

WARHAMMER
40,000

SANCTUS REACH

MALEDICTUS



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A WARHAMMER 40,000 NOVEL

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

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

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



CHAPTER ONE

VOYAGERS

Klas Brauner saw the contrails first. He and his crew had just moved another stone out of the way of the plough. He arched his back, working out the kinks, feeling every decade as hot coal on his spine. He looked up into the hot steel of the summer sky, and saw them: hundreds of streaks as the ships tore down through the atmosphere. Within seconds, the spreading cloud of the contrails dimmed the sun. The shadow fell over Brauner's land, and everyone at work in the fields stopped to stare at what was coming.

War was raining down on Squire's Rest.

Brauner traced the direction of the streaks. There would be no landings on his farm, nor on Elna Stumar's. But the nearest wouldn't be many kilometres away. And the rain of ships kept falling. These numbers would make distance meaningless.

'Get everyone to the house,' he told his foreman, Stellan Dietrick. 'Shutters down. Distribute the weapons. Wait for me there.'

'Yes, colonel.'

Colonel. He hadn't been one for twenty years. Dietrick hadn't been a sergeant for just as long. They had fought their last official campaign with their fellow Cadians on Vhun. They had survived to retirement and earned their reward on Squire's Rest. Brauner no longer held military rank over his employees. The old habits died hard, though. And the wars kept following them. In these last years, there hadn't been a single month without at least one skirmish.

Today was different, though. Today, he thought, their ranks would be needed again.

He ran over to the battered Tauros. He drove the utility vehicle across his fields towards the Stumar farm, bouncing over the stones and ruts of the tired land. Squire's Rest was held out to active troops as a promise of paradise. Perhaps it had been so, a few millennia back, but its Arcadian glories had passed. The agri world was still productive, but reluctantly so. Its fertility was being squeezed from it through overwork and the damage caused by the ork raids. Ten years of raids. Growing more aggressive, eroding the accomplishments of a world of veterans.

Bastards.

He drove for twenty minutes, jouncing straight through both farms, jouncing through crops of struggling maize, until he reached the bluff at the western edge of Stumar's property. He'd guessed right. He saw her, a hard silhouette, watching the streaks of the invasion. He pulled up a few metres back from the cliff edge.

She nodded once as he approached, but didn't look away from the contrails. 'Colonel,' she said.

'Colonel,' he replied. He stood beside her. 'What do you think?'

'This isn't a raid.'

'Not this time,' he agreed. The contrails now covered the sky. The orks were coming to take the planet. 'They want it all. Any word from Ascra?' The regional capital was over five hundred kilometres away. The population of Squire's Rest was not much more than ten million, sufficiently spread out that the individual homesteads were largely autonomous. But the planet's agricultural production needed to be shipped, and so there were spaceports and administrative centres. The Administratum gnomes at Ascra had been of little help during the raids. Brauner did not expect military aid now. But he did wonder if there was news about the rest of the Sanctus Reach.

Stumar grimaced. 'I did a vox scan a few minutes ago. Ascra is just sending out warnings about the obvious.'

'Any off-world transmissions?'

'Nothing from Malaghai Morca.'

So the trading post had fallen. 'And Ghul Jensen?'

'A lot of screaming.'

The hive world reacting as expected. 'They're hitting everywhere then.'

'Seems like it.'

They watched in silence for a few minutes. In the distance, the first booms of landing echoed.

‘So,’ Brauner said.

‘So,’ Stumar replied.

‘I never was much of a farmer.’

‘Know anyone who is?’

They looked at each other then. *Here we are*, Brauner thought, *two old war dogs who should know better than to be happy about this*. They still had some iron in them. It hurt to stand straight, but he could do it. Stumar did too, and didn’t let on if the arthritis was gnawing at her back just as much as it did his. She had it worse with her hands, though, both of them hooked into permanent claws. White hair on both veterans, almost as many scars as wrinkles. Their skin was leather so tough it was almost wood.

‘So,’ Brauner said again.

‘So.’

‘How are we going to fight them?’

Stumar kicked a stone off the top of the bluff. ‘Like we always do.’

‘Las and piss it is, then.’

‘Greenskins won’t know what hit them.’

They grinned at each other, but Brauner felt something clutch in his chest. It wasn’t the coming of war that bothered him. It wasn’t the thought of dying. It was the knowledge that Stumar was going to die too.

They were all going to die.

The orks would make sure of it.

‘We’re ten minutes from the Sanctus Reach Mandeville point, justicar,’ Hadrianna Furia said as she walked into the Chamber of Militant Quiet.

Justicar Styer looked up from the hololith of Squire’s Rest that dominated the projection table in the centre of the room. ‘Thank you, inquisitor.’ The Grey Knight did not resent the arrival of an unannounced presence into the room, intrusive though it was. The space was meditative and tactical, a sanctuary for prayer and war. Situated one level above the bridge of the *Tyndaris*, it provided a valued retreat for Styer while giving him rapid access to the strike cruiser’s nerve centre when necessary. It was circular. The adornment of its dome was simple. The ribs were carved into the representation of spears, in alternating orientation. Between them was the darkness of obsidian. When he gazed upward, Styer found he could empty his mind of the extraneous and concentrate on the

absolute necessity of the moment. What was even more crucial: he could bear down on the problem that faced him and strip it of its inessentials, unearthing the true core of the challenge. On the walls beneath the dome were shelves holding texts that were devotional, military, and arcane. As a librarium, the Chamber of Militant Quiet had a small collection, but it was a powerful one.

Furia looked at the projection of the world. ‘Any luck?’

‘No.’ Styer had been going over everything in the *Tyndaris*’s data banks about the planet during the strike cruiser’s journey to Sanctus Reach. ‘Nothing,’ he said. ‘The world is innocuous.’

‘It is in the path of a massive ork force.’

‘And its inhabitants have my sympathy.’

‘Do they?’ Furia asked.

Was she testing him? Styer wondered. For what? Necessary signs of humanity, or extraneous ones? Or was her purpose less well defined, a question of probing him from different angles, looking for the weakness that would explain his scepticism about the mission? He shrugged off the questions. They weren’t useful ones. ‘Yes,’ he told her. ‘I am not unmoved by their plight. But I will not waste time or energy mourning what a single squad cannot prevent. Nor do I find any records,’ he waved his hand at the data-slates fanned across his side of the table, ‘that point to the work of the Ruinous Powers. What purchase would they find in a population composed of retired Imperial Guard who have been rewarded for loyalty and service? If the fall of Squire’s Rest is a concern for the Inquisition, I would think it falls within the purview of the Ordo Xenos, not the Ordo Malleus.’

‘Nevertheless, those are the coordinates the prognosticators gave us. A major daemonic incursion is imminent.’

Styer grunted.

‘You doubt the prognostication?’ Furia sounded surprised. She shouldn’t. He hadn’t made his reservations a secret. But this was the first time they had discussed the matter directly.

‘About its accuracy, yes.’

‘That is a highly unorthodox attitude, justicar.’

‘And a sound one. I have no wish to suffer further pointless losses.’

The last mission had savaged his squad. The prognosticators had forecast an incursion in the Angriff System. Situated in the Finial sector, Angriff was close enough to the Eye of Terror for warp distortions to be expected. Still, all information had pointed to Angriff Primus’s moon as the site of the attack. The

planet was a miserable forge world, but it was in the moon's mining colonies where the Ordo Malleus and the Ecclesiarchy had already been combating a growing cult whose conception of the Emperor was a dangerously extreme deviation from the orthodoxy of the Imperial Creed. The *Tyndaris* had arrived, preparations had been made, and the cult's centres of activity assaulted. But the daemons had appeared on Angriff Primus itself. Styer's squad had had to fly into battle with no time to formulate a proper strategy. They had managed to contain the infection to a single manufactorum. In the end, they had destroyed the plant and every soul, possessed or innocent, inside.

Two battle-brothers had been lost. Erec and Morholt, their centuries of battle deeds brought to an end by the abominations that should never have been given the chance to enter the materium. Styer didn't know when his squad would be back to full strength. He bore a new set of scars: huge claw slashes, two sets of three parallel gouges that ran down either side of his face from his temples to his chin. The raised flesh of the wounds' ridges reminded him of how badly they had been blindsided. If the prognosticators had sought deliberately to mislead his squad, he thought, they could not have done better. He kept these musings to himself. He would never accuse another Grey Knight of treason or corruption. Those were impossibilities. But what he saw on the table before him made him question the accuracy of the prognosticators even more.

He was surprised that Furia didn't share his mistrust. She had been on Angriff Primus too. She had fought, and she had been wounded. Badly. Most of the left side of her body was augmetic. Arm and leg were bionic. Anyone who saw her in profile saw one of two different people. On the right, there was the flesh of a mid-career inquisitor. Juvenat treatments preserved something that could not be said to be youth – her eye was too hard for that – but was the prime of strength. The left side of her face was a bronze mask, just as stern and remorseless as the flesh, the red lens of her eye a piercing judgement, but the time and the expression were frozen. The right side of Furia was capable of expressing kindness. It could laugh. The left was frozen in unending purpose.

'Our losses on Angriff Primus were not in vain,' she said.

'True,' Styer replied. 'But neither were they necessary. If we had been looking in the right place from the start, they would not have happened.' He stabbed a finger at the hololith of Squire's Rest. 'And this is the wrong place. Again.'

'The coordinates were specific. One of the moons, perhaps?'

'Doubtful. They're just fragments. Nothing larger than a mountain. No mining operations on any of them. They're dead rock.'

‘Then there is something that we’re missing. Just as there must have been something we missed on Angriff Primus. We were in error, not the prognostication.’

‘If we go into battle second-guessing our strategy, we deserve defeat.’

‘Then we will make certain we are not in error,’ Furia said, and turned to go. ‘I think we should be on the bridge, Justicar Styer.’

He grunted and extinguished the hololith. He was dissatisfied with his session in the chamber. He had come to no resolution. He left with as many doubts as he had entered. But Furia was right.

The Grey Knights were about to arrive on their field of battle. Time to lead the charge.

As he and Furia stepped outside the chamber, he saw Vohnum waiting for him. ‘I’ll join you in a moment, inquisitor,’ he said.

Furia glanced at Vohnum, nodded to Styer, and walked on.

‘You wanted to see me, brother?’ Styer said.

‘I was wondering whether you had found greater clarity with regards to our mission, brother-justicar.’

Styer didn’t care for the ambiguity of Vohnum’s phrasing. It could be read as a helpful expression of concern. It could also be a veiled criticism. Vohnum might be implying that it was Styer who lacked clarity, not the mission. ‘No,’ he said. ‘I have not.’ He waited for a moment, then said, ‘Why? Do you see something I don’t?’

Vohnum was the most senior of the warriors who served with Styer. It was he who commanded the other combat squad when they split their force into two on the battlefield. They had fought side by side for over a century, and they had done so well. But Angriff Primus had driven a wedge between them. Vohnum didn’t doubt the prognosticators. His faith in every aspect of them was absolute. If something went wrong, the blame fell with the decisions made in combat. Following that logic, Styer knew that his battle-brother was looking at his leadership critically.

‘It is not for me to engage in exegesis,’ Vohnum began.

‘Why not? An interpretation that would make sense of the contradictions before us would be helpful.’

‘I see nothing to interpret. The prognosticators have foreseen a daemonic incursion at these coordinates. So we have come to defeat it.’

‘Indeed we have.’

Vohnum grimaced in frustration. ‘Forgive me, brother-justicar, but that is not

the impression you are giving.’

‘Meaning what?’

‘You have not made a secret of your questions about the prognostication.’

‘And?’

‘I believe doing so is detrimental to the spiritual health of our squad.’

Styer bristled, but he made himself calm down before answering. Honest debate was part of the mortar of trust between battle-brothers. But not when disagreement crossed over into dissension. ‘After Angriff Primus, I have questions. The current situation makes them even more urgent. I will not conceal my doubts from the rest of you.’

‘I expressed myself badly,’ Vohnum said. ‘It is not your honesty that troubles me. It is the questions themselves.’

‘Are you questioning my leadership?’

‘I seek reassurance about the soundness of your judgement.’

‘Then be assured,’ Styer said, and the air filled with ice. ‘Any question I ask is for the benefit of our squad, and for the fulfilment of our duty and our oaths.’ He leaned in toward Vohnum. ‘Have no doubt of that.’ He was not reassuring the other Grey Knight. He was giving him a direct order.

‘The landings are still ongoing, inquisitor,’ Lowell Montgelas said.

Malia Orbiana stifled the worst of her impatience. ‘I can see that very well, shipmaster.’ The primary oculus of the *Scouring Light* displayed the long rain of ork landings. ‘The bulk of the ork fleet is moving on though, is it not?’

‘It is,’ Montgelas admitted.

She looked down at him from where she sat in the command throne. The seat was an isolated one, rising from the end of a platform that projected into the space of the bridge like a spur from the rear wall. Orbiana’s position was four metres above the deck. She had a clear view of the oculus and of the activity below her. She was present before her crew, but far beyond their level. The architecture of the bridge was symbolic, and symbols could have a direct impact, shaping the perception of power and its currents. ‘The greenskins crave violence like a drug,’ Orbiana continued. ‘This is an agri world. It isn’t worth much of their attention.’ She gestured at the oculus. ‘Clearly, they know this. How many ships at anchor do you see?’

‘None,’ Montgelas said after a minute.

‘Precisely. The orks who seek sport here are landing. Their kin won’t tolerate waiting around without a battle coming their way. We’ll have the near space of

Squire's Rest to ourselves. Don't concern yourself unduly about the greenskins. How close are we to the coordinates I gave you?

'We're nearly there.' Montgelas was standing at a pulpit in the centre of the bridge, a few metres forward of Orbiana. When she was absent, the station gave him the authority he needed. When she was in the throne, Montgelas's subordination to her will was reinforced. He was the shipmaster, but the *Scouring Light* was hers. Every soul aboard served the will of the agent of the Ordo Xenos. 'Auspex,' Montgelas said to the woman sitting at the station to his immediate left. 'Please show us the target.'

Marga Furth tapped some keys, and runes appeared on the oculus, highlighting the goal of Orbiana's journey. It was very close to a cluster of ork landing sites.

'That could be better,' Orbiana muttered. 'What do we know of the vicinity?'

'Farmland,' said Furth. 'Sparsely inhabited. The specific destination is not immediately adjacent to cultivated areas.'

Orbiana nodded. 'So the orks will have little reason to venture there.'

'They will if we're there,' Montgelas said.

'Then we'll be discreet.' She mentally ran through the risks. Montgelas was right, of course. If the orks decided her landing party was interesting, then the mission would come to a quick end. She decided that the danger was a manageable one. 'Get the shuttle ready,' she said and stood up. She wanted to make her preparations for landing, keep herself busy. She didn't want to listen to the small, grating voice in the back of her mind, the one whose accusations made her chest pinch.

She didn't want to listen, but as she walked along the platform and off the bridge, she heard what it said anyway. It complained that she had only pretended to weigh her options, and that she had decided on her course of action before she had even known how close the greenskins would be to the target. That was true. Of course she had. She had decided months before arriving in Sanctus Reach.

The full truth? There was no decision to be made.

She commanded the voice to be silent.

The *Scouring Light* was Orbiana's personal vessel. A modified Viper-class sloop – it was not a combat ship, though it had slit the throat of many xenos threats. It was fast, stealthy, its dark plating almost as effective at concealment as that of the Black Ships. It was a shadow that slipped into enemy territory and brought the Emperor's Light in the form of purifying death.

Orbiana made her way down from the superstructure and headed forward. Midway to bow, she turned off the main corridor. She took maintenance tunnels,

dropping three more levels and weaving through multiple intersections before she arrived outside a closed vault door. 'Is he here?' she asked the guard stationed before it.

'No, inquisitor,' one answered. 'He said he was going to rest.'

'Has he been gone long?'

'About an hour.'

She nodded her thanks. She walked on another hundred metres, and then took a staircase up a level. She stopped before another door. This one was as nondescript as the one below was massive. They both protected objects of great value. She rapped once on the door. After a few seconds it opened.

The man who admitted her to the small sleeping quarters was twice her age and a head shorter. He seemed even smaller thanks to his rounded posture. His hair was lank and grey and his chin sprouted rough, greasy-looking whiskers. His robes bore multi-coloured chemical stains, and there were pinprick burns in the sleeves. His face was sallow, its flesh hanging loose. He looked exhausted.

'I'm sorry to disturb your sleep,' Orbiana said to Ertuo Andoval.

'Not at all, inquisitor,' the sage answered. 'You know how much I value our exchanges.'

'Are you making progress?'

He shrugged, embarrassed and modest. 'Some, I think. Always forwards, inquisitor, always forwards. I have, I believe, stumbled onto what might be some very promising variants, but of course we can't know with any certainty. We need more material—'

'You'll get it. Plenty of it.'

'And the other...?'

'That's what I've come to tell you. We've arrived.'

'Will I be coming down with you?'

'I'm afraid not.'

Andoval looked crestfallen. 'But what we're looking for is so specific...'

'I know very well what we require. Are you questioning my skills?'

Andoval shook his head quickly and took a step away, head bowed. 'I would never think to do that.'

'Good. And this is for your own safety. The orks are here before us. You are too valuable to risk taking you there.'

'I will continue my research while you are gone, then, inquisitor.'

'No,' she snapped. She used her tone as a whip. Andoval recoiled as if struck. Good. 'You will do no such thing. You will *never* do that work when I am not on

board. Am I clear?’

‘Yes, inquisitor.’

‘*Am I clear?*’

‘Yes, inquisitor,’ Andoval repeated, hunching lower as if he might kneel.

‘Good. We are close,’ she said more gently. ‘I have strong hopes that we are only a few cycles away from the answer. Such an accomplishment is worth a bit more patience, isn’t it?’

Andoval nodded. ‘It is.’

She gave him a long stare, then said, ‘Thank you, Ertuo,’ and left.

As she walked away, she faced the idea of Andoval disobeying her command. She knew that he would not. He was loyal. He held the authority of the Inquisition in great awe, as he should. He knew the dangers. He would not disobey.

But he had proposed a course of action that should never have crossed his mind. So Orbiana made herself confront the possibility of Andoval’s disobedience. When she did, she felt more than a pinch in her chest.

She felt terror.



CHAPTER TWO

AN END TO REST

‘That is no ork vessel,’ Styer said.

With the full squad of Grey Knights in attendance on the bridge, the *Tyndaris* had begun a reconnaissance of Squire’s Rest. The auspex scan had revealed massive ork deployments on the surface, but only one other ship in orbit, and that was the Imperial sloop the strike cruiser was now approaching.

‘Squire’s Rest must be interesting in more ways than we think,’ Epistolary Gared remarked.

‘I recognise that ship,’ Furia said. ‘The *Scouring Light*. It is the private vessel of Inquisitor Malia Orbiana, of the Ordo Xenos.’

‘You do not sound pleased. Isn’t what is happening below more her domain than ours?’ Styer said.

‘If she has the means of stopping this invasion on her own, then I hope she shares that knowledge with the rest of the Imperium.’ Furia shook her head. ‘I doubt her reason for being here is to counter the greenskins.’

‘A coincidence? That seems unlikely.’

‘If the Ruinous Powers are at work here, then we should expect stranger coincidences than this.’

Styer nodded, conceding the point. ‘But you haven’t answered my question. Why does her presence anger you?’

‘Inquisitor Orbiana’s methods are unsound.’

‘She’s a radical?’

‘Yes. A Xanthite.’

Styer looked at the *Scouring Light* with a new suspicion. He understood and shared Furia’s distaste for that philosophy. Furia was an Amalathian. Her respect for Imperial orthodoxy was adamant. She and Styer worked well together. From the perspective of the Grey Knights, the radical factions in the Inquisition were little better than outright heretics who had somehow avoided excommunication and execution. Their beliefs and practices put their souls, and by extension the Imperium itself, at risk. If a Xanthite was up to something dangerous, Styer found it increasingly plausible that a daemonic event could occur on Squire’s Rest. Xanthites had no compunction about using the darker powers of warp to achieve their ends. Worse: they sought out those powers, and their research was misguided in the extreme. Styer knew the value of a full knowledge of the Ruinous Powers, but only for the sole purpose of destroying them. The Xanthites hoped to harness what they found. That was madness.

‘I imagine you are feeling a greater confidence in the prognostication,’ Furia said softly, for Styer’s ears alone.

‘Yes,’ he said. He still found the situation disturbing. Had they travelled to Squire’s Rest solely because of what Orbiana was about to do? Was the prediction of the incursion not based on a location, but on a person? And still he wondered why here, and at this moment. Xanthites were inherently dangerous. He and his brothers would have nothing to do with them. Even so, Orbiana and her like were inquisitors, and they were not triggering incursions every cycle. And though he shared Furia’s doubts about Orbiana’s reasons for being in Sanctus Reach, the fact of the ork waaagh! meant that her presence was entirely justified.

Styer felt as if he were seeing the first links of a dark chain of events being forged. There was logic at work that he did not like, though he could not put his finger on the precise reason for his discomfort.

