to take the punishment being meted out by the tau. “Push it to maximum, right now.”

Lucian saw Ruuben turn as if to voice an objection, but the helmsman evidently thought the better of it when he saw the look in Lucian’s eye. Lucian knew the risks of forcing the plasma drive’s purge cycle, but he was prepared to take that risk, however slim, if he might save the *Regent*.

Even as he watched, Lucian saw that the *Regent Lakshimbal* was doomed. Rising to his feet and crossing to the forward portal, he saw a second and third tau vessel close upon the stricken light cruiser. The range had closed, however, allowing the *Regent* the dignity of putting up a fight. The Dauntless-class vessel’s prow mounted lances spat incandescent death at the first tau starship, scoring a solid hit against its rear section. Lucian punched the air in bitter celebration, savouring the heroic act even as he knew the tau ship’s shields had withstood the blow.

“Come on, Mister Ruuben,” Lucian growled.

“Ninety, sir.”

The second and third tau starships were moving to envelop the *Regent*, but in so doing, the tau showed the relative inexperience that Lucian had noted on previous occasions. The *Regent* wasted no time in punishing the xenos for their mistake, both her starboard and port weapons batteries unleashing a fearsome broadside at the approaching enemies. The tau, it appeared to Lucian, were caught entirely unawares, neither vessel managing so much as to offer its prow to the *Regent* so as to present as small a target as possible.

Lucian punched the bulkhead in savage jubilation as both broadsides struck home. He had never seen such a thing, and doubtless never would again, for surely the tau must learn from such an error. Both tau vessels were entirely enveloped in flame and smoke, and Lucian could tell right away that the *Regent*’s attacks had done significant damage, for flaming debris spread outward from the third vessel in an ever-expanding circle. Though not dead, Lucian was quite certain that the ship would be out of the fight, for a time at least.

Then, the third vessel emerged from the smoke and flame that had engulfed it. It edged slowly and gracefully through the debris of its wounds, appearing to Lucian to have taken on the aspect of some oceanic predator from prehistory, closing on the blood scent of its prey. The ship was scarred and pitted, greasy smoke and flame trailing from a dozen scars rent across its armoured flank. The formally pristine white hull was blackened and scorched, but Lucian could see that its weapons batteries were still all too operational. Lucian saw that the tau had just learned a valuable lesson in the nature of the galaxy, and one he doubted they would fail to act upon.

“Make it quick,” he whispered.

As it cleared the smoke and debris of the *Regent*’s broadside, the tau vessel opened fire once more. Blue flashes marked the discharge of its hyper velocity weapons, each propelling an indiscernibly small, but impossibly dense projectile across space. Accelerated to an unbelievable speed, the projectile penetrated the *Regent*’s shields, unleashing a blinding storm of arc lightning.

Lucian winced, expecting a catastrophic explosion, but none came. Instead, the *Regent* unleashed a second broadside, the entire length of its mid-section obscured as the superheavy shells of its weapons batteries were flung across space.

The second broadside was just as unanticipated as the first had been, the tau caught unawares by a foe they thought dead. The tau vessel was wracked by mighty explosions, some blossoming across its shields and others penetrating them to strike its superstructure. The tau vessel veered drunkenly to port, and, through the debris and flame, Lucian made out that its drive section was aflame, ghostly plasma fire dancing across its rapidly melting armour.

Then, disaster.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

The Regent Lakshimbal appeared to Lucian to shudder, faltering in her forward motion as she slewed about her central axis. He could see immediately that something had gone terribly amiss and that the shot that had struck her minutes before must have caused some unseen yet fatal wound.

Lucian watched as the *Regent's* mid-section buckled. He could scarcely believe his eyes as he saw the dying light cruiser fold around its spine, its thickly armoured outer hull cracking wide open. Debris burst from the great rent in an explosion of escaping gases. Though Lucian could not make out the details from this distance, he knew that hundreds of men were dying a cold, desperate death even as he looked on.

Lucian slammed his fist into the armoured portal. "Status!"

"Almost there, sir," replied Ruuben, calm despite the edge of threat that Lucian had put into the simple request.

Unable to watch as the *Regent Lakshimbal* spewed her guts into space, Lucian crossed to his command throne and threw himself down into it.

"Initiate purge cycle, Mister Ruuben, and hold her steady."

The helmsman turned to meet Lucian's eye, and then nodded his understanding. Bracing himself against the mighty ship's wheel, Ruuben made a series of adjustments to the helm and then communicated Lucian's order to the enginarium.

Lucian too took the opportunity to brace himself, gripping the arms of his command throne against the shock he knew was about to overtake his vessel. He was too late to save the *Regent*, that much was obvious, but by the Emperor, he would make the tau starship pay for what it had done.

"Purge in ten..." called the helmsman.

"Now is fine, Mister Ruuben!" Lucian growled back.

Without answering, Helmsman Ruuben hauled back on a mighty, floor-mounted lever. For a moment, it appeared to Lucian that nothing would happen. Then, he felt a subsonic trembling rise up from the deck plate, growing in intensity until every surface on the bridge was vibrating violently. Lucian gripped the arms of the command throne still tighter as the lights gave out, the only illumination provided by rapidly flashing pict screens.

Then, these also died and the vibrating subsided in an instant. The *Oceanid* fell utterly, deathly silent. Lucian's fists dug into the fabric of his throne and he closed his eyes tight.

Drive three thundered into life, the seismic force of its sudden reawakening transmitted like a quake throughout the length of the vessel. An instant later, the other three drives powered up, and then the bridge lights, and with them all of the ship's systems were restored.

All except the *Oceanid's* cogitator.

"Let's see how good you really are, Mister Ruuben!" Lucian yelled. He was aware that an edge of mania had entered his voice, though he believed he was entitled to it. No sane man would attempt what he had just ordered.

Even from the fore-mounted bridge, Lucian could hear the roar of the *Oceanid's* mighty plasma drives transmitted through the ship's structure. As they reached a crescendo, the vessel began to edge forward, riding the wave of the tremendous momentum generated by the ad hoc purging of drive three. Ruuben was straggling at the helm, putting all of his strength into holding the great ship's wheel on the course Lucian had ordered.

Still the myriad clusters of pict screens and data viewers around the bridge remained black. The *Oceanid* was for the moment running with no form of guidance or regulation from the massive cogitator banks secreted in her heart. Lucian knew that she could not survive for long without them, and neither could Mister Ruuben control the helm in anything other than a cursory fashion.

“Lieutenant Davriel,” Lucian said, addressing the Navy officer overseeing the cogitator banks at station five. The man appeared at least as much a machine as one of the servitors who had crewed Lucian’s bridge until so recently, a cluster of data cables writhing around the back of his shaven head to interface directly with the *Oceanid*’s cogitation matrix.

Davriel’s eyes had been closed shut as if he was in deep concentration, yet they snapped open the instant Lucian spoke his name.

“My lord,” the officer responded in a lilting whisper quite at odds with his appearance, “I am communing with the custodians.”

Lucian knew that Davriel referred to the... creatures that maintained the *Oceanid*’s huge crystal datastacks. Each had once been a tech-priest of the Adeptus Mechanicus, who had, upon transcending the mental frailties of the organic body into which he was born, merged his consciousness with the Ommissiah, shedding his physical form to attain apotheosis with the Machine God. What was left behind once the tech-priest had merged his knowledge and experience with that of all his predecessors was a soulless husk. The Machine Cult used them to tend such cogitators as controlled the functions of the *Oceanid*. Davriel’s station communicated with them.

“How long?” Lucian demanded.

“Primary functions?” Davriel asked, a damned stupid question in Lucian’s opinion.

“Any bloody functions,” Lucian retorted. “Helm control might be useful!”

“Aye, sir,” replied Davriel, apparently unflustered in the face of Lucian’s wrath.