‘We must go aboard that ship,’ Furia said. ‘We must learn Orbiana’s purpose.’

‘Agreed.’ It was the only way to know what role, if any, she had to play in the foretold crisis. ‘Hail the *Scouring Light*,’ he ordered.

There was no answer at first. The sloop maintained vox silence until the *Tyndaris* was almost upon it. When the *Scouring Light*’s shipmaster finally responded, Styer had been on the verge of having the boarding torpedoes readied. Even then, Lowell Montgelas extended no welcome. He acknowledged the hails, assured Shipmaster Bruno Saalfrank of the *Tyndaris* that all was well, and said nothing else.

Styer took the vox. ‘Shipmaster Montgelas,’ he said. ‘I am Justicar Styer. Your estimation of your well-being is of little interest to me. My mission is. You will receive me, my squad, and Inquisitor Furia aboard the *Scouring Light*.’

‘But without the authorization of Inquisitor Orbiana...’ Montgelas began. There was a quaver in his voice. He was clearly terrified by his own defiance.

Styer granted him a degree of respect for doing his assigned duty. He granted the man nothing else. Certainly not mercy. ‘You will drop your shields and open you starboard landing bay to our gunship. You will do so immediately, or be destroyed.’

Montgelas complied.

The orks hadn’t come yet. There were larger farms to the west. The land in the plains below the shelf that Brauner and Stumar worked was more fertile, though a far cry from how bountiful it had been in centuries past. There were larger population centres in that direction too. More fun for the greenskins.

There was news from those farms. It came in the form of distant conflagrations and smoke that rose in huge clouds from the land.

Brauner was talking with Stumar outside his house. Dietrick had done as ordered and gathered the farmhands inside. The building was a low, long, brooding, stone structure, holding his quarters as well as the barracks. It was solid, not built for war, but ready if it came. After a decade of raids, and centuries of benign neglect on the part of the rest of the Imperium, there weren’t too many homes on Squire’s Rest that hadn’t suffered damage or decay. Stumar’s had been hit the year before, and half the length of its barracks was still a burnt-out shell. Brauner had been lucky. His land had been spared to date. His walls were the strongest. So when the time came, Stumar would pull her workers back to here, and together the two groups of veterans would make a redoubt of Brauner’s home.

That way, Brauner joked to Stumar, and to her alone, they should last another five minutes.

‘Any sign they’re moving our way?’ he asked Stumar now.

She shook her head. ‘For the time being, they aren’t interested, or haven’t noticed we’re here.’

‘Let’s hope they’re blind. That eastern windbreak of yours might make all the difference.’ The trees that marked the boundary between the farms stood close together. It wasn’t easy to see through them to the cultivations on the other side.

She looked at him for a long time before answering. ‘That doesn’t sound like

you. You know the greenskins have been on my land before.'

'Different ones, different time. No reason to think they shared the knowledge.'

'Magical thinking. What's wrong with you?'

He had been avoiding asking himself that question. Perhaps what was wrong was that he knew the end had come for all of them this time, and he was trying to fill up the time between now and then with a pretence of meaningful action. Perhaps he didn't want to believe in the inevitability of the burning of Squire's Rest, and the death of everyone.

Or perhaps he feared some deaths more than others.

He didn't fear his own. He had had that particular anxiety beaten and scorched out of him decades ago. He couldn't remember if he had ceased to care about his own mortality during his training period or after, during his first campaign in the trenches of Beria. The distinction didn't matter. He wasn't afraid to die.

He *was* afraid of Stumar's death.

He could tell himself that, though it was more than their friendship was worth to let her know. She was cut of the same tough leather as he. Too stubborn to die. Almost too chewed up to live. Their lives of brutal toil and blood had won them a reward, and their slice of paradise had been, in reality, just a doorway to more toil. And now the final measure of blood was going to be exacted from them. Some of their farmhands had retained enough illusions to start families. Brauner had not.

He had never allowed himself to articulate the thought of Stumar as something other than a fellow former officer, a valued comrade in the battle to keep the fields of Squire's Rest fruitful, a trusted neighbour. A best friend.

No, he had never allowed himself to think anything more, because the life he had led – the life they *both* had led – was not one where such thoughts had a place. They were too soft. They were parasites that weakened their hosts, leaving them vulnerable to misplaced hope and wide-eyed blindness.

Even so, the thought that Stumar might die terrified him.

And that, he realised, was why he was indulging in the ridiculous speculation that the orks would not notice the two farms on this shelf.

'Don't know what I'm saying,' he told Stumar. 'Tired old man.'

'You'll have plenty of time to sleep after the orks are done with us.'

'True, true.' He slapped the wall of the house. 'So what are we thinking? This will hold them for a bit. Then what? We make them burn us out?'

She grimaced. 'Not my first choice.'

'Another retreat, then?'

‘If we don’t leave it too long, maybe. Where to?’

They looked up at the slope behind the house. Brauner’s land continued for some distance yet to the east of here, but the soil was no longer arable. It was too thin, then too rocky, then too steep. There was a rough forest for the first half kilometre, and it gave way to scrub, then scree.

‘Not much shelter,’ Stumar said.

‘I can think of one possibility.’

‘Really? Not what I could call ideal.’

He shrugged. ‘Strong walls, though.’

‘Do you think—’ she began, then stopped.

The roar of engines. Airborne. Coming closer.

They looked up. Some of the armed farmhands emerged from the house. For a moment, Brauner expected to see the silhouettes of an ork bomber squadron. But no, he realised: the engines, though deep-throated, weren’t the ugly, chugging, snarling abominations of greenskin technology. And there was a single set.

The vehicle was Imperial. It drew closer, its shape acquiring definition as it dropped in altitude. It was a shuttle, sleek, expensive enough to belong to a wealthy merchant, but with heavy, dark shielding, and front-mounted heavy bolters. There were no identifying markings. That fact alone told Brauner that whoever commanded the craft was formidable. His instinct for self-preservation, honed over hundreds of battlefields, warned him to keep his questions to himself.

The shuttle kept dropping. It slowed, then ceased its forward flight and descended to the field opposite the farmhouse. Maize burned in the wash of its retro-motors. Bits of crop flew, hail in a whirlwind. Brauner didn’t blink at the damage. It would all be ash soon enough anyway.

The shuttle landed, its engines fell silent, and an access door opened on its side. A staircase dropped to the ground. A moment later, a woman in power armour started down them.

‘The Sisters of Battle...?’ Stumar began.

‘I don’t think so,’ Brauner said. He had encountered a few of the Adepta Sororitas in his time. They were forbidding figures, as was this woman, but there was an aura of piety that was missing. The seals and wards that adorned the crimson-and-emerald armour did not appear to be religious icons. At least, not ones that he recognised as such. Then there was the pendant. It hung over her chestplate from a thick, iron chain. It was a rosette in the form of a column with a skull at its centre.

‘Is that...’ Stumar began, then stopped herself.

‘I don’t know,’ said Brauner.

‘Neither do I,’ Stumar said quickly.

‘Inside,’ Brauner told his farmhands. When he glanced back, he saw their pale faces and compressed lips. None of them could say that they knew with certainty what that rosette represented. But they had all heard whispers. What they did know was that it was a mark of absolute authority. Any information beyond that was not healthy to possess. They retreated to the interior of the house, removing themselves from the woman’s gaze.

Behind her came a squad of men-at-arms. Their uniforms mirrored the colours the power armour. Their faces were grim, but if they were in the service of the owner of the rosette, at least they didn’t carry the same terrible symbol themselves.

The woman stopped a few strides away from the gathering. ‘My name is Malia Orbiana,’ she said. She was, Brauner guessed, close to his and Stumar’s age. His judgement was not based on her apparent age, but on her overlapping scars. They were the topography of past battles. Her eyes, though, burned with the passion of someone much younger. Orbiana was driven by obsessions that went far beyond simple duty, or the need to win the day. They were another sign, for Brauner, that Orbiana was not a warrior in the sense that he understood. She made war, but by means that he would be happy not to know about.

Brauner stepped forward. ‘Welcome to Squire’s Rest,’ he said. He introduced himself and Stumar.

‘This is your land?’ Orbiana asked him.

‘It is.’

‘Then you can be of assistance.’

‘Honoured to be of use,’ he said. Despite his wariness of the authority Orbiana obviously wielded, Brauner resented the cavalier way she ignored the crisis faced by the citizens of Squire’s Rest. She had noticed the ork army, just a few kilometres distant, hadn’t she? He was careful to keep all irony out of his tone as he said, ‘However, the greenskin invasion is—’

She cut him off. ‘I’m seeking the tomb of Major-General Luter Mehnert. My information is that it is in this vicinity.’

‘Uh... yes. Yes it is,’ Brauner stuttered in surprise. ‘About a kilometre from here.’ It was that officer’s mausoleum, and the cemetery surrounding it, that he and Stumar had been discussing as their next line of defence. The coincidence alarmed him.

‘You will take us there.’

‘Of course.’ He exchanged a glance with Stumar, who had joined him.

‘Is there something wrong?’ Orbiana’s tone was sharp.

‘With the tomb?’ Stumar asked. ‘No.’

Brauner wondered if Orbiana would catch the implication that there was a lot wrong with everything else.

If she did, she ignored it. ‘Tell me,’ she said, speaking now to everyone present, ‘is there any folklore associated with the Mehnert tomb?’

‘No,’ said Brauner. ‘None that I’ve ever heard.’ The cemetery was an old one. Interred on its grounds were some of the original colonists of Squire’s Rest. All the lines of descent from the men and women who had gone to their final rest there had long since withered away. The site had fallen into disuse. No one visited. It sat on the extreme eastern edge of Brauner’s territory, and he had explored it a few times. He knew where it was and its layout. He knew the names on the largest tombs. But that was all.

‘What of Mehnert himself?’ Orbiana continued. ‘Any stories?’

Brauner shook his head. The general was known for his role in the early settling of the planet. His military career, to the best of Brauner’s knowledge, was distinguished primarily by the fact that he had survived it. His name and his history were sinking into the mire of the past. He was no legend. He was just a man.

Orbiana frowned briefly. ‘Odd,’ she said.

Brauner did not ask why. Neither did Stumar.

Orbiana looked past them, at the hard land upslope. ‘Then let us go pay our respects,’ she said. ‘We have little time.’ She paused, and the silence was filled by the rumble of the invasion. It sounded less distant. Orbiana turned her attention back to the farmers. ‘And you have still less. I am not unsympathetic to your situation. With your aid, however, it may be possible to end the greenskin plague forever.’

She was holding out hope but Brauner didn’t dare grasp it. Leaving the farmhands to complete the preparations for defence, he and Stumar led the way towards the cemetery.

Shipmaster Montgelas and a small retinue of warrior acolytes greeted the Grey Knights as they disembarked from the Stormraven *Harrower*. The reception was respectful, but not welcoming.

‘They see us as intruders,’ Epistolary Gared voxed on the squad channel.

‘They want us gone so soon?’ Brother Vohnum asked. ‘That speaks volumes.’

‘It does,’ Styer agreed. ‘So we shall have to disappoint them.’

Furia said to Montgelas, ‘Why is Inquisitor Orbiana not present?’

‘She is not currently aboard,’ he said.

‘Where is she?’

For a few moments, Montgelas’s features were the portrait of distress in its purest, most concentrated form. He was, Styer could see, torn between opposing commands, neither of which could be defied without mortal penalty. But a decision was necessary, and he chose the inquisitor he served, rather than the one who stood before him. ‘I implore your forgiveness,’ he said, ‘but I cannot say.’

Styer respected the strength of his determination. Orbiana’s philosophy was dangerous, but that was not the fault of her underlings.

‘You cannot or will not?’ Furia asked.

Styer intervened. ‘Is there a difference?’ he asked. ‘We demand the same of the crew of the *Tyndaris*.’

‘You are fortunate,’ Furia said to Montgelas. ‘It is a rare day that Justicar Styer appeals to my better nature.’ She turned from him, the abruptness of her gesture expressive of disgust and anger. ‘Is there a reason why I should not put this man to the question?’ she asked Styer. The chill of her voice pervaded the landing bay. Montgelas paled.

‘Because it is unnecessary.’ He gestured, taking in the shipmaster and the honour guard. ‘Loyalty of service is nothing to be condemned. We will have our answers soon enough.’

He strode towards the doorway leading to the interior of the ship, his brothers following.

Montgelas hurried to catch up. ‘Your pardon, lord,’ he said. ‘May I know your intentions?’

‘To go to the bridge and await Iquisitor Orbiana’s return. Do you propose to block my path?’

Montgelas stumbled. He looked miserable. ‘No, lord. Of course not.’

‘I didn’t think so.’

To his credit, the shipmaster kept up the pace. ‘Will you come this way, then?’ he asked. He moved faster yet.

‘You have my thanks,’ Styer said, granting him the pretence of escorting the squad to the bridge.

The pretence was a weak one. Montgelas trotted in front, almost running to stay ahead. Behind him came the grave, unbending force of the eight Grey

Knights and the half-metallic shadow of Furia. Trailing at the rear were the guards. Styer imagined they were formidable when backing Orbiana and bringing Inquisitorial force to bear on the foes of the Imperium. At this moment, their primary struggle would be to hold on to their pride. He granted them a degree of sympathy. Honour had value.

Furia opened a private vox-channel to him. ‘Thank you,’ she said. ‘I was letting my anger get the better of me. Orbiana’s crew are not responsible for her decisions.’

‘Is there a history I should know about?’ Orbiana’s radicalism was enough to condemn her in his eyes, but if there were other factors at play here, he didn’t want to be surprised by them.

‘Yes,’ Furia said. ‘One from twenty years ago.’

‘You were working together?’

‘No. Circumstances brought us into contact. It was on Novgorod.’

‘Exterminatus was declared there,’ Styer recalled.

‘Yes. I was pursuing a heretical cult. The planet was caught in the path of an ork waaagh! while I was there. That was, I assume, what brought Orbiana to Novgorod.’

‘A strange repetition of circumstances.’ He distrusted the coincidence. It suggested other forces at work. He liked the current situation even less. The signs should have encouraged him to trust the prognostication. Instead, his unease grew.

‘A repetition only in the broadest terms,’ Furia said.

‘What happened?’

‘An outbreak of the Plague of Unbelief. Between that and the orks, Exterminatus was the only choice.’

‘You blame Orbiana for the plague,’ Styer guessed.

‘I have no proof. I don’t know with any precision what her actions were on Novgorod.’

‘But you have enough for suspicions.’

‘Yes.’

‘You can’t think that she deliberately caused the plague.’

‘No. Not deliberately.’

More dark implications, more omens whose full import he couldn’t divine. Orbiana would have to be watched carefully. Styer studied his surroundings as they made the journey to the bridge. The corridors of the *Scouring Light* were a gallery of tapestries depicting Imperial victories over xenos armies. The subjects

ranged over the millennia, and the enemies were varied. Orks were a recurring theme, however. For every defeat of the tau or eldar, there were five portrayals of the green tide being repulsed.

‘Are you admiring the art too, brother-justicar?’ Gared asked.

‘I am. You notice the recurring theme, then.’

‘An obsession, I think.’

‘Oh? Not just an interest?’

‘Many of the battles being depicted are from Armageddon. These are all portraits of triumphs, but hard ones, and many of them provisional. Furthermore, the orks are consistently represented in the most fearsome terms. These are reminders of how dangerous that enemy is.’

So Orbiana had surrounded herself with art intended to inspire rededication to a cause. In the archways between the tapestries, he saw many closed doors, a number of them marked by sigils of protection. They were the sorts of wards that were common on the *Tyndaris*, especially on the entrances to cells where dangerous research into the nature of the Great Enemy was undertaken. Their presence here was an anomaly: the servants of the Ordo Xenos trespassing into the domain of the Ordo Malleus.

With every step, Styer was more convinced of that Orbiana’s radicalism was taking her down dangerous paths. If the *Scouring Light* were a civilian vessel, he would already have ordered it destroyed.

If the *Scouring Light* were a civilian vessel, the danger signs would be clear. The site of a potential incursion obvious. But the prognostication had involved galactic coordinates, not the name of the ship. And the sloop, though private, was not civilian. He was seeing pieces of the threat assemble around him, but they were not forming a coherent picture.

The bridge was just ahead.

‘Brother-Epistolary,’ Styer said to Gared, ‘I would welcome your insight.’ The collective psychic strength of the squad centred itself in the justicar, but the Librarian’s personal prowess gave him a deeper understanding of the threats from the immaterium that simmered just beneath the surface of reality.

‘And I would welcome the chance to be of use,’ Gared said. ‘But I cannot. There are risks here, but...’

‘There is something we are missing.’

‘Yes.’

As the Grey Knights reached the bridge, Styer identified the nature of the premonitory instinct that was troubling him. He had the vague but insistent

conviction that he was walking into a trap, but one that did not yet exist.

He looked at the oculus, and the image of Squire's Rest. To Montgelas he said, 'You refuse to indicate where the inquisitor made planetfall?'

Montgelas squirmed. 'Lord, I have no will to disobey...'

'But I am about to place you in a position where you must disobey someone, is that not so?' As soon as he asked the question, he repented of having done so. He had already decided that the shipmaster was an honourable man. He would not humiliate him. 'Have no fear, shipmaster. I will spare you that. We will demand no betrayal from you. We will simply wait. You will hear from Inquisitor Orbiana. And when you do, she will hear from us.'

The graveyard was invisible from the farmhouse, hidden behind a shoulder of land. The slope rose, fell, and then rose again, more steeply. The tombs began at the bottom of the dip and extended uphill almost to the end of the scrub. Beyond them, the gradient increased again, becoming a cliff face a thousand metres high.

There were perhaps two hundred graves. There had once been more, but rough as the vegetation was, it had claimed some of the markers over the centuries. The more humble gravestones were crumbling and sinking slowly into the earth. A few of the larger monuments had fallen over. Vaults had collapsed. The roof of one mausoleum had fallen in. Everywhere, erosion, subsidence and the elements had done their work. Most of the memories of the first settlers had vanished with their last descendants. The stones that announced the existence of memory were on the road to vanishing too. But not yet. Battered with age, like the veterans who had been given the planet for a home, the monuments were still here. Not quite gone. Waiting for time or war to finish them off, but not without a fight.

A dry stone wall surrounded the cemetery. It had weathered the elements well. It was chest-height, lower than Brauner would have wished on this day, but better than nothing. He opened the iron gate in its westward, downslope side, and led the way through the tombs. Orbiana, her guard and Stumar followed. There was no path, and the graves crowded in on each other. Brauner had to weave his way around the leaning stones and lichen-stained obelisks.

He liked the absence of a straight route. The defensive possibilities of the cemetery were looking better, now that he was watching for them.

Major-General Luter Mehnert's mausoleum was modest by the standards of the more heavily populated worlds, but grand for Squire's Rest. The largest monument in the graveyard, it stood in the far third of the uphill section. It was a solid, squat building, ten metres wide at the base, and fifteen metres tall at the

peak of its stepped-pyramid roof. Columns topped by winged skulls guarded the entrance. The façade was unbroken by any other openings. Its bas-relief engravings of heroic struggle, fading and stained, were crude, the work of labourers rather than artisans. The veterans of Squire's Rest knew how to build fortifications. There had rarely been room in their lives for anything not directly related to the taking or the holding of ground. Before long, Brauner suspected, their work here would be put to that use.

A few steps before the mausoleum, Orbiana said, 'Thank you. That is far enough.'

Brauner stopped. Orbiana and the guards moved to the door. She examined it carefully, then looked back at Brauner. 'I must ask again. You know of nothing unusual connected with this location?'

'Nothing.'

'No deaths?'

'No.' He was tempted, for a mad moment, to point out that death was all around them.

'Very well. You may go.'

Stumar looked murderous. Brauner saw red.

Orbiana waited, watching them.

Brauner swallowed his rage. He turned and began walking away. Stumar eyed Orbiana a moment longer, then joined him.

'Any ideas?' she asked once they were out of earshot.

'None. Happy to keep things that way. You?'

She gave a dissatisfied shrug. 'Can't help wonder if something that might be helpful to us right now has been under our noses all this time.'

'If there is, it isn't something for the likes of us to use. Besides, you heard what she said earlier. She's going to end the greenskins forever.'

'And we'll be very grateful, I'm sure. Do you believe her?'

His sarcastic reply died on his lips. He heard las-fire from the direction of the farm.

And the roar of the ork tide was much louder.

Brauner and Stumar ran up the shoulder and down the slope towards the farmhouse. They had a brief view of the house and the fields before they were in the trees. The shots from the house were still sporadic. The orks that were making their way across the field were the outliers from the mob. The main force was not there yet, but it was coming. The roar was building by the moment.

The two veterans made their way down as quickly as they could. They were slower than they would have liked. Brauner couldn't remember when he had last sprinted. Neither could his body. He was short of breath before they hit the trees. Pain wracked his frame. His legs were stiff with age. They didn't belong to him at all. He wondered bitterly who had stolen the body of his memory. Stumar's breath sounded ragged too. The last hundred metres was a stumble through a fog of agony. Brauner's chest felt like artillery guns were firing at his ribcage.

They reached the farmhouse. The shots had stopped. A handful of ork bodies littered the field, clustering near the shuttle. There were no other attackers for the moment. Beyond the fringe of trees that marked the boundary between Brauner's land and Stumar's, smoke rose in a wide grey cloud. The burn was large.

The roar of approaching war had acquired definition. Brauner could hear the shouted glee of the orks. He could hear the sounds of vehicles, of explosions, of stone breaking. He didn't hear screams. He didn't know if that was a mercy. He didn't hear anything he could identify as retaliatory fire, either, and that was no mercy at all.

One battle had already ended.

'I'm sorry,' he said to Stumar.

She nodded once. 'I know they fought well,' she said, and she looked away from the smoke.

A farmhand opened the barred door to let them into the house. They turned right into the dormitoria. Brauner had fifty hands working for him, and they had set up the defence there, aiming through the narrow, barricaded windows. A few of them were young, members of that rare group of native-born citizens of Squire's Rest, the offspring of those few settlers who weren't past the age of bearing and rearing children when they completed their service in the Imperial Guard. Most of the men and women of the Brauner farm were veterans close to his age. Many had worked their own plots for some time before selling up and choosing the greater stability of home and board on a larger farm. They were all proud warriors, and they were all, like him, worn down. They had the experience and the training, but they no longer had the strength. The young had the strength, and the experience of the raids. But they had not fought a war on this scale.

'Took the first ones down, colonel,' Dietrick said.

'I saw the bodies, sergeant. Well done.' He was starting to get his breath back, but it was all he could do not to hold on to the dormitorium archway to keep from collapsing.

'We can't stay,' Stumar said.

‘Pull back now?’ Brauner asked, startled.

‘Listen to what’s coming,’ she said. ‘If we don’t retreat to the cemetery now, we won’t have the chance later.’

He wanted to refute her. He didn’t want to surrender what was his without a fight. *What difference does it make?* he almost said. He held back from that truth. The people who worked for him deserved at least the prospect of hope before their deaths. Stumar was right. There were heavy vehicles approaching. They would run right through the house. But in the cemetery, the land was steep, the obstacles plenty, the area more restricted. It was possible to imagine a weaker force holding out longer there. He nodded. To the farmhands he said, ‘Load up. Grab whatever weapons and food you can. Five minutes.’ He hoped the greenskins would amuse themselves that long at the ruins of Stumar’s farm. ‘We’re moving to the cemetery.’

Dietrick looked wistfully out of the window at Orbiana’s shuttle. ‘A shame to leave heavy bolters behind.’

‘Can’t be helped.’ A thought struck him. ‘That’s probably what drew them here in the first place.’

There weren’t enough guns for all. Many of the weapons were keepsakes, growing ancient along with their owners. Brauner had purchased more lasrifles and energy packs due to the raids of the last decade, so half his army, at least, would be able to shoot. The rest grabbed old combat blades, a few swords, or made weapons out of whatever tools were around. Grabbing supplies in his quarters, Brauner started to hand a rifle to Stumar, but she refused it.

‘No point,’ she said, raising her arched fingers. ‘Can’t pull the trigger. Get me a sword.’

Brauner pulled his own off the wall. She worked her fingers around the hilt with difficulty. She could just hold it, but her grip was tenuous. ‘How are you going to use it?’ he asked.

‘Bind it,’ she said.

He didn’t ask if she was sure, though he winced at what she was requesting. He pulled the sheets off his cot and tore strips off them. He wrapped her hand, wrist and upper arm.

Her breath hissed. ‘Tighter,’ she said through her wince.

Brauner obeyed. When he was done, the blade was an extension of her arm. ‘Must hurt like hell,’ he said.

She nodded. She gave the sword an experimental swing. ‘It’ll hurt the green bastards even more. Now give me another sword.’

Then they were out the door, and moving with their patchwork army up the slope, to make their last stand among the dead.

Less than an hour later, on the *Scouring Light*, Orbiana's signal arrived.

'A tomb,' Furia said, when she heard the vox.

'Our target,' said Styer.



CHAPTER THREE

THE TOMB SIEGE

The *Harrower* came in over the high butte. Brother Warheit dipped the nose and took the Stormraven into a steep dive, almost flush with the cliff face. Seated in the twin-linked heavy bolter turret above the cockpit, Styer watched the graveyard race toward them. The orks had it surrounded. Their infantry was spilling over the wall. Downslope to the west, four Battlewagons were cresting the shoulder. The defenders were clustered around the large mausoleum. They were slowing the orks but they were not holding them.

‘Take the tanks, brother,’ Styer said.

Warheit opened up with the nose-mounted multi-melta, angling to port to bring the weapon to bear on one Battlewagon while Styer rotated the turret to fire on the starboard tank. As the *Harrower* passed over the Battlewagons, a beam of solar fire ripped into the one, while mass-reactive ammunition pounded the other. Twin-linked assault cannons tore into the foot soldiers. The ork vehicles were strong, their shielding an excess of metal piled upon metal. They could stand up to a lot. But Warheit flew low, hitting his target with the full strength of the multi-melta. The orks on the roof were vaporised. The beam sliced deep into the hull, incinerating the interior, turning steel into slag. The tank shuddered to a halt, its shape disappearing, melting into formless wreckage.

To starboard, Styer battered his target, keeping the turret trained on the Battlewagon as Warheit completed the first pass. The initial shells punctured the armour. The ones that followed in the rapid drumbeat of the barrage exploded

inside the tank. The chain reaction did not come right way. The interior shook with the blasts of the shells. The tank kept moving. And then there was fire, the flames billowing out of the torn hull. Still the tank kept moving. Styer was surprised any members of its crew were still alive.

The *Harrower* left the Battlewagons behind. Warheit brought the ship around for another pass, aiming at the untouched tanks. As the gunship flew over the shoulder again, the burning vehicle skewed to its left. It was out of control, still under power but no longer steered. It rammed up against the third Battlewagon, hard enough to lift its right side off the ground for a moment. The driver tried to steer the tank away, but the spikes and jagged edges of the hulls locked together. The Battlewagon's guns fired upward at the *Harrower*. A few shells smacked into the underhull shields. They did little damage.

The chain reaction in the flaming tank reached its climax. The ammunition erupted. The Battlewagon became a fireball that engulfed both vehicles and the foot soldiers around them. Twisted, blackened metal arced across the hillside and the cemetery. Warheit flew in a circle over the conflagration, still firing. The two vehicles were welded together. They ground forward another few metres, then stopped. They were a single torch.

The remaining Battlewagon raced toward the cemetery wall. Though the orks clinging to its exterior fired at the Stormraven, the orks crewing the tank's guns ignored the gunship. They used their last few seconds to fire the main cannon and secondary guns forward at the defenders, as if they wished to go down shooting at something they knew they could kill. Earth and shattered tombstones erupted as the shells marched uphill to the mausoleum. Styer saw more ork bodies than human caught in the destruction. But the orks had the bodies to spare.

'Finish it,' Styer said.

Warheit did. Heavy bolters and the multi-melta reduced the Battlewagon to a smouldering wreck.

'That's all of them,' the pilot said.

'For the moment. There will be more once the greenskins realise they have a battle on their hands here. Drop us at the mausoleum. Then hold off the heavy armour as long as you can.'

'By your command, brother-justicar.'

The Battlewagon's final volley collapsed the vault Brauner was using as shelter. He scrambled back from the tumbling stone and ducked behind another large

tomb, a few metres down from the mausoleum. He leaned against its rear wall, catching his breath. Dietrick was there, poking around from the right to fire. Without taking his eyes off his targets, the old sergeant said, 'Did Orbiana summon Adeptus Astartes? Who is she that she can do that?'

Brauner looked up at the Mehnert tomb. Orbiana still hadn't emerged from its interior, but her escort was holding the entrance, laying down a disciplined stream of las at the orks. Brauner saw one stare for a moment at the gunship, then shout something at his comrades. 'I don't think she did,' he said to Dietrick. 'Her troops are as surprised as we are.'

He stepped out from the vault and fired a quick burst. He dropped one ork. A single drop in the wave that was over the cemetery wall and crashing against the tombs.

'I don't recognise the heraldry,' Dietrick said.

'Neither do I.' Black on white in a field of crimson, a sword pointed down like judgement rendered. The ship was grey. Pride and honour mixed with the cold realities of war.

The Stormraven unleashed a storm of assault cannon and heavy bolter fire on the orks. The lower half of the cemetery vanished from Brauner's sight in a cloud of earth, fire and smoke. The orks were shredded. They fell back from the assault, though still more moved up the graveyard walls on the left and right to flank. The gunship dropped to within a couple of metres of the ground. The slope was too steep to permit a landing. Its side door opened and the warriors within leaped out. It seemed to Brauner that the earth shook as they landed.

How could it not, when struck by such beings?

The Stormraven rose and roared downhill to the west again, still raking the orks with cannon fire. The giants it had left behind strode up the hill. They were clad in silver-grey Terminator armour. They carried swords and halberds and hammers instead of the bolters he would have expected, but something with formidable barrels was mounted on their wrists. The armour was of a design Brauner had never seen before. In the heraldry was the same terrifying 'I' worn by Orbiana's escort. Brauner had no idea who had arrived on the field, but his throat went dry from awe and fear.

There were seven of them. As the squad advanced, they raised their arms and fired with their wrist guns to the north and south, striking hard into the flanking manoeuvres of the orks. The guns were double-barrelled, and Brauner recognised their deep-throated beats: storm bolters.

Wrist-mounted storm bolters.

That such power existed was stunning. For a moment, the howls of the orks faded to the rear of his consciousness, as if a sphere of majesty had expanded from the Adeptus Astartes and silenced the xenos filth that dared tread on soil claimed in the Emperor's name.

A bullet careened off the vault just above Brauner's head. He flinched. He was exposed, staring at the Space Marines. He blind-fired to his left and retreated behind the vault again. Dietrick crouched with him, looking as stunned as he felt. 'Who are they?' he whispered.

Brauner shook his head. 'I don't know.' In spite of the nobility of the beings he had just seen, he was uneasy, too. He had the intuition that there was a price to be paid for seeing such wonders. And he wondered why the thought of that price worried him, when he could hardly expect to survive through the next hour.

The ork fire in their vicinity diminished. The ferocity of the attack was just as strong, but the storm bolters thinned the ranks. The orks within range concentrated their anger on the Space Marines. Their rage was futile. Brauner risked another look beyond the vault. The armoured figures walked through the enemy volleys as if it were beneath notice.

Brauner took the seconds of relative calm near him to look around. He had lost track of Stumar when the shell barrage had hit. She had been forward of his position, taking on orks that ran ahead of the main bulk of their force. She had been near the centre of the cemetery. If she had been caught in the Stormraven's scouring assault, there wouldn't be enough left of her for him to know that she was gone.

Then he spotted her. She had retreated towards the mausoleum too. She was near the southern wall, crouched behind an altar-shaped tomb. An ork thundered past her in the direction of the Space Marines. The beast wore an iron shield over its face and wielded a flamer. It sprayed a stream of fire before it. Stumar lunged up behind the ork and stabbed at the promethium tanks on its back. She dropped to the ground and scrambled back as the liquid splashed and ignited. The ork shrieked as it was enveloped by the conflagration. It ran faster yet, veering wildly downhill, colliding with its kin, spreading its death wide.

Stumar had given away her position. She ran, hunched low, towards the mausoleum, joining the rest of the defenders as they retrenched even more tightly around the great tomb. She arrived just before the Space Marines. Her breathing sounded like stones in a pipe. She was bleeding from cuts to her forehead and left shoulder. Her clothing was scorched. They exchanged exhausted looks, then looked up as the Adeptus Astartes were among them.

At their head was a colossus. Given the size of the squad, Brauner would have guessed him to be a sergeant, but the glory of his armour and its skirt gave him a gravitas that marked him as somehow *other* than even those legends of the battlefield. The helmeted head looked down at Brauner and Stumar. Brauner couldn't guess what he saw, but he asked, 'Do you command here?'

'Outside the mausoleum, I do.'

To the rest of his squad, the Space Marine said, 'Hold here. Brother-Epistolary, please join us.'

The Librarian stepped forward while the squad formed a perimeter around the vault. Their suppressive fire held the orks at bay. The greenskin numbers would have overwhelmed the veterans of Squire's Rest before very much longer. Even with the benefit of the high ground and the shelter of the graves, Brauner's comrades had been reduced by half. But the green tide would have to be much higher to swamp the power that had arrived on the field.

'And inside the mausoleum,' the Space Marine asked, 'is it Malia Orbiana who commands?'

'Yes, lord. She is searching for something.'

There was a brief pause. 'I see.' The voice hardened.

The Librarian looked towards the Mehnert tomb with a cold gaze. His face, shadowed within his psychic hood, was lined with scars that had not been created by any physical wound. Whatever evils he had fought, the determination to confront them had, over time, given his visage the unyielding qualities of stone.

'What is your name?' the commander asked.

'Klas Brauner, lord. Forgive me, but it shames me to say that I do not know who honours us.' It felt strange to be so formal while the clamour of war resounded, but he had no choice. He felt that he was addressing beings in which the truly divine burned.

'I am Justicar Styer. We are the Grey Knights.'

When Styer spoke, the Librarian's eyes flickered to Brauner. He thought he saw pity in their depths, which was terrible to witness. Though the orks were the threat, Brauner didn't fear them. He did fear these warriors.

'What will you have us do, lord?' Stumar asked.

'What you have been doing. Fight well.' Styer fell silent again, but when he started forward, with only the Librarian accompanying him, Brauner realised he must have been speaking to the rest of the squad over the vox.

The Librarian stopped for a moment. He turned to Brauner and Stumar and

said, 'Do not trust the shelter of the mausoleum. Be aware of events at your back.' Then he disappeared with the justicar through the entrance.

'What did he mean?' Dietrick asked.

'Just keep fighting,' Brauner told him. He looked around the vault and resumed fire, shooting in the gaps between the Grey Knights. On all sides, the orks were dying.

But they kept coming. And their numbers were still growing.

Montgelas tried to follow Furia as she left the bridge. She rounded on him.

'What are you hoping to accomplish, shipmaster?' she asked.

'I'm sorry, inquisitor, but I must insist—'

'Insist? *Insist*? Is that really the word you wish to use?'

Montgelas swallowed. 'I apologise,' he said. 'I merely meant... ' He trailed off, squirming.

'You meant to stay out of my way,' Furia informed him. She remained quite still, but the shipmaster took a step back. 'Your loyalty does you credit,' she continued. 'I respect it. What I do not respect are the risks Inquisitor Orbiana is taking, and I know she is taking them, even if I do not yet know what they are. You will not tell me?' She waited, watching Montgelas squirm, turning an even unhealthier shade of pale. 'I didn't think so,' she said. She lowered her voice so only he could hear. 'I will not punish loyalty. You have your duty. But if you try to interfere with mine, I will kill you.'

Montgelas took another step back.

'You are the master of this vessel,' Furia said. 'You are needed on this bridge. Don't you think?'

'Yes, inquisitor.'

'Yes.'

Furia left him there. She began by retracing the route back toward the loading bay. She had no precise destination in mind, but there were passages and chambers that she wanted a closer look at. She wanted a solid sense of the ship's layout before Orbiana returned and was able to mount a more effective barrier to her movements.

She knew that, even now, there were doors that would remain closed to her. Montgelas did not know it, but she had been bluffing when she had threatened him. Without incontrovertible proof of Orbiana's malfeasance, something that went beyond the ideological divides of the Inquisition, direct action would carry tremendous risks, and could very probably backfire. Without that proof, and

especially during Orbiana's absence from her vessel, any violence Furia meted out would be construed by many in the ordos as an act of war, rather than the furtherance of her duties. Montgelas no doubt thought she had spoken softly in order to allow him to hold on to his pride before the crew. The truth was that she wanted the threat of her presence, at this stage, to be a thing of whispers and suppositions.

She walked with a slow but determined stride down the main corridor, giving herself time to examine the intersections and doorways closely, but moving with apparent purpose. She chose one of the open doors. The inner chamber was a small librarium, little more than a study. Furia scanned the titles on the shelves. For the citizens of the Imperium, they were all on the index of prohibited texts. For the Inquisition, they were nothing remarkable. They were standard treatises on xenos threats, with special attention given to the orks. Furia saw treatise after treatise on ork physiology. She took a few down and leafed through them. They were heavily annotated. Two people were responsible for most of the notes. They were all written in the same cryptic shorthand. Given enough time, Furia was confident she could decipher their import. But she did not have enough time, and if the books were out in the open, they could not be that important.

She replaced the texts and looked around the room. She asked herself why such a tiny librarium should exist. What purpose could it serve? She could imagine the space being used for specialised research, but the material here was too basic. She would have been more surprised by its *absence* aboard the vessel of an Ordo Xenos inquisitor. The room made no sense.

Unless the material here was overflow. Unless the principle librarium was full of far more dangerous works.

She left the room and continued walking. At the far end of the corridor, just before the intersection that would bring her to stairs leading to the next level down, was one of the sealed doors. Two of Orbiana's guards stood outside it. They stared straight ahead as Furia stopped between them. She looked at the door's sigils. They were tools that were more properly the domain of the Ordo Malleus, though they were used often enough throughout all branches of the Inquisition. They were not proof of anything. They were barely suggestive.

Furia approached the door. The guards tensed. Still they did not look at her directly. They did not bring up their lasrifles. 'You have orders to let no one in,' she said.

The one on the left nodded. 'Yes, inquisitor.'

'And if I try to enter, I will leave you with no choice.'

The woman nodded again. ‘Yes, inquisitor.’

‘You understand that you have no hope of stopping me.’

‘We do, inquisitor.’

She wasn’t threatening them. In a sense, they were threatening her, with the complication of their own deaths. They didn’t have to worry. She had no intention of trying to force her way through a door with that many wards on it. Whatever was on the other side would only be aided by any disruption she created.

She said nothing more to the guards. She turned away, took a right at the intersection, and then the stairs to the level below. If she kept going down, and to starboard, she would reach the landing bay. She headed toward the bow instead, going down another long corridor. It was similar to the one above. The tapestries here were, if anything, even more single-minded. The orks were the subjects of all of them, turning the walls into snarls of aggression.

More doors with sigils and guards. Furia could disable the guards without killing them if she chose. Even that step would be politically fraught. She held back from taking that step for the time being. If she found nothing, she would rethink her options.

One of the few open doors she passed revealed another small library. She stepped inside. It was much the same as the one above. The works here were older, and a bit more speculative. There was more marginalia, and though both hands were still present, one predominated here.

There was an iron lectern in the centre of the room, illuminated by a single, crystal-encased glowglobe that hung from the ceiling. A data-slate sat on it. Furia flipped through its files. She found notes and symbols, equations and formulae. Little that made sense. More about the orks, though. More and more information and theories about the orks, though most of it in so abbreviated as to be incomprehensible. Many questions, too, just as indecipherable. She was looking at the dialogue of one. Only the owner of the slate could understand it.

And the owner had forgotten it.

She replaced the slate on the lectern, then walked to the rear of the chamber, where the lighting was dim. From the main corridor, she would be hard to spot. She slowed her breathing, becoming perfectly still. She waited.

Perhaps an hour passed. Then an elderly man entered the library. He was a dishevelled, tired, distracted-looking specimen. Moving in a rushed shuffle, he zeroed in on the lectern. He made a small exclamation of relief when he saw the data-slate. He seized it and slipped it into a pocket of his robe.

‘Missing vital findings?’ Furia asked.

The sage jumped. He whirled around, his right hand holding the lectern for support, his left clutching at his chest.

‘I apologise,’ Furia said, stepping forward. ‘I didn’t mean to startle you.’ She was very conscious of the effect her appearance had on most civilians whose path she crossed. She opened this encounter with a quick alternation of fear and an innocuous greeting. She wanted to see which approach the man responded to, which would get him talking most easily. ‘I am Inquisitor Hadrianna Furia.’

The sage bowed his head. ‘Ertuo Andoval,’ he said. ‘I didn’t realise we had guests.’ He nodded again. ‘Always honoured to meet one of Inquisitor Orbiana’s colleagues. How generous of you to help. The more the better, at this juncture.’

Interesting. Whatever his task, it rendered him oblivious to other events on the *Scouring Light*. His false assumptions were going to make life easier for her. She decided to remain friendly. ‘Precisely,’ she said. She gestured at the lectern. ‘Were you stymied without your slate?’

‘What? Oh.’ He shook his head. ‘Not at all, not at all. A bit. Shouldn’t have mattered.’ He gave a self-deprecating laugh. ‘Silly distractions of an old man, you see. Nothing very important on it now, just some prompts and questions for myself. But I didn’t know where it was, and then that was all I could think about...’ He stopped. He frowned, anxious. ‘Oh dear. Inquisitor Orbiana won’t like to hear that.’

‘She won’t hear it from me.’