Before Lucian could press the issue, the bridge was flooded with incandescent fury. Lucian snapped his head away from the forward portal, throwing an arm across his face in an effort to stave off the impossibly bright, pure white light. He clamped his eyes tight shut, and then dared to withdraw his arm, knowing that if the light remained he would see it through the membrane of his eyelids. Guessing it was safe to open his eyes, he saw that the portal had dimmed, an instant too late as ever, protecting the bridge crew from the worst of the inferno raging where once the dying *Regent Lakshimbal* had floundered.

Lucian was stunned. He had seen the *Regent*’s doom even before the terrible damage inflicted by the tau’s last attack had been revealed, but he had not anticipated the catastrophic fate that had engulfed her. He guessed that it was some form of reactor collapse, though he suspected none would ever know for sure, for scant evidence would be left to sift through.

Knowing the luxury of mourning must be deferred, Lucian attempted to get a hold of the events unfolding around him. He had no course data, and no holograph to consult, but he could see with his own eyes that the *Oceanid* was being propelled by the force of the drive purge straight towards the tau vessel that had murdered the *Regent*.

“Mister Ruuben,” Lucian said, addressing the helmsman as he wrestled with the ship’s wheel, “hold as steady as you can. I don’t expect miracles, but I want to pass that tau bastard at point blank. I’m going to make them hurt.”

“Aye, my lord,” snarled back the helmsman. “How about two thousand?”

Lucian smiled savagely, embracing the atavistic brutality of the battle. “Give me two thousand metres, Mister Ruuben, and we’ll have them stone dead.”

“Two thousand it is then, sir,” Ruuben replied, hauling upon the ship’s wheel to bring the *Oceanid* about on her new heading. Without the cogitation banks to aid the manoeuvre, Ruuben was steering her unaided, in a virtuoso display of spacemanship.

“Mister Davrial,” Lucian said, turning to address the officer at station five, “your turn to excel. Don’t let me down.”

“Sub systems reawakening, sir. I’m prioritising helm, fire control and shields.”

“How long?”

“Minutes, my lord, I assure you.”

Lucian nodded, and leaned back in his throne. He took a deep breath as he looked around the bridge for any sign of the cogitation banks coming back online. Individual lights blinked where moments before consoles were dark, and quite suddenly every pict screen on the bridge burst into bright static. After another minute, the bridge was filled with the familiar sound of comms traffic as the many stations around the vessel re-established contact with one another. Many would have had no clue as to what was occurring. Perhaps such ignorance was bliss, thought Lucian, considering what still had to happen for the coming manoeuvre to succeed.

Still lacking the bridge holograph, Lucian looked through the forward portal to make an estimation of the distance the *Oceanid* still had to close before she would pass the tau starship. Less than eleven kilometres, he judged, give or take a couple of metres.

“Helm function returning!” Mister Ruuben called out, relief evident in his voice.

“My commendations, Mister Davriel,” said Lucian, determined not express his own feelings of relief. Looking towards the tau ship as it manoeuvred around the wreckage of the *Regent*, he realised that he had a major decision to make, and he would have less than ten minutes in which to make it: shields or fire control?

If he raised shields before restoring fire control, the *Oceanid* would survive anything the tau vessel might throw at her as she passed, but with the cogitators offline and unable to provide accurate fire control, that pass might be in vain. He could order a broadside without the aid of fire control, but even at two thousand metres, an impossibly close range at which to engage another vessel in ship-to-ship combat, he could not count on making his shots count. Unless...

“Mister Ruuben,” Lucian said, “I need five hundred metres.” He leaned forward as the helmsman turned around and regarded him with ill-concealed incredulity. “Can you give me five hundred metres?”

The bridge chatter fell silent, the tau vessel looming all the larger in the forward portal.

“Aye, sir.” Ruubens nodded, and then grinned like a madman. “Five hundred metres it is!”