‘Oh thank you, thank you. I wouldn’t want her to think that I’ve been derelict. Of course, there are limits to what can be done until her return. But we have high hopes that we’re on the right track this time. Don’t you?’

‘Indeed.’ *Right track for what?* she wondered. She examined Andoval’s clothing, noting its stains. There was a chemical odour that wafted from him too. And beneath it was something else, harder to define. It was related to decay. She didn’t think it came from him, but from the materials of his work. ‘Can I help?’ she offered.

‘Very kind, very kind. No, I don’t think so, inquisitor. Not until they return from planetside.’

‘You have the space prepared for that return?’

He blinked at her. ‘I don’t know what you mean.’

Furia cursed herself. She had overplayed her hand. Whatever Orbiana hoped to find on Squire’s Rest, it wasn’t large. It might be knowledge itself. ‘I meant that all is in readiness,’ she said.

But Andoval was suspicious now. His frown returned. His lips moved silently. Furia realised that he was mouthing her name over and over. Then his brow cleared. He looked at her sharply. He started to back away. ‘I remember now. Oh no, no, no, this won’t do. Inquisitor Orbiana won’t be pleased with me. She has mentioned you before.’

Furia followed him. She advanced one slow pace at a time. She didn’t want him to flee. But she also wanted him to understand what he was facing in her. ‘If you know who I am, then you know the ordo I represent, and the nature of my duty.’

Andoval nodded, head bobbing up and down as if on a spring.

‘I am not here because of a personal animosity for Inquisitor Orbiana. I am here because of a threat to the Imperium. Those who do not aid me are aiding the Ruinous Powers, and so their lives are forfeit. Am I making myself clear?’

The old man’s head kept bobbing. His feet kept shuffling backwards.

‘Then tell me what Orbiana seeks on Squire’s Rest.’

Andoval stopped backing up just before he reached the doorway. He cleared his throat. His shoulders hunched in, as if he expected a blow. When he spoke, his voice quavered, but the bravery of his words belied the terror of his body. ‘I mean no disrespect, Inquisitor Furia. But your authority does not supersede that of Inquisitor Orbiana. You both have absolute dominion over the likes of me, but the two of you are peers. My duty in this situation is to the inquisitor in whose service I am sworn. Unless she tells me otherwise, I cannot do as you ask.’

‘Do you understand the risk you are taking?’ Furia asked him, her voice turning into a hiss of ice.

He trembled, but he stood his ground. He said, ‘Yes, I do.’ Then, pleading: ‘The work we are doing here is so important. Please let us finish. The benefit to the Imperium will be immense.’

That was a dangerous delusion. Though the Xanthites had won battles that might have been lost if not for the methods they employed, Furia believed that they ran the risk of losing the greater war. She didn’t know what Orbiana was doing here, but if Squire’s Rest was key, and if Squire’s Rest was the location of the prognosticated incursion, then Orbiana’s project could have catastrophic results. Andoval appeared to be the key researcher. Furia wondered how much of a blow for salvation she would strike if she killed Andoval here and now. Would that be worth the consequences?

And why was she so sure that Orbiana’s work was dangerous? She had no facts to go on. Only the general principle that her radicalism was toxic. With a

struggle, she recalled herself to the mission. She had not come on the hunt for Orbiana. She was here because of Squire's Rest. It was possible that Orbiana's activities might exacerbate the danger of the incursion. But by the same token, open conflict in Inquisition ranks would serve daemonic interests admirably. If she acted rashly, she would be doing the work of the Archenemy.

'Go,' Furia told Andoval. 'I will speak with Inquisitor Orbiana when she returns. Note this: I will not permit anyone to harm the Imperium. If I determine the action is necessary, I will not hesitate to order this vessel incinerated. Do you understand?'

Andoval went back to bobbing his head. 'Please don't worry, inquisitor. If we succeed, you'll see that—'

A blaring tocsin cut him off. Furia pushed past him and into the corridors. She listened to the wail for a moment, then started running in the direction of the bridge. The hull of the *Scouring Light* resounded with the call to battle stations.

The sounds of the war dropped away quickly as Gared and Styer walked deeper into the mausoleum. The walls shut out the signs of struggle beyond them. They preserved the final silence of their interior.

A tomb was right, Gared thought. It was the sort of location where, given the correct rituals, the barrier to the empyrean could be thinned. Events were centring themselves around the Mehnert mausoleum. Logic and experience suggested that the Grey Knights had found the location of the incursion. They were on time. They could defeat the threat before it could establish a foothold in the materium.

Only...

'Is something wrong?' Styer asked.

'No, there isn't.'

'That is also my impression.'

They were walking down a narrow corridor leading from the entrance of the tomb. The construction was monolithic rather than ornate. The exterior walls appeared to be many metres thick. The stones were cleanly hewn and unadorned. The atmosphere was stale, but not corrupt. As far as Gared could tell, the most defining characteristic of the mausoleum was that it was large.

'What do you think?' Styer asked.

'I don't know.' He was torn between the fact of the prognostication, the logic of the site, and the psychic emptiness he now confronted. If he had just arrived here with no prior knowledge, it would never occur to him that anything

daemonic was going to happen here.

The corridor ended in a circular interment chamber. At the centre was the general's sarcophagus. A figure in power armour stood before it, flanked by two warrior acolytes.

'When I signalled my ship for assistance,' Orbiana said, 'I had no idea my crew would show such resourcefulness.'

'Inquisitor,' Styer said. 'I must ask you what the significance of this tomb is for you.'

'My energies are concentrated on the struggle against the orks. My researches pointed to the possibility that information valuable to that struggle could be found here.'

'What sort of information?'

'The affairs of the Ordo Xenos are not yours, justicar.'

'Did you find it?' Gared asked.

'I think,' Orbiana said, ignoring the question, 'that our priority should be departure from this site.'

Styer turned his head in Gared's direction. 'Brother-Epistolary?' he asked.

Gared gave a slight shake of his head. He was uncertain.

Styer faced Orbiana again. 'Your business here is concluded?'

'It is.'

'We require some time here ourselves.'

She made a slight bow in assent. 'Of course. We will join the struggle.' She marched out of the burial chamber, followed by the guards.

'Well?' Styer asked when they were gone.

'I don't know,' Gared said, frustrated. He circled the chamber, examining everything, learning its nature. The sarcophagus was marble, while the rest of the tomb was granite. A tribute, no doubt, to the dead man's rank. A heroic representation of the general was carved in on the lid. He held a crown aloft with one hand, while his booted feet trampled a massive ork chieftain. The artist had technique, but little inspiration. That this much had been attempted on this planet, Gared thought, suggested Mehnert had been a figure of high renown.

A frieze of winged skulls circled the chamber midway up the height of the walls. Below them were sconces. Orbiana had lit their torches. Beneath these were the relics of a martial life: sword, lasrifle, uniform, medals. The collection appeared to be intact. There had been no theft. Another sign, Gared thought, of the honour of the settlers of Squire's Rest. They deserved better than to be crushed beneath the greenskins' barbarism.

Gared turned his attention to what he assumed were trophies captured from the general's battlefields. He searched for some taint, for anything that would suggest the great man's life was really a lie, and his death a trap that would doom Squire's Rest and reach out to grasp the Sanctus Reach.

Quite a few of Mehnert's souvenirs had been taken from fallen greenskins. Gared saw their crude machetes, unworkable guns, and numerous pieces of armour. Judging by their size, Mehnert or the forces he commanded had slain some formidable specimens. Gared could imagine some of these items being of interest to the Ordo Xenos. A few pieces of armour looked very old, and perhaps those whose province it was to study the ways of the foe would find valuable information here. Perhaps the truth in this tomb was exactly as Orbiana had said.

But it couldn't be.

'Anything?' Styer asked.

'No.'

'Do you understand the reason for my doubts?'

'I do, but with respect, brother-justicar, they must be mistaken. The prognostication cannot be questioned.'

'Yet it must be,' Styer insisted.

Gared knew he was right. He also knew the justicar was wrong. He understood Styer's doubts. After what had happened on Angriff Primus, the fog that was gathering around this mission was cause for concern. Gared felt his own doubts gaining strength. This was something he could not allow. The prognostications were too important an element of the Grey Knights crusade against the daemonic to be questioned. The more he looked for clarity on Squire's Rest, the less there was, and so he needed the certainty of the prognostication as an anchor. The incursion *was* coming, and it was coming to *these* galactic coordinates. That was truth. That was the anchor for the actions he and his brothers were taking. If that anchor was pulled, then they were flailing in the dark.

'Perhaps the inquisitor has taken the source of the danger,' he said.

'The thought had occurred to me,' Styer said. 'I felt nothing as she passed, though. Did you?'

Gared's psychic powers were stronger and more acutely developed than Styer's. He had felt no warp-related disturbance in Orbiana's presence. Still... 'She was ready to depart. So she must have accomplished her goal here.'

'True.' Styer was facing the sarcophagus. 'There is nothing about this tomb that suggests an alliance with the Ruinous Powers. All I see is evidence of this man's loyalty to the Emperor. Could the sum of his heresy be contained in a

single object?’

‘I see no other possible explanation.’

‘Apart from the mission itself being mistaken, you mean.’

Gared did not mean that. He could not afford to. With the forces he wielded, and the risks he took in doing so, doubts could be lethal. He walked out of the burial chamber and down the corridor toward the exit. He moved slowly. Though his body was travelling through physical space, his consciousness was plunging forward into the warp. It swam through currents of nightmare possibility, of hideous potential that sought the strength to become real. Beings of desire and hate and teeth clawed at his psychic barriers. They were the predators who waited for any human who dared venture into the lethal thought-potential of the warp. They had a special hatred for Gared and his brothers. The Grey Knights were incorruptible. They could never be prey. The denizens of the warp were drawn to them, maddened by thirst, hunger, and obsessive revenge.

Gared treated the hunters with caution and with contempt. He was used to their presence. They were always there. He searched for a new pattern, a strengthening current, and emerging vortex. Anything that might signal a daemonic power pulling together its strength for an assault on the materium.

His search was frustrating, inconclusive and painful. He could find nothing that suggested the prognostication was about to be realised. But his ability to read the currents was hampered. He couldn’t tell if he was seeing disruptions, or if it was his perception that was disrupted.

He pulled out a few steps before the end of the passage.

‘Well?’ Styer asked.

‘I don’t know. There is great interference, but I can’t tell if that means anything.’

‘The orks?’

‘Yes.’ He had experienced these difficulties before. Every time had coincided with a massive greenskin action. The orks’ use of psychic forces was a mysterious as their technology. But it was real, it was powerful, and when their numbers reached a mass such as the one that had invaded Sanctus Reach, they created a shockwave in the immaterium. The orks on Squire’s Rest itself weren’t numerous enough to have this effect, but the totality of the force in the Reach was a system-wide psychic blow. The collective strength of uncountable thousands of greenskin witches pressed inwards on Gared’s skull. His ability to strike out was undiminished, but scrying with any accuracy was impossible.

‘You feel their impact too,’ he said to Styer.

‘We all do.’

‘Their presence may explain our difficulty in pinpointing the threat.’

‘But not the lack of other evidence.’

An inspiration struck Gared. He wanted very much to believe it was inspiration, and not something weaker, further from the truth. ‘It may be that our view of the tomb is incorrect. We have been looking for signs of corruption. Perhaps corruption is precisely what it guards against.’

‘And its destruction by the ork invasion is the danger we have come to prevent?’

‘That would account for what appears to be the unblemished life of the deceased.’

‘I am not satisfied, Brother-Epistolary. I would prefer to know what Inquisitor Orbiana found to her benefit here. But I agree that we must not allow the orks to rampage through this site. To war, then.’

They emerged from the mausoleum, back into the rage of battle. The rest of the squad had held the ground well. The orks had made inroads into the cemetery, but at a great cost to themselves. Their numbers had dropped. They still outnumbered the defenders by hundreds to one, but Gared could see no reinforcements beyond the current wave. However the rest of Squire’s Rest was faring, this was the greenskins’ last push on the cemetery.

‘Brothers!’ Styer shouted. ‘Purge this land. Restore its sacred nature!’

Gared ran forward with him. They rejoined the squad and added their storm bolter fire to the barrage. The human defenders, clustered tightly around the mausoleum and using the nearest gravestones and vaults for cover, fought with more spirit than effect. Their weaponry was too weak, their bodies too old. But they still took a toll, and Gared saluted them for that. He wondered if any would survive the day. If they did, they would not be permitted to remember it, so perhaps it would be a gift for them to fall in glory.

Orbiana and her acolytes had taken up a position at a vault a short distance to the left of the Grey Knights. Their weapons were disturbing, the most blatant confirmation of the inquisitor’s radicalism. The acolytes were using kroot long rifles. They were more powerful than lasrifles, and were downing orks at a good rate, but that did nothing to cleanse them of their unclean, xenos origin. Orbiana’s willingness to outfit her troops with the tools of a race of mercenaries paled next to the crime of her own weapon.

Beams of green lightning arced from the muzzle into the enemy. Orks disintegrated, their being negated in layers by the gun’s arcane energy. With

every pull of the trigger, she was plunging a thin, sharp blade into the body of the enemy's advance. Her armour gave the means to be exposed for longer periods, and she was using this to her advantage, scything greenskins apart with a grim, venomous enthusiasm.

The gun was not the work of any human hand.

The need to know what she had found in the tomb became more pressing.

'Justicar Styer,' Orbiana called, 'our extraction from this location is the highest priority.'

Styer ignored her. 'I want the heart torn out of the enemy,' he said to Gared. He hefted his daemon hammer. 'Give our strength the speed we require.'

Gared nodded. As he concentrated, he heard Styer order the mortals to hold their positions. The justicar then divided the squad in two and called for a forked advance down the hill. Gared reached out, expanding his consciousness to envelop the totality of the squad. His awareness became a collectivity. What his brothers saw and heard and felt, so did he. The influx of information did not overwhelm him, because their responses were his as well. Through him, the squad achieved full situational awareness.

The Grey Knights charged forward from the vault. They were a hurricane. Their speed was the wind. Their reflexes were the lightning. The battlefield unfolded before Gared's consciousness like a regicide board. He and his brothers had all the time they needed to react to each threat, to evade each shot and blow, and to bring destruction to the orks.

In Styer's combat squad, Gared closed with a cluster of orks. They moved as if in a quagmire, laughable in their sluggishness. He swung his sword. Its blade crackled as it decapitated one ork. He brought the sword back and killed another before the first gun was pointed his way. The recoil of his wrist bolter jolted along his arm as he blasted two more greenskins into oblivion.

Forward. Like a storm. Like thought. The speed of instinct, the fury of faith. The orks fell before them, scythed. In less than a minute, the two groups of Grey Knights were more than half way to the downslope wall. They carved a pair of furrows into the orks. The greenskins howled frustration and rage, and converged on the threat. Their advance toward the defenders of the mausoleum ceased. The struggle became a whirlpool in the centre of the graveyard. The orks poured into the vortex, and the Space Marines took them apart as fast as they arrived. The frenzy was no more than a series of still lifes for Gared. Each kill, each explosion of blood and bone, each grinding fusing of metal and flesh was distinct. The orks saw a whirl of ceramite and metal and energy discharges.

Gared and his brothers saw a series of targets offering themselves up for the slaughter.

The Grey Knights obliged.

The greenskin numbers thinned even more. The enemy's ferocity meant nothing. Gared felt the tide of battle tilt toward the inevitability of victory. The battle was not over. Much blood would yet be shed. But the end was known. There was nothing this force of orks could do.

In the small portion of Gared's awareness that was not consumed by the flood of impulses and reactions to the struggle, a hope sparked. It was the hope that a decisive victory here was the action this mission required. Squire's Rest itself was lost. It would take a massive Imperial effort to repel the orks, and there were other, more vital worlds in the Sanctus Reach where those operations were concentrated. But if this one spot could be saved, if only for a time, perhaps that would be enough to defeat the machinations of Chaos.

The hope was not for ease of battle. The hope was for the confirmation of the prognostication, and the erasure of doubts.

He plunged his force sword through the chest of a chainaxe wielding ork. To his right, Styer's hammer came down on the head of a brute whose limbs were as thick as the arms of Terminator armour. The skull exploded. And for a moment, the way forward was clear. In that direction, for a drop of time, there were no orks.

In his accelerated state, the moment expanded. The clarity became more than spatial. In that moment, it wasn't just the ork lines he broke through. His strength pierced their psychic interference. He grasped a single fragment of knowledge, a crystalline intuition as fine as it was narrow. He saw himself in battle again, and his attacks were magnified. His identity was a composite one, his body giving motion and force to a much larger one. He did not know what he was fighting, but he recognised the sensations he was experiencing. He knew *how* he was fighting. He was piloting a Dreadknight.

The moment ended. His consciousness returned to his body and his body alone. The world returned to its normal pace. The orks fought with a growing, desperate anger. Gared tore into them with a bitter taste in his mouth, and an even more bitter knowledge in his heart.

His hope had been a lie. The war would not end here. It was going to get worse.

And then, from the *Tyndaris*, Shipmaster Saalfrank's voice came over the vox. 'Lords,' he said, 'an ork vessel, designation *kroozer*, is approaching Squire's

Rest.'

Much worse.



CHAPTER FOUR

PREDATOR

Montgelas ordered the magnification of the oculus reduced. As Furia watched, the kroozer's size diminished. But not by much.

Another chance, another temptation. The *Scouring Light* was no match for the monster that entered the orbit of Squire's Rest, and it was at anchor between the ork vessel and the *Tyndaris*. Furia could return to the strike cruiser, engage in battle, and leave the sloop to its fate. It might survive. It likely would not. Orbiana's project, whatever it was, would perish. The death of the ship's crew was regrettable, but she had had to make colder decisions in the past.

Duty, discipline and caution pushed her away from that move. The situation had too many unknowns. If it became necessary to destroy the *Scouring Light*, it would be done on her orders, and by Imperial hands. She could not pre-emptively assume Orbiana's heresy. The reasons that made her spare Andoval applied again.

'Open a channel with the *Tyndaris*,' she ordered Montgelas.

He did not hesitate. In the context of the approaching battle, he deferred to her authority without question.

'Your orders, inquisitor?' Saalfrank asked.

'Draw the enemy's attention. Then kill it.'

'I shall. My thanks for this honour.'

'Shipmaster Montgelas,' Furia continued. 'Hold fire. As soon as the *Tyndaris* begins its action, take us lower. Evasive action until the ork vessel has

committed itself.'

'Understood.'

The kroozer came nearer. It was a hulking, carnivorous mass, the upper and lower halves of the prow split like gaping jaws.

'Why aren't they attacking?' Montgelas said softly.

'They might not know we're here.' As soon as the kroozer's approach had been detected, Furia had ordered both Imperial vessels to run dark. At this distance, on the nightside of Squire's Rest, shadows against the void, they might avoid detection a few minutes longer.

Closer yet. The ship would be an inviting target for the *Tyndaris's* bombardment cannons.

'If they don't see us, why are they here?'

The answer came a moment later. The kroozer's bay doors opened, unleashing an unending stream of landers and drop-ships.

'They've come for the fight,' Furia said. The ork hordes would be coming down very close to where the Grey Knights had engaged them. 'Saalfrank!' she called. 'While the doors are open, fire! Fire now!'

The *Tyndaris* unmasked itself with a gigantic broadside assault. The *Scouring Light* began its dive. The war of leviathans began.

The sky above the cemetery darkened. So many ships, so many contrails. A storm was coming, raining iron and flame. Styer looked up once from the killing. He saw what was coming. He turned back to the slaughter.

Under the shadow of the coming doom, the battle was almost done. The orks had rushed the Terminator squads and paid for it. Two unstoppable fists had broken them. Two centres of destruction had formed, the annihilation of the orks spreading outwards while the mortals whittled away at the outer edges of the mob. He and his brothers were mopping up now.

Setting the stage, Styer knew, for the greater battle on its way.

'Justicar,' Orbiana voxed him. 'This is our moment. We must leave.'

'What did you take from the mausoleum?' Styer asked.

'Nothing that concerns the Ordo Malleus, rest assured.'

Yet you refuse to tell me, he thought. 'I do not rest,' he told her. A dozen metres away, three orks sheltered behind a family vault and fired their crude rifles. The bullets would have torn the head off a mortal. They ricocheted off his armour. He trained his storm bolter on the tomb. Stone and ork bodies alike disintegrated under his barrage.

‘I say again, we must leave,’ Orbiana insisted.

‘Not until I am satisfied.’

‘With what?’

He ignored her. He did not answer to demands from the Ordo Xenos, and especially not from a Xanthite. She would get no more information from him than he would from her.

A few minutes later, he killed the last of the orks from the first wave, swinging his hammer through the brute’s chest. The corpse fell in two pulped halves. He turned around, scanning the cemetery, taking in the full situation. The mortals had barely been a factor to begin with, and there were only a few dozen of them left. Many of the graves had been destroyed, reducing the available shelter. The mausoleum still stood, as did the larger vaults in its immediate vicinity. None of his battle-brothers had fallen.

‘This foe is beneath us,’ Vohnum said as the other combat squad reached Styer’s position.

‘Perhaps, but we will soon be beneath them.’ He pointed to the sky. The ork landers were still coming down. The initial landings were taking place out of sight, beyond the shoulder of the slope. Styer judged that most of the ork ships were coming down in Brauner’s fields. The attack would not be long in coming.

Styer turned to Gared. ‘Any new insights, brother?’ he asked.

‘Only that our struggle is just beginning.’

‘That much is clear to us all.’

‘Against more than just orks.’

‘We know that too,’ said Vohnum.

‘But we still have no idea how and why or if the incursion will occur,’ Styer said.

‘It will.’ There was fatalism, but not doubt, in Gared’s tone.

Styer looked back at the mausoleum. ‘Very well. We have no choice anyway but to act on that assumption. But Brother Gared, we have no hope of keeping the cemetery out of ork hands. If the mausoleum has an importance, we need to know what it is, and immediately. Otherwise we should listen to Inquisitor Orbiana and leave.’

‘I will examine the tomb again,’ the Librarian said.

‘Ten minutes,’ said Styer. ‘If you find nothing definitive, we depart.’

‘And if I find something?’

‘We will deny the greenskins their prize.’

The Librarian made the sign of the aquila and headed for the Mehnert tomb.

‘This is going to be a defensive war,’ Vohnum said.

‘It will,’ Styer agreed. He thought for a moment, considering the terrain and its possibilities. ‘But that doesn’t mean beginning from a defensive position.’ He outlined what he had in mind.

Vohnum nodded. If he had any reservations about Styer’s strategy, he was keeping them to himself. ‘It will be hard on the mortals,’ he said.

‘There is nothing easy for them this day. I will speak to them, though. They should know what to expect. Make ready in the meantime.’

As Styer walked up the slope, he contacted Warheit in the *Harrower*. ‘The orks have only one possible approach, unless aircraft are involved.’

‘I understand, brother-justicar. They will not find the passage an easy one.’

Orbiana met him before he reached the clusters of battered mortals. ‘This delay is foolish,’ she said. ‘There is no reason to remain here.’

‘You are wrong,’ Styer said. ‘I have reasons. As you pointed out, the duties of the Ordo Xenos and the Ordo Malleus are different.’

‘There is nothing I can say to convince you of the foolishness of this course of action?’

‘Will you tell me what you were looking for? No? Then I have a campaign to prepare.’ He stepped away from her.

‘Justicar,’ she called, ‘if your decision is based on displeasure with my necessary silence, then that is a poor reason to pursue an unwinnable war. It is a mistake.’

Styer stopped and looked back at her. ‘The mistake is yours. We are facing a danger more pernicious than an ork invasion at these coordinates. It is my sacred mission to confront that danger.’ His doubts were no concern of hers. And they did not change the dictates of his duty. ‘If you have nothing constructive to contribute, inquisitor, then your views on this mission are irrelevant.’

He left her, and walked on until he stood before the mortals. What was left of their force – a bit more than twenty souls – was bloodied. There was a better distribution of arms than there had been earlier, though. They had retrieved rifles from the hands of the fallen. Styer was looking at an assembly of the aged and worn-out. But these men and women were also veterans of the Imperial Guard. Their lives, their bodies, and their souls had been shaped by unflinching service. Physically, they were the weakest combat force Styer had ever seen. He had no choice but to admire their spirit, and to grant them his respect. He had taken the time to learn the names of their two leaders. He could grant them one more thing: the chance of a good death. That was no small thing.

They had all been watching the sky, which was still clawed with the marks of the greater invasion's arrival. Now their eyes turned to Styer. They already knew their fate. They were waiting for him to give it purpose. 'This day draws to an end,' he said.

'Along with Squire's Rest,' said Stumar. Her tone was not bitter or disrespectful. She was merely speaking the truth.

Styer nodded. 'That is so.'

'Are you standing with us, lord?' The speaker was an old woman. She wore a blood-soaked strip of cloth as a patch over her left eye. Next to her was a man the same age. His right arm was missing below the elbow. He held on to his rifle with his left hand. He held his posture erect with exhausted dignity. He looked at Styer with the same intensity of hope as the woman.

They all did.

He saw in them the strength of honour. So he gave them the honour of the truth. 'The next minutes will determine the course of our mission,' he said. 'If we are still here, then we are not standing with you. It is you who are standing with us. And for that, you have my thanks.'

In the wake of his words, a shadow flickered over their faces. That was the realisation that death was coming this day, and that to hope otherwise was to believe in a lie. Then the shadow was banished by the adamantine will to fight that had brought them through all their other battles to this final one.

Klas Brauner said, 'Then we're fortunate to have seen this day.'

Styer told them what would happen. They showed no fear. By the end, they looked almost eager. As he left them to rejoin the squad, he experienced a moment of pity. It puzzled him. The colonists of Squire's Rest were going to a warrior's death in the service of the Emperor. There was nothing to be pitied about that.

He realised that he was listening to his own doubts. The mortals' fate had been sealed the moment the first orks had made planetfall. Whether Gared found anything in the tomb or not would change nothing except the particular circumstances of their deaths. But if the prognostication was in error, then this battle was pointless. It was Styer's anger at the possibility of futility that was making him pity the mortals.

He squashed the emotion. He walked downhill to prepare for Gared's news, and for the arrival of the full strength of the orks.

Gared examined the sarcophagus. He confirmed his earlier impression: Orbiana

had not opened it. He did not believe in unnecessary profanation, but the choices were running out. Before he took that step, he looked at the relics one more time. In the north of the chamber's perimeter, in a direct line with the head of the sarcophagus, one of the trophies was an iron crown. The work was orkish. The object was massive, crude, a vulgar exaltation of violence. It was itself a collection of trophies, adorned with objects captured from the worlds conquered by the warlord who had worn the crown. Some of the objects were valuable, others were mundane. There were even some fingers – human, tau and eldar – embedded in the leaves of the crown, cast in iron. Gared surmised they had been torn from the hands of defeated commanders. The dust on the shelf where the crown rested had been disturbed. Gared picked up the trophy. He turned it around. On one of the leaves that had been facing the wall, there was a circular depression, about the size of a purity seal. Something had been removed.

Orbiana's prize, Gared thought. He had an idea of its shape and dimensions now, but not its nature. Still, an object prized from a relic of clear xenos origin was well within the purview the inquisitor's ordo. There was no connection that he could see to the prognostication.

He returned to the sarcophagus. He raised the lid. When the seal broke, there was an exhalation of air, a funereal gasp. There was no coffin within. The skeleton of Major-General Luter Mehnert did not lie as it had been arranged by the mourners. Instead of stretched out with its arms folded in the sign of the aquila, it was curled in a ball. Its spine was bent into a circle. Bent backwards. The back of the skull touched the heels. The arms were splayed, the fingers touching the sides of the sarcophagus as if the corpse had been clawing at the stone.

Had Mehnert been interred alive? That seemed unlikely. But so did a post-mortem twisting of the body into this agonised position.

He looked closely at the inner marble walls. There were no scratches.

The distortion of the body went beyond its position. Every joint, down to the individual knuckles, bent the wrong way. The bones themselves were twisted. The malformation was most visible in the femurs and other long bones, but Gared could see that even the skull had been reshaped.

There was a ring on the third finger of the right hand. Gared picked up the metacarpal. The jewel was oval. It appeared to be onyx. It was carved with minute hexagrammic sigils. Either its band had constricted, or the bone had swollen, because the ring was fusing with the finger. When Gared tried to separate them, ring and bone shattered, dust and glass.

There was another exhalation. This time it was not air that stirred, but reality. Until this moment, the mausoleum had been free of taint. When the ring disintegrated, the attack began. Beneath the sarcophagus, something was stabbing upward. It was a synaesthetic putrefaction. Touch and sight and hearing and smell and taste all began to rot. The thing was near, it was eager, and it was hungry.

‘Brother-justicar,’ Gared voxed. ‘The incursion is here.’

‘Do you require assistance?’

‘Not yet.’ The assault was debased, but its strength was limited. ‘I think I can contain it,’ he said. ‘But I will need a bit more time.’

‘Understood. Fight well, brother.’

The sense that the threat had a spatial location directly below the sarcophagus was powerful. Gared fired his storm bolter at the bottom of the tomb. Marble shattered into powder. The shells punched through the floor of the mausoleum and into a void. The hunger was an emptiness, a nothing that swirled with the desire to *be*, and the venomous potential to drag the real into the maw of the inchoate. Gared looked into the ravenous void, and it shot up for him. It was a narrow vortex, a warp tendril in the shape of a funnel.

It surrounded him.

In the gathering dusk, the *Harrower* pounded the ridge, savaging the orks with cannon and rocket. It reaped casualties by the hundreds. The greenskins were packed shoulder to shoulder as they raced up the slope. Every blow that Warheit struck killed scores of them. But their numbers were so great, it would have taken a tectonic upheaval, a lava flow covering the entire slope, to stop them. Styer doubted that Warheit had even managed to slow the charge much. He had simply ensured that the numbers that descended on the cemetery were a little thinner.

Behind the infantry came more tanks. The gunship’s attacks shifted to the vehicles, and the ork foot soldiers rushed past. The *Harrower* couldn’t take out all the Battlewagons, nor could it kill all the clumsy, mad walkers, blasphemous imitations of Dreadnoughts, that had also joined the fray.

The orks hit the cemetery as a roaring wave. The wall fell before them, blasted apart by the guns of the walkers and Battlewagons. The tide flowed down the dip, then up the slope as it rose again. The only opposition was the weak fire from the humans at the mausoleum.

Styer waited until the cemetery was full of the enemy. He waited until the

forward elements of the orks had engaged with the settlers and the more fanged resistance of Orbiana's force. He let the orks believe this was the fight they had heard about and that had called them to this planet. He did not give them time to be disappointed. And when the attention of the horde was focussed on the knot of resistance in the upper reaches of the graveyard, he struck.

Styer had split the squad into two trios. They hit simultaneously, charging out from behind vaults close to the north and south walls. Six Adeptus Astartes counterattacked against the orks' thousands. The number was small. For any other force, the idea that six warriors could mount a pincer attack would have been ludicrous. But they were six Grey Knights. And so when they hit the orks' flanks, the blow was meaningful. It plunged deep. It drew blood.

The orks did not react with fear, but they were startled, and Styer took some satisfaction in seeing the fanged jaws gape in surprise. *Isn't this what you wanted?* he thought. *Weren't you hoping for a fight? Here it is.* He ran forward, crushing limbs with the mass and speed of his armour, and swung his daemon hammer in a wide arc before him, simultaneously fired his storm bolter. He was a wave of death cutting across the wave of the orks, a wave whose power was amplified by the actions of his brothers behind him, and by Vohnum leading the attack from the other side.

Vohnum was right. The orks were an enemy that was beneath the sacred calling of the Grey Knights. Yet he felt in no way diminished by this battle. He took pride in the death of this foe. For their crimes against the Imperium and the supremacy of man, the greenskins deserved extermination, and he was pleased to carry out the judgement.

His hammer coruscated with its rage. He was coated in xenos blood within seconds. Skulls erupted before him. And the orks reacted in disorder.

The forward ranks became aware of the conflict behind them. Some of them continued to advance into the fire of the settlers. Others turned back to answer the new threat. Downward of the pincer movement, the orks roared with anger and rushed forward to counterattack. They reduced their own freedom of movement by crowding in too close.

They sought their battle. They found it. And their bloodlust stopped their advance. The graveyard became a cauldron of violence.

Gared had his minutes. Styer hoped he would use them well.

The *Tyndaris's* broadside lit up the lower hull of the kroozer. Flames billowed out of the bays. Furia saw the great ship shudder as the *Scouring Light* passed

beneath it. For such a movement to occur, as deep and powerful as an earthquake, the damage must have been catastrophic. The fires continued to grow after the initial barrage. The ship's nose rose. It pulled up from Squire's Rest. There were no further drop-ship launches. She doubted whether cutting off the ork reinforcements would make a difference at this point to the Imperial forces below, but first blood had been drawn in the void war, and the kroozer's wound was not closing.

The ork monster picked up momentum. It was heading for the *Tyndaris*. Furia watched the images on the pict screens looking aft. The strike cruiser was manoeuvring too. Two giants engaged in a glacial game, a slow race for the position from which to deliver the killing blow.

'Are they going to ram?' Montgelas wondered.

'Perhaps,' Furia said softly. The kroozer's speed was increasing markedly. Its engines were firing with reckless fury. Its attack was a brutal charge, a madness. The *Tyndaris* was accelerating too as it sought to evade, but Furia wasn't sure if it would be fast enough. She almost voxed Saalfrank to urge him to greater speed. She held herself back. He was well aware of the threat.

The strike cruiser unleashed another volley. Cannons and torpedoes hit the nose of the kroozer. The ork ship drove through the sear of the explosions, the excess of shielding on its bow absorbing the damage. It returned fire now. Its forward cannons opened up. They hurled a storm of metal at the *Tyndaris*. The ordnance was not shaped shells. It was scrap metal, hundreds of tonnes in mass, hurled at such speed that it did not need to be any kind of explosive to kill its target. There was no accuracy to the bombardment. There was overwhelming quantity instead. At long range, the wild abandon of the kroozer's fire was far less of a threat. At close range, it mauled.

The pict technician adjusted the magnification without being asked. Furia saw impact craters pepper its port flank. There were flashes too, bright enough to turn the displays to snow for several seconds. The orks were using plasma bombs. Some of them detonated in the void between the ships. Furia spotted at least two blooms on the kroozer itself, the guns immolating themselves as the bombs detonated at launch. But others reached the *Tyndaris*. One was too many. The hits were devastating. Gasses vented along the vessel's hull. Her corridors, Furia knew, would be burning, while others would be dead, exposed to the void.

But the engines burned still. The *Tyndaris* continued to pull away from the kroozer's path. She struck again. This time, the immense cannon shells hit in the junction between the upper and lower jaw shapes of the kroozer. The shields

were not as thick there. The monster shuddered again. Furia saw an angry glow begin in its forward third. It spread, as if a furnace had ignited in the belly of the ship. The *Tyndaris*'s torpedoes hit in the same vicinity. The glow brightened. More flames gouted from the kroozer, some bursting out far from the impact points.

The bleeding was internal now.

The kroozer's wounds were mortal. Furia was sure of it. And it had committed to its charge against the *Tyndaris*. 'Fire at will, shipmaster,' she said to Montgelas. 'Target the enemy's engines.'

The sloop's plasma batteries and laser cannons were trivial beside the armament of the kroozer and the *Tyndaris*. Furia hoped they would tip the balance. She hoped they would cause just that much more damage than the ork ship could manage, or at least slow it down enough for the *Tyndaris* to clear its path.

She was rewarded by an ugly, void-tearing flash in the upper reaches of the kroozer's aft. The glow of its exhaust dimmed. Its acceleration slowed.

Even with the holocaust that must be consuming its interior, the kroozer continued to fire. Furia pictured a crew so consumed by the frenzy of war that it had no thought for self-preservation. There was something to envy in that single-minded hunger for the enemy's blood. The catapulted masses of wreckage slammed into the *Tyndaris*. The flashes of the void shields built on each other, and the strikes overwhelmed them with numbers. The stern was hit, and hit again, and again. Furia winced when she saw an explosion in the superstructure, very near the bridge. Saalfrank's stream of reports stuttered, but he did not break vox-contact. He kept updating Furia between barked orders to his crew, as if the calm with which he addressed the inquisitor was his own means to preserving a cool head.

'You need to go faster, shipmaster,' Furia said. She told him what he already knew as if by her will alone he might coax a bit more speed out of the battered ship.

'True,' Saalfrank said.

His voice was calm, fatalistic, and Furia knew that he had already ordered the impossible.

The *Tyndaris* shuddered too. Along her length were huge gouges. Furia could see entire sectors burning. The casualties must have been in the thousands. But the batteries kept firing, and the ship kept moving, pulling away from the angle of the kroozer's approach.

Furia allowed herself the rare luxury of hope.

Then the wounded predator sensed its target escaping. The kroozer altered its course. Though the movement was barely perceptible in a vessel so vast, it was faster than should have been possible, and Furia saw it. The shift of a few degrees was all it took to make a mockery of her hope.

The distance between the leviathans shrank. The inevitable loomed. The exchange of bombardments lit the void with an ecstasy of fire. The flank of the *Tyndaris* and the bow of the kroozer flashed with the rage of wounds given and received. Huge fissures, intimations of a volcanic eruption, opened up the length of the kroozer's hull. Furia had to fight to banish the impression that she heard the roar of a beast as the dying ship made its final run. But of course there was no sound.

Neither was there sound when the kroozer's battering ram bow slammed into the stern of the *Tyndaris*.



CHAPTER FIVE

SCORCHED EARTH

The two units of Grey Knights met in the centre of the cemetery. For a moment, the ork force was cut in half. Then the horde fused into one again. It continued to expand. Styer had slowed its advance, but he knew that the orks would still close in on the mausoleum by dint of growing numbers if nothing else. They would gain ground even if they weren't conscious of doing so.

His squad formed a tight circle and lashed out, Nemesis weapons and storm bolters tearing the near ranks of the orks apart.

'Move downslope,' Styer ordered. He smashed the head of his daemon hammer through a greenskin's helmet and its skull. He didn't even feel the resistance of metal and bone. 'We'll draw them away from the mausoleum for as long as we can.'

He was facing west, towards the dip, as he spoke. The squad's position was level with the crest of the shoulder. Warheit was still pounding the heavy armour. A Battlewagon tried to get past his barrage by speed alone. It failed. Warheit punished its presumption with heavy bolter shells. It exploded, still moving fast, as it passed the crest. The blast was huge, all its fuel and ordnance going off at once. It flipped end over end, a rolling fireball that flattened and burned everything in its path before it halted at the shattered cemetery wall. Flaming promethium spread out from the wreckage, incinerating ork foot soldiers.

But the orks kept coming. The more the Grey Knights sent to their deaths, the more rushed forward, drawn by the intoxication of war. And the battle grew

fiercer. The common infantry were beneath Styer's notice. The Aegis armour ignored their weapons. His blows passed through their bodies like air. But the larger orks had stronger weapons, and their armour stood up to far more punishment. Everything the orks threw at his squad was crude. It was almost insulting to be faced with such grotesque distortions of the craft of war. But there was brute power here too. It would be a mistake for him to underestimate the orks.

He would smash them all the same, for Gared needed to complete his task.

A monster came at him. It was a full head taller than he was, and its shoulders were broader than his armour. Its own armour was driven by pistons, and belched black smoke. It swung a power fist at him with surprising speed. Styer parried the worst of the blow with his hammer. It still knocked him down hard enough to crater the ground. The ork reared over him and raised its fist high. He fired the storm bolter at the fist. The shells blasted the weapon backwards, too far. The ork's armour accommodated the motion, but the beast's arm did not. Its shoulder dislocated and the limb dropped. The sudden dead weight hauled the ork off balance and it stumbled to Styer's left. He rose to his feet, propelling himself upward with the hammer. He turned the momentum into a step forward, grounding himself and bringing the hammer around with the force of all his mass behind it. The head flashed with psychic anger, as if the weapon itself were outraged by the existence of the ork. Styer hit the greenskin's chest plate. The metal shattered into jagged shards that drove deep into the brute's torso. The ork stumbled backwards, its entire midsection distorted from the blow, internal organs crushed, broken ribs poking through flesh, blood cascading down its legs. The fire in its eyes dimmed as if fell, dead, but the rage lingered on its features.

'Deff Dreads,' Borsam said as Styer moved back into formation. He used the term that had entered the Gothic tongue to designate the particular obscenity of these ork creations. It was a name of contempt. It would have been an act of sacrilege to refer to them as Dreadnoughts. They were grotesque deformations of those sacred warriors. But they could not be dismissed.

They were coming down the shoulder. Warheit had killed two, but he was engaged with another Battlewagon. There were too many of them for the gunship to stop. Five of them were coming, rocking side to side with every step, mechanical arms stretching forward with shears and saw. Three had guns on either side of their cylindrical bodies were already firing, cutting down the orks before them, digging a furrow through flesh to reach the Grey Knights. The two in the centre had some sort of energy blaster on one side, a rocket launcher on

the other. They were monsters of greenskin war, and they were lethal.

A missile flew towards the squad. It fell short, sending up a geyser of earth and body parts a few metres in front of the Grey Knights.

Opportunity, Styer thought. 'Rush them,' he ordered, and the squad plunged into the veil of bloody dust.

He and his brothers were fighting for mere seconds now. And there was still no contact from Gared.

The Grey Knights came out the other side of the debris cloud. They had a clear run toward the Deff Dreads. The terrain between them was churned gravestones and ork bodies. The ork walkers tried to adjust their range. Their accuracy was still off. Explosions surrounded Styer. Heavy calibre rounds chewed up the ground. Something hit his left pauldron, with enough force to jerk his torso. Damage reports appeared on his retinal lenses. Outraged by the profanation of his armour, he ran faster, shaking the earth with his steps.