“Emperor bless mad old spacers,” Lucian said. “Mister Davriel, concentrate on the starboard shield projectors.”

Lucian did not wait for confirmation that his order would be enacted. He knew it would, for this new bridge crew was competent and professional, and evidently well drilled in following orders under pressure. Instead, he concentrated upon the tau vessel as the range closed.

The enemy starship was coming about. It had seen its danger then, Lucian thought. The tau must surely understand, by now, the danger an Imperial ship of the line posed at close range, where it could unleash the most fearsome of broadsides. He could see that the tau were moving to present their prow towards the *Oceanid*, thereby offering as small a target as possible to the coming attack. They were learning fast.

Lucian saw another threat as the distance closed. This new class of tau vessel with its multiple weapons batteries could present a threat from almost any angle. As the two vessels neared one another, he could make out the details of his foe. Foremost amongst those details were the weapons turrets mounted across the forward dorsal section, turrets that were swivelling towards the *Oceanid* even as he watched, locking those devastatingly powerful hyper velocity weapons onto her.

“Mister Davriel?” Lucian snarled, not taking his eyes from the turrets.

“One minute, sir, and counting. Primary shield communion at fifty per cent.”

“Work fast,” Lucian said. The turrets had the *Oceanid* in their sights. From previous experience, he knew they would fire at any moment.

“Energy spike!” yelled Mister Batista, the ordnance officer. “Brace for impact!”

Lucian glanced across to the shields officer, but saw that Mister Davriel would not have the projectors online before the first shot was fired.

“Mister Ruuben, thirty to starboard!” Lucian shouted.

“Hard to starboard, aye sir!” yelled back the helmsman, bracing his feet on the deck and putting his entire weight into the ship’s wheel.

The forward portal was enveloped in a blue flash, and Lucian gripped his throne all the tighter. The *Oceanid* veered hard to starboard, bringing her on a near collision course with the tau vessel. An instant later and the hyper velocity projectile struck the *Oceanid*. Lucian felt the attack strike his vessel as her armoured flanks were gouged savagely, a terrible rending sound echoing down the companionways, followed a moment later by the wailing of emergency sirens.

“Hull breach, sector seven-seven delta!” called out the Navy officer seconded to the operations station. “Damage control parties dispatched.”

Lucian doubted whether the damage would be limited to the breach. He knew he would only get one chance at this.

“Mister Batista,” he said, addressing his ordnance chief, “prepare a broadside. All starboard ports. Manual offset, twelve degrees.”

“Understood, my lord,” Batista replied. Of all his remaining crew, Lucian trusted his ordnance chief. Batista would ensure that the broadside struck home. If he did not, this fight would be over all too soon.

“Energy spike!” yelled Batista. “Brace!”

“Shields up!” announced Davriel.

“Fire,” growled Lucian.

The *Oceanid* rocked violently as the broadside was fired. The superheavy shells crossed the short distance between the two vessels and slammed home with devastating effect. Fire erupted across the tau starship’s flank, shearing off a vast portion of her drive section. The damage caused an instant destabilisation in the enemy’s handling, and Lucian watched as his foe was thrown off course, beginning a drunken slew about its own axis.

Yet, despite the massive wounds inflicted upon her, it was obvious to Lucian that the tau vessel was determined to give a good account of itself. As he watched, the turrets mounted across its dorsal section swivelled as one, tracking the *Oceanid* with unerring stability, even as the tau starship came almost full about with the violence of its destabilised drives.

“Brace!” called Batista. Lucian held his breath.

Once more, the forward portal was flooded with the blue light of the tau weapons batteries discharging. At such short range, the impact came almost instantaneously, yet to Lucian’s enormous relief the newly raised shields held, the incredible energy of the projectiles being translated into raging energies that roiled out into space, but which caused no harm to the *Oceanid*.