'Low and fast,' he said, and hunched into his charge.

The Grey Knights came in under the Deff Dreads' fire. They shot back with storm bolters, aiming for the viewing slits near the top of the bodies. The armour, primitive but massive, repelled the shells, but the explosive impacts blinded the occupants. The walkers' response was wilder, more inaccurate. On Styer's left, Borsam struck home, shooting through the slit of one of the lead monsters. The Deff Dread convulsed with the pilot's death throes. The body tilted forward. It fired its rocket just before it fell. The missile detonated against Borsam's chestplate. The explosion knocked Styer to his knees.

He was up again in the instant. Borsam's rune started flashing red in his auto-senses. Still moving forward, Styer risked a glance in his brother's direction. Borsam was down, slumped over the prone walker. His armour was smoking. But he was moving, struggling to push himself up with his arms.

Borsam might yet live. But for him to have a chance, the immediate battle had to be won. There could be no stopping to aid him now.

'Hold fast, brother,' Styer voxed.

As he spoke, two Deff Dreads close on him. They turned, away from his brothers' fire, and reached for him with arms that could tear a Chimera open. They were unmoved by the bolter shells battering their sides. Styer ducked beneath a snapping shear. Its jaws snapped together with such force that he could believe it would have decapitated him. Sensing the second attack from the rear, he turned and threw himself at the foe, leaping upward. The arms flailed, trying to stop him. He landed on the flat top of the Deff Dread. The other trained its fire

on him. He withstood the blows and raised the daemon hammer high. To his left and right, his brothers were locked in battle with the other walkers. Another rocket strike, one well-placed blow, and the balance could turn against them. They had snatched the momentum of the struggle through speed, but in sheer destructive power, the Deff Dreads were their superiors.

At the crest of the hill, more of the monsters appeared, accompanied by two Battlewagons.

Victory was impossible. Annihilation was imminent.

Defeat was sacrilege. Styer refused it.

The psychic force of his brothers flowed through him. They were linked as a unit, a synchronised force that was greater than the sum of its superhuman parts. And the justicar was the nexus of the fusion, the fulcrum of the squad's power. He drew on that power now. A lightning storm flashed along the length of the hammer. He was more than Styer as he brought it down. He was all of his brothers. He was *the* Grey Knight. He struck the Deff Dread with the force of the Emperor's justice itself.

Thunder tore the air. Light blasted apart the evening's gloom, and it did not dissipate. It arced between the two walkers. The hammer blow smashed the upper portion of the Styer's prey. He compacted the armour, crushed the ork inside, and ruptured its power plant. Its launcher fired a rocket at its brother. The energy weapons of both walkers overloaded. They exploded like solar flares. And the energy was still building, out of control, the next event unstoppable. Styer leapt again, away from the stricken Deff Dread. The squad, as one, retreated. Vohnum grabbed Borsam and hauled him back. They dropped flat as it came: the great explosion of both power plants. Day returned to the graveyard. The Deff Dreads vanished. The other three were crippled by the blast, limbs blasted off. They fell. They were raging, weaponised tombs.

The crackling, burning day faded. For a dozen metres in every direction, the ork infantry had been decimated. The survivors were injured, stunned, unable to mount an assault. The Grey Knights rose, surrounded by a blackened wasteland.

But this was no victory. It was the gain of a few paltry seconds. Ahead came the next line of ork heavy armour. A Battlewagon fired its big gun. The shell shrieked past Styer.

He felt a new crater form behind him.

A very few seconds. There would be no more.

And still there was no word from Gared.

‘Cease fire,’ said Furia.

‘Inquisitor?’ Montgelas asked.

‘The enemy ship’s engines have stopped.’ She pointed at the pict screen. The flare from kroozer’s stern had died. The ship still glowed, though. The veins of fire pulsed the length and breadth of its hull. The enormous hulk looked almost fragile, on the verge of flying apart from internal pressure. If it did, it would take the *Tyndaris* with it. Furia said, ‘I won’t take the chance of a triggering a chain reaction.’

The bow of the kroozer was embedded in the *Tyndaris*’s flank like a Cretacian saurian with its jaws locked on its prey. Its guns had fallen silent. Perhaps, Furia thought, ramming the strike cruiser had been the ork ship’s final act. Though its body was still dangerous, was its crew dead?

The *Tyndaris*’s cannons still fired, but with more deliberation. The bombardments were aimed at the bow of the kroozer, not far from where it was fused with the *Tyndaris*’s hull.

‘They’re trying to dislodge it?’ said Montgelas.

‘Yes.’

‘They could trigger a catastrophic—’

Furia cut him off. ‘There is no choice.’ Then, disgusted by the necessity of the move, she said, ‘Shipmaster, withdraw this ship to a safe distance.’

The stricken *Tyndaris* fired again, and again, beating away at the corpse of the predator. The glow from the kroozer became uglier, the fissures longer. Furia braced herself for a detonation that would destroy both vessels.

The warp tendril was diseased. It *was* disease. When it took Gared, he fell into infinite depths. He knew that his sense of plummeting was a lie because there was no gravity in the warp – no up, no down, and no true *space* at all. But his consciousness experienced a plunge. It was the pull of the malevolence in the warp. Writhing intelligences and ravenous impulses clutched at him. Things that were still hungers, but on the verge of breaking into pestilent existence clutched at him. Tendrils within the tendril wrapped themselves around him, a falseness with powers beyond the real, driven to spread its contagion.

And the hunger was rotten, infected. What sought entrance to the materium would be an embodied volition of illness and rot. It was very close to finding a shape whose consolidation would mean decay for all it touched. Close enough to hold him, and as in the act of grasping, it gave itself definition. The tendrils became the possibility of hands.

Gared fought back. He centred his awareness in the reality of his identity, and of the material reality of his body. He reinforced his psychic shield against the assaults, and gathered his strength, weaving it into a counterattack. The assault he was weathering exposed the nature of the enemy. Knowing its desire gave him a target, and his strike a deadly precision.

Disease pressed harder around him. It tried to pry apart his armour. It tried to be inside his bones. He held it at bay. He completed the weaving. The non-space that held him broke out in pustules. Something began to babble. It was not yet a voice. It was a liquid, idiot gargle, fumbling toward words of decomposition.

Gared struck. His weapon was a great severing. It was a psychic guillotine blade, slicing through the tendril, cutting it off from the source of its power and the greater sentience beyond. The tendril convulsed. It exploded with a corruption of intensity. With its ebbing will, it stabbed into Gared's skull. The blow felt like the point of a dagger, one that was rusted and caked with putrefaction. He took the pain and refused the thing entry to his mind. It howled, mindless and frustrated. The howl was torn from no throat and many, and then the potential collapsed. The root of the tendril found no purchase, nothing to devour except its own pseudo-being. Its purchase on the materium and on Gared fell away.

He had the sensation of a final, murderous, gurgling snarl, and he was back in the materium. He was crouched beside the ruins of the sarcophagus. It had crumbled, the marble eaten away as if it had turned into sponge. There fragments were covered by a sheen of slime. The bottom of the grave had vanished. Below was a bottomless darkness. The sides of the shaft were stone, the bedrock of the hillside. It had been reshaped. There were patterns in it, descending as far as Gared could see into the gloom. They had something in common with engravings, but there was something what went much deeper. The stone had flowed, become flesh and been twisted, and now it was a language without words or alphabet, a perpetual spell. A summoning.

But as he stared at the ruinous shapes, and felt the fading heat of transformation, Gared understood that he had not revealed the obscenity by blasting through the sarcophagus.

He had called it into being.

‘Shipmaster Saalfrank,’ Furia voxed, ‘do you understand the risks of what you are attempting.’

‘I do, inquisitor.’ His voice was that of a man who was surrounded by nothing

but bad situations and worse choices.

The guns of the *Tyndaris* continued to beat the kroozer. The *Scouring Light* had retreated to a point just before the curvature of Squire's Rest would have hidden the other ships from view. Montgelas had brought the sloop around so it would be in a position for a quick return. The oculus was filled by the image of the strike cruiser's attempt to break free of the toxic wreck.

'What is the state of your engines?' Furia asked Saalfrank.

'Inoperative.'

Without motive power, what Saalfrank was attempting had an even greater chance of disaster. The *Tyndaris* would not be able to pull away even if the two vessels were parted.

Furia did not reply to the shipmaster. She watched the pict screens. The auspex scan could say nothing of use about the kroozer. Its construction and capabilities, even in its death, were too alien to understand. So she watched. She watched the shells hit. The pict resolution was insufficient to show her the damage being done to the bow's armour. She watched the spread of the fissures. She watched the intensification of the glow. She watched for the inevitable.

And then, to her surprise, she watched the rebirth of hope as the hulk at last released the *Tyndaris*. The two ships parted. The movement was slow enough to be the floating of continental plates, but it was steady. The force that had dislodged the kroozer had given it momentum. The space between the vessels grew from sliver to gap.

'Holding fire,' Saalfrank voxed.

Furia's eyes moved back and forth between the damaged ship and the dying one. She wished the *Scouring Light* could move closer to assist, and provide her with a clearer idea of the extent of the damage to the *Tyndaris*.

Montgelas had the same thought. 'Inquisitor,' he began, 'we should approach. We should be providing aid.'

'What aid would you give?' Furia snapped. 'Subjecting both our vessels to catastrophic damage? Hold this position, shipmaster.'

The kroozer continued to move away. There was malevolence in its slow drift, as if the ship were revelling in the threat of its death. The fissures became a web of jagged fire over the hull. The greatest concentration of wounds and intensity of light was around the engines. Furia looked back and forth between the kroozer and the *Tyndaris*. She measured the speed of their separation and the spread of damage on the ork vessel. She foresaw the inevitable.

She came close to predicting the very moment of the blast.

The orks' plasma reactors went critical. The aft of the kroozer bulged, and then gave birth to a sun. For a brief second, the forward half of the kroozer was visible in silhouette. Its broken jaws looked like they were laughing. Then it vanished in the killing light.

The shockwave raced through the close orbit of Squire's Rest.

A great flame washed over the *Tyndaris*.

The end of shelter had come. The Grey Knights had centred the orks' attention on themselves, and that had meant a few more moments of life for the settlers around the mausoleum. But the ork numbers had swollen to the point where any diversion mattered. The greenskins filled the cemetery. Most of them were clambering over each other in the effort to reach and kill the Space Marines. Most of them. The others were a horde of their own. They surrounded the mausoleum. They rampaged around vaults and gravestones, and the settlers who were slow to retreat to the mausoleum itself were slaughtered. The battles were more than close quarters now. They were point blank. The orks cut their prey down with blades, chainaxes and power claws. Brauner's comrades were being annihilated, their bodies hacked and smashed to boneless, unrecognizable pulp.

But they had held the mausoleum. And they were still holding.

The remaining force was a tight cluster around the tomb's entrance. There were enough guns to lay down a constant barrage of las. In the centre of the forward rank was Orbiana. Only two of her acolytes were still alive, but her xenos weapon carved the orks who rushed her out of existence. And still the orks came in such strength and fury that weapon fire wasn't enough. Some would reach the defenders, and the battles then became hand to hand. The human concentration of force gave them the edge to delay the end.

Brauner knew the delay was measured now in moments. The end they had all foreseen was upon them. And as he fought, as he killed, as he expected his own death from second to the next, he rejoiced. The veterans of Squire's Rest were dying. In this spot, and everywhere else on the planet, their last, hopeless stand had begun. But the Emperor had sent a gift to him and Stumar and the men and women who were dying with them. Brauner had known the end was here, and he had known he would fight until he met it. His death would be ugly. His body would have no burial. Xenos brutes would trample his remains into the mud. But that fate had been written when the first contrails had cut across the sky. His death would also have glory. His fight had meaning.

When he had retired from the Cadian Shock Troops, he had told himself that

war was done with him, and that he was glad of it. But in recent years, as his body slowed, and its pains had gone from occasional to chronic, and sleep had receded from his grasp, he had faced the spectre of slow, inconsequential death, and it had troubled him.

So he was grinning now.

He should thank the orks. And he did. With las and blade.

The green tide pressed closer. An ork launched for him, jaws gaping. He shot it through its mouth. Twice. Its throat seared and closed by las, it collapsed, gaping for air gone forever. Another grabbed the barrel of his gun and yanked up. He held on. It leaned over him, metal plates beneath its jaw and on its shoulders absorbing the shots of Brauner's comrades. Before it could strike him with the axe in its other hand, Stumar slipped between them and ran it through the eye with her sword. Her blade stuck in its skull. The greenskin fell hard, snapping the blade off. It snapped Stumar's wrist too. She grunted and stepped back into the ranks.

Brauner exchanged a look with her as she brushed past him. He saw his feral gratitude mirrored in her face. Her features were pinched in agony. They glowed with zeal.

The grand death.

He smelled smoke. Fire approached. The flamer orks again. Their fellows scattered before their indiscriminate streams of burning fuel. Those not fast enough became howling, charging torches. They ran into the defenders. Fire sprayed over the defenders' formation.

The order broke down.

'Inside!' Orbiana shouted. She raised an arm up, protecting her head as the flames washed over her armour. She retaliated with her gun. The ork's promethium tanks exploded. More came behind it. The flames came in a torrent. The air was thick with the stench of burning flesh.

Brauner was one of the last in behind Orbiana. So few of them left now, though it was still crowded in the mausoleum's entrance corridor. It was hard to shoot out.

Almost over now, Brauner thought. Nowhere left to retreat. The final seconds of the final stand.

A huge presence rushed forward from inside the tomb. Brauner didn't turn, but he could feel the impact of the Grey Knights Librarian like the blow of a physical shadow. He dropped to the ground. A terrible force was coming. Even Orbiana threw herself to one side of the corridor.

Outside, a bit behind and above the first ranks of the orks, the night screamed. It twisted itself into a spiral. The spiral became a vortex, and the vortex was a wound, a howling maw in the real. Brauner tried to look away. He could not. The foundations of his sanity shook.

The realisation that there were beings of such power on this battlefield filled him with religious terror.

The whirlpool of madness seized the orks. It pulled them off the ground and into itself. Grunts and warbosses tumbled into the raging gulf of the immaterium. Energies released by the destruction of rationality lashed out. The ground was wracked by explosions as fuel tanks went up one after another. A wind shrieked over the cemetery. It was a wind that Brauner felt inside his head, and now he did squeeze his eyes shut against the pain and the madness.

A few seconds later, the howl ended. Brauner opened his eyes. The vortex had passed, leaving residual lightning in its wake. The surviving orks in the vicinity were stunned. The relentless beat of the war paused.

Gared strode through the corridor, passed the huddled mortals and out of the mausoleum.

Orbiana followed. 'Did you find what you sought?' Brauner heard her say.

'Yes. We must leave immediately.'

'Good.'

'And destroy this site.'

Brauner didn't hear what Orbiana replied. The orks had recovered. They advanced on Gared, shouting murder at him. He was motionless. A nimbus of energy crackled around him. Brauner had time to fear what awful wonder the Librarian was about to perform now when he received his answer. There was a flash of something that might once have been light, or might yet be. When it faded, it revealed the rest of the Grey Knights. They had materialised just in front of Gared.

Brauner's jaw sagged. He blinked, awed by the feat of teleportation he had witnessed. Then he rose, and ran back out to the war. The mausoleum no longer needed to be defended. Time to meet his end and go down fighting.

Stumar was beside him. As they crossed the threshold, Brauner felt a pang of regret. It was fleeting, because it was an impermissible luxury. It was also sharp as a stiletto. It was the thought of things unsaid, that should have been, and now could never be. He glanced in her direction, but she had already veered to the left and was limping towards the enemy, her good arm and its blade before her.

She disappeared in the resurging tide of the war. He saw her one more time,

bloodied but still fighting, drawing the sword back to stab an armoured greenskin twice her size. He didn't see what happened. His vision was reduced to the immediate need to shoot and stab. The reflexes that had kept him alive this long still served him. The orks were stronger than he was. Many of them were faster. He was more precise. He knew how to move and when.

He just couldn't move as well as he once did. And there were so many. Too many. Even with the Adeptus Astartes here now, the orks were unstoppable. Glancing blows and flesh wounds took their toll. He could no longer see any sort of strategy. The battle became a shattered mosaic. He lived each moment as a jagged fragment of dodging, shooting, blocking and stabbing. He was surrounded by muscle and fury and the undiluted war joy of the orks. He fought, he injured, he killed, and orks fell, but his friends died, and died, and died. He was drenched in so much blood that he didn't know what was his own, or came from his comrades, or his foes. Soon, he knew nothing at all. There was only the struggle, and the pain of the struggle, and surely he would die soon. Surely this would end soon.

Less than five minutes had passed since Gared had emerged from the heart of the mausoleum.

Huge roaring above his head, even louder than the endless howling of the orks. A great, rhythmic hammering of heavy bolters. Explosions. The roaring louder yet. And suddenly the orks near him pulled back. He swung his bayonet at the air. He stumbled forward, blinking. The urgency of combat had released him, and he was confused.

His mind cleared enough for him to focus on objects more than a metre in front of his face. He understood what was happening. The Stormraven had reached their position. It had assisted the Grey Knights in blasting a landing area clear of the enemy. The orks had fallen back to prepare another charge. Brauner heard the rumbles of other engines close by, and he saw the greenskin tanks and walkers pushing their way up the hill, running over infantry and blasting through vaults and stones. The gunship came down fast, the backwash of its engines almost knocking Brauner over. Its nose loading ramp slammed down. The ground vibrated beneath Brauner's feet.

The Grey Knights held the orks at bay for a few more seconds. Orbiana entered the gunship first. No acolytes followed her. They were all gone now. And as the Space Marines boarded the Stormraven, Brauner realised that he saw no other human survivors.

It was suddenly very difficult to hold on to the glory of the battle. To be the

last was a cold honour. He felt alone in a way that he had never experienced, and never imagined. He searched the flame-lit night, but saw nothing but the encroaching green tide. It would no longer be denied. The heavy armour was nearly there. A shell exploded against the other side of the *Harrower*.

The despair he had escaped until now sank its claws into his heart.

The realization of his situation, the search, and the shadow falling across his soul took only a few seconds to come to pass. And then Gared stood before him. The Librarian paused. He looked down at Brauner. His moment of contemplation seemed to last an age. Brauner looked up, meeting his gaze directly. He was amazed to see what looked like pity in Gared's eyes.

'Go aboard,' said the Grey Knight.

Stunned, he did. And when he was strapped into a web harness designed for a being much larger than himself, and the gunship was aloft, he stared through the viewing block, searching for what he knew he would not find. The ground below flashed with the fire of the ork guns. It strobed with the blasts of the cannons, bolters and mindstrike missiles with which the *Harrower* destroyed the mausoleum and whatever it was that Gared had found. The devastation dazzled Brauner's eyes. He could not even make out the ork foot soldiers beyond the boiling of a undifferentiated mass.

If there were any human survivors still fighting, he would never see them. He knew that there were none, and that was a mercy.

And yet...

He recoiled from the thought of Stumar's death. He held tight to his last sight of her: sword raised to strike, fighting as if the orks were the ones doomed to defeat. He had to believe in this image. He had to preserve this memory. It was the only way he could make her live.

It was the only thing he had left.



CHAPTER SIX

THE GREAT WORK

‘Brother-justicar,’ Warheit voxed from the cockpit of the *Harrower*, ‘the damage to the *Tyndaris* is severe.’

Styer looked through the viewing block. The strike cruiser’s shape stood out against the aurora of still-dissipating energy of a massive explosion. The ship was dark. The *Scouring Light* was approaching as well, and it was a brilliant torch in contrast. ‘Are you in contact with Shipmaster Saalfrank?’ Styer asked Warheit.

‘Sporadically. The bridge is intact. Large areas of the ship have lost atmosphere and power. Casualty numbers are high.’

‘Do you have any good news?’

‘Most of the weapons systems are still operational.’

‘Any other ork ships on the way?’ If another kroozer appeared, he would be faced with an unpalatable decision.

‘Not at the moment.’

‘Thank you, brother.’ Styer turned from the viewing block. Gared sat across the compartment from him. The Librarian’s face was grim. It had been since they had left Squire’s Rest. ‘Brother-Epistolary,’ Styer said, ‘do you believe the daemonic threat on Squire’s Rest has been neutralised?’ he asked.

‘I do. The damage we caused was more than enough to destroy the runes I saw.’

‘So Squire’s Rest is lost, but the Ruinous Powers are contained.’

Gared didn't answer.

'Your silence is disturbing,' Styer said.

'It comes from feeling disturbed.'

'Then tell me: in your estimation, have we completed the mission? Has the prognostication been fulfilled?' He did not lower his voice. He saw that the rest of the squad was listening to their exchange. That was how he wished it. It was right that they should know what informed his decisions.

'I don't know. The orks' psychic energy is creating so much interference that I can only detect the workings of the Ruinous Powers in extreme proximity.'

Styer nodded. 'It is telling that we didn't notice anything in the mausoleum when the threat was right beneath our feet.'

'I believe the truth is more complex than that.'

'Your tone is ominous, brother,' Borsam put in.

'It should be,' Gared answered. To Styer he said, 'What I discovered was unformed. It assumed definition during the struggle.'

'And what do you infer from this?'

Gared hesitated. 'I believe...' He frowned, reluctant to voice his conclusions, as if to do so was to give them the weight of truth. 'I believe that my actions had the effect of bringing that threat to the surface.'

Styer understood the Librarian's reluctance. If he was right, the implications were terrible. 'How is that possible?'

'Again, I am uncertain. My sense is that there was a probing or searching occurring. But it was blocked.'

'By what?'

'There was a ring.'

Styer listened to Gared's description of the object. It did sound like a ward. 'This relic was stymieing the search and a possible incursion?'

'I think so.'

'That would make sense, given that Mehnert's loyalty appears to have been above reproach. But if there was a probe, there must have been a reason for the search.'

'That is my conclusion as well.'

'The question, then, is what was being sought.'

'I have no answers for that.' Gared looked straight ahead at Styer. His eyes did not flicker to his right.

Styer gave him a slight nod to show he understood. He did not look in Orbiana's direction either. Despite the loss of her shuttle and all but one of her

acolytes, she appeared to be satisfied with the results of her mission. She had found what she had come for. Her authority placed strict limits on what Styer could do to discover what she had taken from the tomb. He said, 'It is imperative that such answers be found.'

'Yes,' said Gared, and Styer knew that he had understood. The Librarian had accepted the mission to discover what the Xanthite was planning.

Styer opened the vox channel to Warheit. 'Make for the *Scouring Light*,' he said.

Orbiana overheard and spoke up. 'Is that quite necessary, justicar? Isn't your mission in this system complete?'

'I hope it is,' he said. 'But until I have a definitive answer, we must remain at these coordinates. I will not have my squad immobilised. We will be requesting your hospitality, inquisitor.'

'My vessel is at your disposal.' She spoke through gritted teeth.

The *Harrower* entered the launch bay of the *Scouring Light*. The roar of its landing was a declaration. It made a fiction out of Orbiana's command of the ship.

Once they had disembarked, Styer took Gared aside. 'The mortal,' he said. 'Why did you save him?'

'It was an impulse,' Gared admitted. 'He fought well, in a battle that was of more use to us than to his doomed colony. And he survived. I thought that should count for something.'

'Will it? If he lives with no memory of his comrades or their sacrifice, where is the value in that?'

Gared looked over to where Klas Brauner stood beside the *Harrower*'s starboard wing. Deprived of purpose and action, he looked lost. His face was grey with grief. 'Perhaps the mind-wipe would be a mercy.'

'You don't believe that, brother.'

No, he didn't. Mind-wiping was a necessary practice. Civilians could not be allowed to live with the knowledge of the Grey Knights' existence. But the necessity was regrettable. Mind-wiping removed a portion of the individual. It was a mental amputation. Brauner would be diminished. 'There is another option,' he said. There was service to the Inquisition.

'He is an old man,' Styer said. 'He had completed his duty to the Imperial Guard, retired, and then fought a last, desperate battle. I'm not sure you did him a kindness.'

‘Perhaps not. But he fought with great honour, and honour should be rewarded.’

Styer nodded once. ‘The decision isn’t pressing. It can wait until we leave the system.’

‘Which is not imminent.’

‘Not with so much unanswered. I have spoken with Inquisitor Furia. Meet with her. Uncover this ship’s secrets.’

Gared made the sign of the aquila and left. He found Furia in the lower level library. Styer was on the bridge. The rest of the squad worked with Orbiana’s crew to repair the damage the Stormraven had suffered. Orbiana had appeared on the bridge only long enough to re-establish her authority. Then she had vanished into the lower reaches of the vessel. The urgency of her obsession was telling.

Furia showed him the texts and their annotations.

‘Suggestive,’ he said.

‘But inconclusive. The sage I encountered, Andoval, seems to be the primary researcher. I would guess it is his hand we see on these pages.’

‘Then we should find him.’

‘There are many doors closed to us,’ she reminded him.

‘Even so, let us look at them.’

They walked the corridors of the ship. Orbiana had increased the guard since their return. Acolyte warriors stood outside entrances and at enough intersections that he and Furia were never out of the sight. They could not hope to stop him, if it came to that. They weren’t guarding, he decided. They were watching.

‘Many of these doors were open before your return,’ Furia said.

‘Oh?’

‘Some of them are simple storage or dormitoria. There is no reason to have them sealed.’ She pointed at some sigils that had been recently applied. ‘Those are a farce.’

‘Inquisitor Orbiana knows we’re searching. She is giving us an embarrassment of targets.’

Furia’s features remained impassive, but she made a dismissive gesture with her bionic hand. ‘That is a trivial strategy. What does she hope to gain?’

‘Time, perhaps?’

‘It won’t amount to much.’

‘She may be confident that she doesn’t need much.’

‘Then we have little.’

As they descended another level, Gared said, ‘You sound convinced that her

agenda is a dangerous one.'

'I am. Aren't you?'

'I am convinced we must look,' he said. The uncertainty that Squire's Rest had left him with was a torment. He could tell that Styer had grown even more doubtful about the value of the prognostication. If what he had encountered on Squire's Rest was the extent of the threat, one that barely came into existence, then the near-destruction of the *Tyndaris* was too high price to have paid for this mission. Gared could not believe that the Grey Knights' work here was done. But the way in which the threat had manifested itself was troubling in the extreme, and now he was feeling his way through the dark. Blindness was a novel experience. He did not like it.

He opened himself up to the psychic currents in the ship. The system-wide mayhem of the orks pressed inwards with greater fury. His impression of the immaterium was storm and interference, and he could not tell if it was the warp itself that was in upheaval, or if it was his senses that were at fault. Perhaps it was both, observer and observed distorted by the collective force of the orks. They were the embodiment of havoc, and their rampage stretched across all forms of existence.

As he and Furia passed the sealed doors, he tried to determine if there was any daemonic threat on the other side. He could tell nothing. The results were worse than inconclusive. They were meaningless.

'There may be only one way of learning Inquisitor Orbiana's project,' he said. Furia sighed. 'I know.'

'Are the consequences that would follow acceptable?'

'What about the consequences of inaction?'

'They could be worse,' he agreed. 'Unless we are wrong to mistrust her.'

'She is a radical. Mistrust of that kind is necessary or we doom the Imperium.'

'That sounds like you have made a decision.'

Furia hesitated. 'We will look a bit longer. But forced entry is an option, if we should find a promising candidate.'

Gared nodded. He didn't ask what she would find promising. He would know, too.

And he did. They found what they were looking for two decks down from the loading bays. At the fore end of a long corridor was a massive vault door. The hexagrammic wards were the most extensive and complex yet. Six acolyte warriors guarded it. Gared and Furia stopped at the other end of the passageway, fifty metres away.

‘We will see what is beyond that door,’ Furia said to Gared, though she was looking at the guards.

‘One moment,’ Gared said. If there was still a way of avoiding outright battle between Inquisition factions, he would take it. He focussed on the door. He opened himself more to the awareness of the immaterium. The physical world vanished from his perception. The ork presence was a wave of battering pressure. He did his best to ride the wave, to see it through, but it was unending and he could not see past it. The constriction around his skull grew into an agony.

But then there was something there beyond the force of the orks. It did not pound. It pierced. It was another tendril, like the one he had encountered in the Mehnert tomb, but much stronger, more precise. It had the coherence of sentience. It knew what it was looking for, and its quest had been successful. On the other side of that door was the object of the tendril’s quest. There was triumph in the warp, and it was diseased. As on Squire’s Rest, what was probing at the barrier to the materium was illness and rot, infection and decay. The coherence of the tendril was simply the means for a dissolution into the chaos of plague.

Coiling around the tendril was a helix of laughter. It was pointed. It was aware of Gared. It knew he saw it, and it was pleased.

Gared snapped back into the materium. He would not rejoice over what he had discovered. But there was satisfaction in knowing that his course of action was clear. He said to Furia, ‘There is no doubt.’

‘Is she still in there?’ Styer asked as he and the rest of the squad joined Gared and Furia.

‘Yes,’ said Furia. ‘No one has passed through the door since we arrived.’

‘And the threat is related to what you fought on Squire’s Rest,’ he said to Gared.

The Librarian nodded. ‘Intensified,’ he said.

‘Your belief is that the prognostication involved events on this vessel rather than the planet below.’

‘Yes.’

Gared sounded uneasy. He should, Styer thought. The prognosticators had sent them to specific coordinates, not a ship. The site of the incursion could so easily have been elsewhere. It was happenstance that the *Scouring Light* had still been present when the *Tyndaris* arrived.

Styer wondered if the *Scouring Light* would have been destroyed if not for the *Tyndaris*. Or perhaps it was more likely that the kroozer would never have been drawn here without the promise of a good fight. More and more disturbing implications were opening up before him.

Vohnum said, 'Clearly it was right that we were sent here.'

'Brother,' Styer said, 'your exegesis is unnecessary. I believe it is also short-sighted. But I will not enter that debate now. We have a duty to perform.'

He and Furia led the way down the passageway. The acolyte warriors tensed. Styer watched their hands tighten on their guns. They were carrying more kroot long rifles. They still had the sense not to aim them at the Space Marines. Styer carried his daemon hammer in one hand, holding it near the head. Furia had not drawn her weapon. They were keeping their approach peaceful. There was no need to threaten. The guards knew what they were up against. But it was important for them to know also that nothing would prevent his entry to the chamber beyond.

Styer stopped two paces from the door. He turned his head to the first guard on the left. 'Open this door,' he said.

'We cannot,' the guard answered.

'Your orders have no weight with me any longer.'

'You misunderstand me, lord,' she said. She had paled. So had her companions. 'Only Inquisitor Orbiana and Sage Andoval can open it. It responds to no one else.'

'Then you are fortunate,' Styer told her. 'We will open the door ourselves. Step aside.'

'Please, lord, we—'

'Step aside.'

She did. They all did.

'Brother Vohnum,' Styer said, 'please get us inside.'

Vohnum stepped forward and fixed a melta bomb to either side of the door.

'There is a risk,' Gared said quietly.

'To breaking the wards?' Styer asked. 'Of course there is. But you are convinced a great threat is forming on the other side.'

'It is.'

'Then it would seem these wards are of little use. Brother Vohnum?'

Vohnum moved back, detonator in hand. 'At your command, brother-justicar.'

'Move back,' Styer told the acolyte warriors. They did so without protest.

The squad retreated a few metres, Furia a bit further than that. They readied

their weapons. 'Now,' said Styer.

Light the intensity of pure heat and pain filled the corridor. The reaction ate through the metal of the door, evaporating it within seconds. The glare faded. Borsam, his surety of movement belying his injuries, advanced with Vohnum. They reached into the gaps, took hold of the damaged door, and pulled. With a hiss of escaping air, and subaural hum of profaned sigils, the door came away from the wall. The crash as it fell resounded along the length of the corridor like the toll of a huge bell.

'Enough of secrets,' Styer said. He climbed over the door and through the entrance.

The room on the other side was a large labororium. It was almost as big as a loading bay. Its central area was split between theoretical and practical research. To the left, bookshelves reaching almost to the height of the ceiling ten metres high. Before them was a desk, strewn with data-slates and open manuscripts. To the right, arrays of medicae equipment and several surgery tables. Around the periphery of the labororium were stasis tubes. They contained specimens: orks. Two more, dead, were strapped to tables. Orbiana and Andoval were standing by what appeared to be the most recently deceased ork. From their position, Styer guessed that they had been examining it when the bombs had been triggered. Andoval held something disc-shaped.

At his shoulder, Gared muttered, 'I would very much like to see what the sage has there.'

'You're thinking of what was removed from the crown in the tomb.'

'I am.'

Orbiana strode forward. 'Justicar,' she said, 'you overstep your authority.' Her voice was frozen rage.

'Our mission,' Furia said, advancing to meet her, 'is to combat a direct threat to the Imperium caused by a daemonic incursion. Our prognosticators declared it would occur at these coordinates. Epistolary Gared detected the taint of the Ruinous Powers in this space. That is all the authority we need. It is you who treads on perilous ground, not us.'

The two inquisitors stood face to face, power armour against bionic reconstruction. Orbiana wore metal and ceramite. Half of Furia *was* metal and ceramite. They were both beings of absolute determination. Neither would concede to the other. If one of them could, she would be a poor inquisitor.

Styer watched closely. He would not be the instigator of internecine violence. But he would act with all necessary force if circumstances dictated. If Orbiana

moved her hands the wrong way towards the weapons at her armour's belt, she would bring those circumstances into being.

Orbiana kept her hands still by her side. She said, 'There will be no fighting here.'

'That is wise of you.'

Styer wondered if Furia was goading Orbiana. He didn't think so. That was unlike her. The venom he heard was for the danger the other inquisitor was bringing to the Imperium. The sight of so many orks, alive though in stasis, was an affront. Orbiana had run serious risks on Squire's Rest, risks that, at least indirectly, had nearly cost the Grey Knights a strike cruiser. And the object she had taken from the mausoleum had had its own part to play, he was sure, in those costs.

Orbiana said, 'You can see there is nothing daemonic at work here. Will you do as I ask and leave me to my work?'

'Your work?' Furia was disbelieving. 'You bring our foes onto the ship. You call that work?'

'Everything I do is for the greater good of the Imperium.'

Gared said, 'What is your work?'

Orbiana's answer was long in coming. Styer thought her hesitation pointless. The materials of her project were exposed. How difficult would it be now to divine its goal? Perhaps it was pride that made her resist, a refusal to be forced into this position. Certainly, there was pride when she did speak. And pleasure. The work was her obsession. The entire ship was testament to that fact. 'We are,' she said, 'on the threshold of the final destruction of the orks.' There was a slight tremor in her voice. There was an emotion there that Styer had not heard from his brothers, or Furia, or known himself for as long as he could remember. It was joy.

'Lunacy,' said Furia.

Gared was moving toward Andoval. The sage was frozen and shaking. He looked back and between Orbiana and Gared, as if seeking some guidance from the inquisitor. But she had forgotten him as she sought to turn the moment of revelation into victory.

'You do me wrong, inquisitor,' she said. 'I don't expect you to understand. You Amalathians are incapable of thinking beyond simple preservation. That isn't enough. You cannot conceive of the fact that the salvation of the Imperium lies in the courage to take the great risk.'

'So does its damnation.'

Orbiana shook her head. 'Extraordinary risks demand extraordinary precautions and extraordinary care. These have been taken.'

'In order to do what, exactly?' Styer was growing impatient with the drama of Orbiana's preamble. 'By what miracle will you exterminate the greenskins?'

'By means of a plague.'

Silence. Dead silence. Orbiana's pronouncement was a stone that plunged into consciousness and kept going down, down, down into depth upon depth of implications. The idea was mad. If Orbiana believed in its reality, she was mad. Its implementation would surely unleash madness beyond measure. Styer and Gared exchanged looks. Both daemonic forces the Librarian had encountered had defined themselves with disease. The puzzle pieces the Grey Knights had found since arriving in the Sanctus Reach began to come together. The image they were forming was dangerous.

Furia pointed to the medicae equipment and its profusion of beakers and solutions. 'Your plan,' she said, her tone flat with disbelief, 'is to unleash a plague upon the galaxy?'

Until this moment, Styer had not thought Orbiana insane, at least not beyond the derangement that he believed to be inherent to all Xanthites. Her conduct in battle had been skilled and intelligent. He reproached her use of xenos weaponry, but not the manner in which she laid waste to the foe. But given what she was proposing to do, he now had to consider the possibility that she had fallen to corruption.

'That is my intent,' Orbiana confirmed. 'A specialised plague. One that will affect only the orks. Humanity suffers from many afflictions to which the orks are immune. There is not a single recorded instance of the Plague of Unbelief falling upon any race other than ours. I see no reason why the reverse could not also be true.'

Furia was shaking her head. 'My colleagues in your ordo have never mentioned such a thing as being even remotely possible. We understand so little about the most basic nature of the orks.'

'You know only intellectual cowards. The knowledge exists. It is simply a question of recovery.'

'You were looking for this knowledge in the Mehnert tomb,' Styer said.

'Precisely.'

Gared loomed over Andoval. The sage looked up at him. The little man was so hunched that Gared was almost twice his size. 'I will examine that,' he said, holding out his hand. The sage handed him the disc.

Styer approached them, keeping an eye on Orbiana's movements. She made no attempt to stop them. She actually seemed to welcome their scrutiny of her materials now, as if it was inevitable that she should convince them.

Gared showed him the object. It was black iron, densely engraved with runes. They were arranged in two interlocking spirals, one moving out from the centre of the disc, the other moving in. Styer couldn't read the runes, but their effect was disorienting. He regarded the relic with deep suspicion. 'What is this?' he asked.

'When the Octarius System fell to the orks, Major-General Mehnert led a counterattack that briefly reclaimed one of the outer planets. Though the victory was short-lived, he killed the warboss who led the ork forces on that world. He took some trophies. One of them was a crown on which the ork had mounted its own trophies of conquest. That disc was among them. The ork could not possibly have known its significance. Nor could Mehnert.'

Gared said, 'I have never seen runes like these before.'

'Their precise origin is unknown. The references to the relic are very rare and fragmentary. It has taken me thirty years to track it down.'

'Your research must not have been confined to human sources,' Furia remarked.

Orbiana ignored her. 'It is my understanding that weaknesses specific to the greenskins are revealed in those runes. I believe they tell the tale of a plague that befell the orks in the distant past.'

'You can read these?' Styer asked.

'No,' Orbiana admitted. 'Not enough to unpack the knowledge encoded there. Not yet.'

Furia joined Styer and Gared in examining the disc.

'This is not merely xenos work,' Styer said. The spirals captivated the eye even as they damaged vision. They invited study. They pulled at the mind. They were a dark fascination. Styer was convinced of one thing Orbiana had said: he was looking at a chronicle of disease. Not merely a chronicle, though. The vortex of the lines was unhealthy. Disease itself lay in the relic.

'I agree with the justicar,' said Furia. 'The runes are dangerous.'

'Of course they are,' Orbiana said. 'Everything about this project is dangerous. War is dangerous. Handled correctly, this danger will bring about the end of another. The orks will trouble the Imperium no more.'

'They are *too* dangerous,' Styer said. He turned to the squad. 'This laboratory is under quarantine, forbidden to all but the Ordo Malleus. Destroy

the unused specimens. Seal the rest. Burn the texts.’ He looked at the equipment. He saw now several small stasis tubes containing fluids of foul, dark colours. ‘All of this will be purged in due course,’ he continued.

‘You have no right!’ Orbiana protested.

‘We have every right,’ Furia told her. She took the disc from Gared. ‘You have been using the tools of Chaos. The radicals of our ordos are adept at rationalising such acts. Your duty is to combat xenos threats. You may think you have been doing so. I will do you the honour of believing that you have convinced yourself you are doing the Emperor’s work. But you are deluded. *Our* duty is to combat the daemonic. Epistolary Gared detected an imminent threat in this chamber.’ She raised the disc. ‘We have found the origin of that threat.’

‘You will regret this,’ Orbiana warned. The earlier cold of her anger was transmuting into something molten. Her eyes were wide. Her stance was battle-ready. It would have taken very little, Styer thought, to push her into a suicidal attack.

‘If you try to stop us, you will make me regret not having you put to death,’ said Furia.

Gared relieved Andoval of his data-slates. The sage hobbled away from the Grey Knights to stand beside Orbiana.

Styer said, ‘Will you leave of your own accord, inquisitor? I would spare you the indignity of an escort, if I could.’

Orbiana didn’t answer. She stalked out of the laboratorium, ceramite boots ringing an angry toll against the decking. Andoval followed in her shadow. At the exit, she paused before climbing over the fallen door. ‘You have destroyed the network of wards that protected this laboratorium and my ship. I hope you know what you are doing.’

‘I only wish you did,’ Styer said. He walked over to the first of the orks in stasis. He leaned over the control surface next to the vertical tube and began the process of shutting the containment field down.

Orbiana left without another word. The Grey Knights began the process of destroying what had become her life’s work.

Almost an hour passed before they were interrupted by the ship’s tocsins.



CHAPTER SEVEN

GATEKEEPER

Styer reached the bridge with Furia. A glance at the auspex told him what he needed to know. The auspex readings confirmed the worst. A swarm of ork ships was approaching. Shipmaster Montgelas, his face pale, his right cheek twitching, turned from them to look up at the empty overhead command throne.

‘Where is Inquisitor Orbiana?’ Styer asked him.

‘I assumed she was with you,’ Montgelas said.

‘She was.’ Her absence was a troubling one. He did not like the way elements were suddenly coming together. Neutralising Orbiana’s project should have felt like a victory. It did not. It had come too easily. And now there was an acceleration of events that he did not trust. ‘Is there another kroozer?’ he asked Montgelas.

‘No, lord. They are all small ships. A great many of them.’