Ruuben’s previous manoeuvre, combined with the drastic change in the tau vessel’s course following the damage inflicted upon its drive, left the *Oceanid* bearing right down on her. The tau vessel passed directly across the forward portal, its entire starboard drive section burning. As the flaming hull filled the entire portal, the tau vessel impossibly close, Lucian saw that the two ships were set to collide, and there was nothing he could do to avoid it.

“Full power, Mister Ruuben,” he ordered. “All forward. Shunt her aside.”

It was the only way, though Emperor only knew what damage it would inflict upon his beloved vessel. The armoured sides of the tau vessel reared ahead, flames dancing across its pitted and scarred surface. Then, the prow of the *Oceanid* ground into the tau starship’s side and a dreadful shudder was transmitted the length of Lucian’s ship. A moment later and a terrible grinding roar filled the *Oceanid*, the bridge lights dying, and then coming back to life as the ship’s reawakened cogitation banks re-routed the power conduits that fed them.

The fiery drive section of the tau ship ground across the upper hull of the *Oceanid*, the vessel so close that the flames licking its surface washed over the forward portal. An explosion to the fore shook the bridge crew, bright sparks exploding from consoles as their operators dived for safety.

“Keep going, Mister Ruuben!” bellowed Lucian over the deafening roar of grinding metal. He could not tell whether or not the helmsman had heard his order, but felt the *Oceanid*’s drives pour yet more power into the manoeuvre.

Raging flame and roiling black smoke entirely obscured the view through the portal. The bridge lights died once more and all was plunged into a stark darkness punctuated only by the guttering flames, and the small explosions of sparks that still spat from consoles. Yet another grinding quake shuddered through the vessel, and Lucian felt the *Oceanid* lurch upwards. Sweat poured from his brow and his heart pounded in his chest. If this didn’t work, he thought, it would be a damn stupid way for the Arcadius dynasty to end.

The two vessels parted as the *Oceanid*’s drives swept across the tau starship’s prow, propelling them apart and inflicting hideous damage in the process. The smoke and flame obscuring the view ahead parted.

What Lucian saw made him punch the arm of his command throne in celebration.

The Imperial Navy’s battle line had followed Lucian in as he had drawn off the lead tau starship, which, even now, spun drunkenly away from the battle. Jellaqua’s cruisers were trading devastating volleys against the tau ships, who appeared hard-pressed to keep them at bay. The entire area of space ahead was lit blue with the discharge of the tau’s weapons, and fiery orange with the shells and torpedoes of the Imperial Navy’s. Ships burned and men and aliens alike died as the vessels of each fleet sought to wreak bloody slaughter upon one another.

“Comms online!” Katona announced. Lucian saw that the man’s face was badly burned down his left side; evidently the man had refused to leave his station even while it burned, and he had restored the *Oceanid*’s communications system even while fighting the fire that had burned him. “Incoming transmission on fleet wide band.”

“Thank you, Mister Katona,” Lucian said, nodding to the man, determining to reward each of the bridge’s crew, assuming they all lived through this battle. “Patch it through.”

“Imperial warships...” Lucian smiled as he recognised the voice of Admiral Jellaqua. “The *Oceanid*’s unusual manoeuvre has taken the bastards by surprise! We have a new contact in amongst the escorts, and I am taking the *Blade of Woe* in to deal with it. Finish them off! In the name of the Emperor and the Imperium, give them hell!”

The bridge crew cheered, and this time Lucian joined them. As the last of the *Oceanid*’s cogitation banks came back online, the holograph spluttered to life at the centre of the bridge. Lucian leaned forward to study the unfolding battle, and smiled.

“Ordnance,” he said, “I want every gun loaded and ready for firing. Shields, full power to frontal arc. Helm?”

“Helm standing by, my lord.”

“We’re going in.”

Brielle stood upon the observation deck of the tau vessel the *Dal’yth II’ Fannor O’kray*. The circular chamber was ringed with a single viewing window, and at its centre was projected a blue-tinged, three-dimensional representation of the battle unfolding around the nearby world. A dozen tau stood around the projection, conversing quietly and nodding as they watched events unfold.

Her heart raced as she saw an Imperial Navy vessel, a light cruiser, possibly a Dauntless by its displacement and configuration, die violently, its overloaded plasma reactor creating a new sun for an instant, which rapidly died to leave nothing but atoms to mark the ship’s grave. The tau envoy she had met upon Dal’yth nodded to her at the ship’s passing, quietly marking the victory. She nodded back, yet she raged inside.

The tau expected her to celebrate with them, but she could not.

As she watched, the defence station that had wrought such havoc in the early stages of the battle was overwhelmed by the Imperium's escort squadrons. Then, a senior tau of what they called the Air Caste, those responsible for the operation of the tau's fleet, issued an order. A mighty vessel, called a warsphere, belonging, she was told, to a subject race of the tau called the kroot, emerged from behind the planet and ploughed right into the escorts' formation. Though its weapons were close ranged, the warsphere took a fearsome toll amongst the far smaller escorts, before the Imperium's largest warship, undoubtedly the *Blade of Woe*, circled back and destroyed it with relative ease.

"They're winning," she said, more to herself than to anyone around her. "The Imperium is winning."

"My lady," replied Naal, standing at her shoulder, "have no fear."

Brielle turned her back on the projection and looked out into the blackness of space. Although the battle was too distant to see in any detail, pinprick sparks blossomed amongst the stars, each no doubt marking the passing of a thousand needlessly expended lives. What if one of those tiny lights was the death of the *Fairlight*? What if it were the *Oceanid* or the *Rosettal*? Then she would truly be alone, set adrift from all that had made her what she was.

She was a child of the Arcadius dynasty. She was born to explore and to conquer the dark regions that lay beyond the borders of the Imperium. She was not, she saw with sudden clarity, born to be some turncoat ambassador, and she would not act out such a role for the tau or for anyone else.

"My lady?" Naal asked, his voice low and urgent. "The envoys, my lady. They wish for you to witness the fleet pull back before the next phase is implemented. And when you have, they will wish to have an answer to their proposal."

Rage welled up inside her, but she beat it down savagely before turning to face the gathered tau. Let them gloat over their small victory, she thought. It can't possibly last. That would be her answer to their damned proposal.

Lucian sat alone in his stateroom, the lights down, a glass of strong liquor in his hand. They had won, he brooded, but at a terrible cost: four cruisers lost in a single battle. The names would be entered into the rolls of honour, but Lucian knew the *Duke Lakshimbal*, the *Centaur*, the *Niobe* and the *Lord Cedalion* would be missed grievously in the coming battles. The *Niobe* at least had been afforded the unusual luxury in space combat of its crew having time to escape, for the damage done to her had not been initially fatal. It was only three hours later, once the tau had finally disengaged, that the vessel's damaged plasma relays had lost containment and Captain Joachim had ordered his ship abandoned. Another hour later and the *Niobe*'s reactor had gone critical, engulfing her and those crew who had not escaped in roiling plasma. Lucian had not been surprised to learn that Captain Joachim had survived the death of his cruiser; he had not expected the man to be the last off of his vessel.

In addition to the four capital ships, the fleet had lost fourteen escorts, with another two almost certainly damaged beyond the fleet's capacity to repair them in space. The battle had been a victory, Jellaqua had announced, but it was obvious the Imperium could scarcely afford another such win.

Lucian could not guess how many lives had been lost, and this was only the first engagement in the crusade's mission. Downing the contents of his glass in one gulp, Lucian cursed the cardinal and his faction to the depths of the warp. If only the council had not been swayed by Gurney's rantings.

A chime sounded at the door to Lucian's chambers.

"Enter," he growled.

The wheel at the door's centre spun, before it swung inward on creaking joints. A junior officer stepped through and saluted smartly.

"Report," Lucian ordered.

"The pathfinder wing, sir..." Lucian slammed his glass down on the table beside his chair. "We have them on the rangers."

The holograph revolved slowly before Lucian. The augurs had picked up three returns, which even now were speeding towards the fleet at high speed. Both the *Oceanid* and the *Blade of Woe* had been hailing the three small scout vessels continuously for thirty minutes, but their long-range communications systems must have been down, for no signal was received back.

“Coming into range now, my lord,” announced Katona. “Hailing on all short range channels.”

Lucian nodded, his heart pounding. If only three scout vessels of the elite pathfinders had returned from their mission, they must have ran into serious trouble, for they were trained and equipped to escape enemy contact, not to seek it out. The thought that he might have lost a second child was too awful to consider, and so Lucian offered up a silent prayer that Korvane would be returned safely to him.

“Pict signal on screen now,” Katona said.

The main screen above the forward portal came to life. At first the signal was little more than static, but after a minute, the picture became more distinct. It was the small, cramped bridge of the lead scout vessel. The ship must have suffered terrible damage, for the small cockpit was wreathed in smoke, the figure sitting at the command station barely visible.

Then, the smoke parted as that figure waved his arm to clear it. Lucian knew blessed relief as he saw that it was Korvane.

“Son!” Lucian said. “Thank the Emperor. What happened?”

“Father?” Korvane replied, his voice hoarse; the effects of the smoke, Lucian supposed. “Father, it’s you.”

“What is it, Korvane? Come aboard immediately.”

“No, father, wait.” Korvane reached across to his console and flipped a switch.

“We’re on fleet wide,” Katona announced. Lucian knew that what Korvane was about to say would be heard upon the bridge of every vessel in the crusade fleet.

“I can see,” he said, before pausing to cough violently. “I can see that a great victory has been won here this day, though not without a price, I judge.”

“Yes,” Lucian replied. “The action cost us dear, but the tau are beaten back.”

“No,” Korvane answered, coughing once more, “they are not beaten back. They have regrouped. The fourth body in this system is a major centre of population. We fought a small patrol and trailed the survivors home. We monitored their comms traffic. We couldn’t translate anything, but we measured the signals and their sources.”

Lucian’s blood ran cold. “Go on.”

“As I said, the fourth body is a major world, as populous and as well defended as any sector capital. And it’s not the only one. By the comms traffic we intercepted, this entire region is swarming with activity. Father, these tau are not some insignificant little race limited to one or two systems. There are millions of them, spread across the whole cluster. Whatever you faced here today is only the smallest part of their forces. And...” Korvane broke into another fit of violent coughing.

“And,” he continued, “they are converging on the fourth body. It seems their entire fleet is converging on the fourth body of this star system.”

Lucian stood, looking up at the image of his son upon the main pict screen. The fleet wide channel broke out in chaos as those masters who had listened in demanded a million answers to a million questions, all at once. Lucian saw then that the crusade council had made a terrible error in underestimating the tau as it had. The council had decreed that the crusade would be sufficient to conquer the tau. Lucian had to admit that even he had believed the aliens would sue for peace rather than face the might of the crusade, somehow having convinced himself that no sane foe would risk the utter devastation the fleet could wreak upon any world it encountered.

Lucian saw then that the crusade might soon have to fight, not for conquest, but for its very existence. He doubted the dominant faction, led by Cardinal Gurney, would view the matter in quite

the same way, however. Lucian knew that the crusade would continue blundering on into tau space until it ran out of momentum entirely and the tau unleashed the inevitable counter-attack.

Sitting once more, Lucian pondered further. Perhaps, he thought, the crusade might in the long run benefit from taking such a thrashing. Perhaps it might facilitate a seismic shift in the balance of power. Perhaps, he thought, warming to the idea, a sound defeat under the leadership of that bastard priest might cause the council to reject that leadership entirely.

Then, Lucian grinned savagely, he would step forward. He would fill the power vacuum left in the wake of Gurney's passing, and the rise of the Arcadius would be ensured.

Scanning and basic
proofing by Red Dwarf,
formatting and additional
proofing by Undead.