More carrion birds, lured away from the main fleets by the battle over Squire’s Rest. The destruction of the kroozer must have been a beacon to the horde. There were too many for the *Scouring Light* to take one. Evasion was not an option. It would mean abandoning the *Tyndaris*, and the sloop’s chances of escaping notice were slight. If the vessel remained where it was, it had the cover of the strike cruiser’s firepower. ‘Close in with the *Tyndaris*,’ he said.

‘How long can we fight them off?’ Montgelas asked.

‘I’ll find Orbiana,’ said Furia. Raising her voice so the entire bridge crew could hear, she said, ‘If the inquisitor returns, you will accept no orders from her.’

This vessel is under the command of the Ordo Malleus. Is that understood?’

A full second passed before Montgelas said, ‘Yes, inquisitor.’

‘Order a search, ship-wide, for Inquisitor Orbiana, and full cooperation with me.’

‘At once.’

Furia held his gaze for twice as long as he had hesitated before she left.

Styer voxed Gared. ‘What is the status of the laboratorium?’

‘Sealed, brother-justicar. No further work is possible. We have denied the Ruinous Powers any purchase there.’

‘Would you consider our mission complete, brother-Epistolary?’

‘Not for a moment.’

‘Neither do I.’ A minor incursion on the planet. A blocked one on the ship. His doubts swirled, and he doubted his doubts. The results of the prognostication so far had been gigantic cost at the hands of a xenos enemy, and suggestive but inconclusive encounters with the daemonic.

He had been making decisions based on current conditions. They were the correct ones, but the results had been closer to catastrophe than victory.

He asked himself what he would do if the circumstances were very different from what they appeared. If they were fatally different. Then he opened the squad channel on the vox. ‘Brothers,’ he said, ‘make preparations for the worst of battles on the *Scouring Light*. Bring over everything from the *Tyndaris*. We have little time before the orks arrive.’

‘You expect boarding actions?’ Borsam asked.

‘That is a certainty. Prepare for more than that. Prepare as if we had arrived too late at the laboratorium.’

Furia heard Montgelas’s voice speak from vox-casters that dotted the corridors. He was doing as she had told him, and ordering the apprehension of Orbiana. The acolyte warriors she passed looked stunned.

The *Scouring Light* was not a large ship. It was large enough, though, for one person to vanish. Furia could find no trace of Orbiana. She gave the first level below the bridge only a cursory search. If Orbiana sought concealment, it wouldn’t be in a high traffic area. The Grey Knights had ordered all doors unsealed. Secondary laboratoria had also been purged, though only the main one had contained ork specimens.

Think, Furia told herself. She isn’t going to give up. But what can she try if we have ended the means of her research?

Only they hadn't, she realised. There was no sign of Andoval either.

Finding Orbiana became even more urgent. She would be desperate to continue her work. She would be willing to take greater risks.

Furia ran. Her bionic leg set the rhythm. She pounded with clockwork precision and machinic speed down the corridors and staircases. She headed for the lowest levels, for the regions furthest away from the bridge. She raced, acting on a guess rather than a deduction, but her gut had served her well in the past. It was a form of faith, the sort of faith that Styer had to learn to trust. There was no question of the justicar's purity of mind and dedication to the God-Emperor. But he doubted the accuracy of the prognostication because it was not a rational one. She understood the need for evidence. Sometimes, though, it was necessary to act in its complete absence.

She didn't know where Orbiana was. She was rushing to where she would imagine the other inquisitor finding a final refuge for her work. She headed into the bowels of the ship, deep into the cargo area, into the sloped, tapering nose, where corridors dead-ended, where ceilings slanted down, where access passages were a forgotten tangle. This was the domain of the awkward corners of the vessel. It was the least-used area of the ship.

The nose was about two hundred metres long, and about fifty across at its widest point. It had only one level, the steep angle of the upper hull rendering it more impractical. A passageway ran down the centre, intersected by smaller access routes. Halfway towards the tip, Furia saw a narrow corridor to port that had fallen into shadow. The lumen globes, sparse already, had all been removed. Furia took that route. Her bionic eye adjusted to the absence of light. A dozen metres, and she hit another branch. Deeper darkness in either direction. She listened, augmented hearing filtering the groans of the ship. Nothing.

But to her left, the nothing had definition. There was a patch of total absence of sound. Even the ship's stirrings were silenced. She went left.

The cramped access passage angled, then ended a steel door. It was not as secure as the vault door had been, but it was still covered by a web of hexagrammic sigils. In the walls around it, Furia could make out the electronic trceries. Sound dampening, she presumed. No one would ever think to investigate this corner of the ship, because it would never call attention to itself.

Furia uncoiled her neural whip from around her waist. She lashed at the wall with it. The electrical charge was designed to incapacitate organic beings. Its surge took out the dampeners. The walls screamed. Feedback raced down the corridor behind Furia. Sparks flashed blue. A continuing chain of short circuits

and smouldering wires produced a faint, wavering red glow in the hall.

She had announced her presence. She waited.

The door opened. Orbiana emerged and closed it behind her. She carried her xenos gun. At her waist was an electro-flail.

‘Send the sage out,’ Furia said.

‘No.’

‘You no longer have any authority on this ship.’

‘I have the authority of force. Our work will continue. Andoval is on the verge of a breakthrough. He will finish.’

‘I will get past you.’

‘I doubt it.’

Furia looked at the door behind Orbiana again. Now that she had a better idea of the path of research Orbiana and Andoval were following, the inadequacy of the protection was flagrant. Orbiana’s obsession had pushed her to desperation. She wasn’t just taking risks now. She was actively courting disaster.

Furia was unsurprised. Orbiana’s behaviour confirmed her beliefs about the Xanthites. They would inevitably cross a fatal line. There would be no convincing Orbiana to pull back from madness. Even so, Furia tried one final time. ‘In the name of the God-Emperor, stop this now,’ she said. ‘We will be under attack from orks within the hour.’

‘In His name, let me finish.’

‘You don’t believe you can.’

‘We are close. This time, we have the answer.’

‘*This time?* How often have you thought you were on the verge of success?’

Orbiana didn’t answer. In the faint light, her face was a mask of stone. Her eyes burned, though. They shimmered with the light of passion and with hatred for those who would thwart her holy mission.

Where lay the difference between the radical and the heretic? It lay nowhere, Furia thought. Proof stood before her.

‘Go now,’ Orbiana hissed. She raised the gun.

Furia crouched low and cracked the neural whip forward. Orbiana’s power armour absorbed the charge, but Furia’s yank was enough to spoil Orbiana’s aim. The writhing green beam struck the wall above her head on the right. It stripped away the stone cladding and opened a long wound in the metal iron framework. Furia launched herself forward, a bionic-driven cannon shell. Orbiana swung her arms in to counter. The inquisitors collided. Furia had angled her leap to hit with her reconstructed shoulder. The impact still rang down her spine like a hammer

blow. Orbiana simply took a single step back against the door.

Furia couldn't overcome the strength of the power armour. But she was too close now for her foe to use the gun. Her whip was still coiled around Orbiana's left arm, impeding her motion. Orbiana struck back with brute force, lunging forward and forcing her arms down at a hard angle. They hit like a battering ram. She slammed Furia into the left-hand wall. Marble cracked. So did ribs. The metal in her frame absorbed the worst of the damage, but she felt servo-motors slip and misfire in her left leg. Its movements were a fraction of a second behind her will.

She let her knees buckle. She slid down as Orbiana dropped the gun and drove a fist into the spot where her head had been a moment before. Orbiana punched her forearm through the wall. When she pulled back, something caught and jerked her to a stop. The immobility lasted an eyeblink. It was enough for Furia to slip out and around.

She had to keep moving, use speed to counter power. Even with the damage to her limbs, she was fast, a shadow, a thought, a serpent's strike. She rose, drawing her knife. The power blade was a streak of violet light in the dark. She was taller than Orbiana, and she aimed the knife for the back of her unprotected skull. Orbiana freed herself from the wall and whirled, bringing up her left arm. She was fast enough to save her life, but Furia cut through the elbow joint of the armour. Her blade plunged into the armour's seam, severing fibre bundles, and then the flesh and tendons below them. She pulled the blade out at an angle, sawing again. Actuators lost contact with muscular impulses. Orbiana's arm went limp. It was a dead weight hanging from her shoulder.

She grunted and ran against Furia, trying to ram her against the other wall. Furia moved with the blow, gaining a hair's width lead on Orbiana, and she slipped out of the way just before being crushed. She danced around Orbiana to the other inquisitor's right. She aimed at the other arm.

Her damaged left leg locked. She was frozen to the spot for a moment. When she could move again, the fraction of a second had returned the momentum of the battle to Orbiana. She held her electro-flail in her right hand. She swung it. Furia regained command of her leg and threw herself into a backward somersault. She was half through the tumble when the flails connected with her waist. Again, the rebuilt half of her frame took the hit, so she wasn't snapped in half. But the multiple electrical discharges sent her bionics into seizures. Knocked sideways, she hit the ground in a heap. Her left hand spasmed open and closed. Her leg drummed against the deck. Her right side was numb. She

couldn't move.

Orbiana loomed over her. She raised the flail again. Furia watched the upward arc. She was fast. She had all the time in the world to evade such a heavy, slow attack. But she couldn't move. Her body did not belong to her. It was a marionette twitching on the end of electric chains.

The flail began its descent. It would shatter her skull. *Go*, she thought. *Go*, she told the numbness and the jerking. *Move!* Half her body had no feeling, but it *would* obey her commands. She managed to roll towards Orbiana. Two of the flail heads hit the deck just beyond her. The third bounced up and came back down hard on her throat. There was an intimate crunch and discharge snap as it crushed her bionic larynx.

She was silenced. She drew breath with a laboured hiss. But she had the use of her limbs again. Slower than she should be, still faster than Orbiana, she used her arms to propel herself around the other inquisitor and up again. She ran forward two steps, putting some space between them. And that was all the room she would have: the door was before her.

She turned around. Orbiana's gun lay on the deck between them. Even now, she was not tempted. Picking up the weapon wasn't even a choice. She avoided it on instinct. Contact with it would have offended her very soul. If she'd had time to think, she would have considered victory with a xenos weapon to be a worse defeat than death.

But there wasn't time to think. There was only time for one of them to die.

Orbiana whirled the flail over her head. Furia threw her blade.

She was still fast.

Orbiana reacted to the blur of the strike. She turned her head. The blade missed her eye. It stabbed through her cheekbone, deep into her mouth. She choked and stumbled. Her arm lashed out at the pain. She smashed the flail down. It struck the xenos weapon.

Orbiana was strong. The weapon was powerful. The blow shattered the integrity of the gun. Its energy was released in a single, uncontrolled burst.

Furia saw the danger in the final, stretched moment before the catastrophe took them both. As she threw the knife, she was already moving to a crouch and bringing her arm up against the flail. The flash was the stripping away of existence. Something slashed at her body. It stripped her being away in layers. It hit with a *thrummm* and the vibrations were the terrible song of her disintegration. Her eyes were shut and she could still see the searing green.

Orbiana cried out. There was denial in the shout. There was despair. There was

rage. There was no pain, but there was anguish.

The cry was cut short. The light faded. Furia opened her eyes. She saw only through the bionic one. She still couldn't feel anything on the right. There was something worse than numbness, though. There was absence. She thought she had lowered her arm, and then she realised that she couldn't have. It was gone.

Residual energy from the weapon crackled over the walls and ceiling. Orbiana had taken the brunt of the blast. There was very little to mark her existence. Part of her skull. A hand, still clenched.

Furia lay against the door, surrounded by a spreading pool of her blood. Her breath whistled in and out with a sound like rust. She could move her head. She turned it until she could see the door that she could not open. Orbiana should not have despaired at the last, Furia thought. The irony felt like a spear through her chest. Beyond the door, Andoval continued Orbiana's work. He did not know that there was no one left for him to serve. Furia could not stop him. She did not know if her vox-bead was still functional, but she had no voice to use it. She couldn't move. She couldn't warn Styer.

Full dark returned. It gathered around Furia as she faded in and out of consciousness. She tried to stay awake. She waited.

She waited for time to run out, and for the fates to raise the final curtain. Her head echoed with the silent cry of her own rage.



CHAPTER EIGHT

ARRIVALS

The orks had boarding torpedoes. They were crude devices. Three of them hit the outer hull of the landing bay like rockets. They punched ragged holes in the ship, and it was the *Scouring Light's* own defences that spread foam sealant over the tears, keeping the atmosphere from howling out into the void. The nose of one of the torpedoes was crushed by the impact. No orks emerged. The other two disgorged forty of the brutes into the landing bay.

Brauner had thought he was done with the greenskins when the Stormraven took him away from Squire's Rest. He had been in a kind of limbo since arriving on the *Scouring Light*, bereft of official duty, helping with the maintenance in the launch bay, waiting for the unknowable warriors to decide his fate. Now it turned out that the orks were not done with him. It seemed they missed him. That was what he told himself, a bad joke to boost his bravado as war came for him again.

Brauner was in the bay with a few dozen of Orbiana's warrior acolytes. The Grey Knights had taken the weapons and armour they had brought over from the *Tyndaris* and were stationed on the bridge. One of their number, Warheit, had taken the *Harrower* out of the *Scouring Light* to harry the ork ships that tried to close with the sloop.

These were good measures. But they would not be enough. Brauner didn't know how many vessels the orks had brought to the battle. He didn't have to. The orks always came in numbers. They would overwhelm the defences, and they would be in the ship. There was no way of defending every point of entry.

The Space Marines had the ship's most vital point. The landing bay also had strategic value.

The Inquisition forces were better armed than the settlers. They had armour. They had youth. They had training and fanaticism. Any one of them might, in time, become as formidable as Orbiana. Brauner didn't think they would last more than a few minutes. The one thing they didn't have was leadership. No one knew where either inquisitor was. Orbiana's absence hurt the morale of her troops.

He couldn't understand why they were making a stand. Defeat was inevitable. If the Grey Knights and the Inquisition wanted the *Scouring Light* to survive, they should be racing for the system's Mandeville point.

The decision wasn't his; his decision was the duty to fight for as long as he could. So he fought. Solid barricades had been set up between the outer doors and the exit to the rest of the ship. Brauner rested the barrel of his lasrifle on the top of the barricade and fired. He had been offered one of the kroot long guns and had refused, preferring the sanctity of Imperial workmanship.

He and the acolytes hit the orks with a concentrated barrage. They took down the first few to emerge from the torpedoes. The others came running. Brauner saw the distance between the barricades and the orks diminish with every pull of the trigger. More orks fell. Still more continued the charge. Their fire was wild. It was copious. The head of the man next to Brauner exploded. The acolytes' barrage faltered.

Another torpedo burst through the outer wall. More orks piled out as the first groups closed with the barricades. Brauner took out the eyes of one brute. It howled and struck out blindly with its chainaxe. It cut one of its kin in half. Others beat it to death. For the time it took them to trample it down, Brauner had delayed a section of the charge.

The delay lasted seconds.

A huge ork led the way. It wore a plated exoskeleton that looked like a brutish conception of Space Marine armour. Chains of human and eldar skulls hung from its arms. Spikes curled up from the shoulder plates. The ork swaggered. In one hand, it wielded a hammer big enough to be a Dreadnought's power fist. In the other, it carried a gun whose barrel looked too wide to work.

It worked very well. Each shot fired a shell that hit the barricade with enough force to blast through. Metal erupted by Brauner's right cheek. A slug burned his flesh as it streaked by and embedded itself in the far wall. The monster's armour absorbed the energy from Brauner's las and the beams of the long guns. It began

to glow with heat. The ork laughed and ran faster, shaking the deck with the weight of its tread.

Three more pulls of the trigger. Brauner wanted to see at least one more ork die. One more enemy before the wave hit. His lips mouthed a prayer. It was unanswered. He burned the face of a foot soldier and that was all.

The orks slammed into the barricade. They leaped over it, swinging blades and axes. The leader drove straight into the metal shield. Its momentum was unstoppable. It tore through the barricade. The acolytes behind it went down under the ork's boots. Flak armour splintered and bodies burst. Brauner stabbed his bayonet forward. It sank into an ork's shoulder. The beast swatted him. He flew backwards, skidding along the floor.

Old man pain in his old man bones. Old soldier humiliation at being dismissed with such contempt by a simple ork foot soldier. He struggled to his feet. At least he managed to hold on to his rifle. Then he hesitated. At the barricades, the fight was over. A few acolytes still struggled. They were already going down. The orks were pausing just long enough to finish them off. They shouted with laughter as they butchered the humans.

The green tide was about to invade the interior of the *Scouring Light*. It had been held back for less than a minute.

Brauner's fingers tightened on the trigger. Then he turned and ran for the door. He had a few seconds' lead. He ran through the exit and sealed the door behind him, gaining another few moments. The ork that had struck him had saved his life.

He heard a massive rumble and crash on the other side of the door. The orks would be through the door soon. He backed away, trying to think. *Do something*, he told himself. *Do something useful*. Making a heroic stand here was not useful. It was stupid. The orks wouldn't even notice him as they ran him down.

Do something.

He ran down the corridor, his old man pace stealing the moments he had gained. The first intersection was coming up. There were explosions behind him. Rending metal. He almost fell around the corner as shouts and the tramp of the orks filled the air, echoes bouncing off the walls like bullets. The tapestries that Brauner ran past were tributes to irony. Portrayals of ork defeats would bear witness to their triumph.

He reached another side passage and took it, then turned again, still moving towards the bow, still searching for a purpose. The corridor he was in was a narrower one. He didn't think the orks had seen him.

Do something.

No point making for the bridge. What use could he be to the beings of myth who held that post?

There would be other clusters of warrior acolytes and the ship's crew fighting. He didn't know where. He could search...

He could search for someone more vital. He could seek the inquisitors.

Lungs rasping, legs stumping their pain, he kept running. He had no direction, but he had purpose. He clung to it.

He had evaded the orks, but not the sound of their presence. The walls of the ship shook with the beat of explosions and the roars of the invaders.

'The enemy is in a hurry to die,' Styer announced. It was a simple truth. The orks must have breached the *Scouring Light* in a dozen locations, and were converging on the bridge. They were throwing themselves into a choke point. The hall that ran from the bridge was a wide one, but it was also the only access. The Grey Knights stood with their backs to the sealed bridge door and filled the hall with corpses. The bodies piled up in low hills. And the greenskins kept coming.

'They are tedious,' Vohnum said. He waded forward into a crush of the enemy, laying waste with his halberd. A hail of storm bolter shells flanked him.

'For a lowly enemy, they have already cost us dearly,' Styer reminded him.

'This force is an annoyance, not a threat.' Frustration sated, Vohnum stepped back into formation.

The orks fired as soon as they reached the top of the staircase, a hundred metres away. Their bullets tore up the tapestries. They gouged the marble of the wall and deck. They did nothing to the Terminator armour worn by the squad.

Styer did not correct Vohnum. The ork groups that had made it this far presented to no challenge. The Grey Knights could hold the bridge indefinitely. The fact that they might have to do so was a frustration in itself. They could stop the tide's advance, but they could not stem its arrival. 'Brother Warheit,' he voxed the pilot. 'Status?'

'The *Tyndaris* has denied the approach of all boarding parties. And the orks are losing many ships.'

'Your tone is less optimistic than your words.'

'Still more are coming. This is a swarm, brother-justicar. The battle will be a long one. They are boarding the *Scouring Light* faster than they can be culled.'

'Thank you, brother.' He suppressed a curse. What were they accomplishing

by remaining on station? He tried contacting Furia again, with no success. 'Gared?' he asked. 'Anything?'

'Inconclusive.' Gared's voice was thick with the strain of trying to pierce beyond the psychic interference of the orks' war mass.

No way to tell if they had already completed their mission or not. The value of the prognostication was as slippery as ever. He was mounting what might be a pointless campaign, one that could easily result in the loss of two vessels.

His doubts crystallised. They formed the image of an avoidable defeat, a tragedy of errors leading to an ignominious loss at the hands of an unworthy enemy.

Styer said nothing. His brothers could very well be picturing the same nightmare. But this one he kept to himself. He would not spread the spectre of shame.

'Conserve ammunition,' he ordered. 'We may be at this some time. All forward.' As one, the Grey Knights ceased fire. Nemesis weapons at the fore, they advanced into the ork wave. They shattered the enemy. But as he brought the daemon hammer down, obliterating a greenskin's head and torso, he noticed that the mob had thinned.

He looked ahead. A few orks were at the head of the staircase, shooting. They were not advancing.

A few more blows and the Grey Knights stood in a tableau of death. They ignored the orks at the end of the hall. Their fire was without effect. They weren't worth expending ammunition to kill.

'Where are they all?' Gared asked.

The answer was a volcanic eruption. The orks had mined the entire deck from below. The explosions took out the floor. Styer was lifted off his feet. He rose in a chaos of flames and marble, iron and torn bodies. Then he fell, tumbling with an avalanche. Rubble rained down on him. He shrugged free of the wreckage, climbing out onto a ragged slope. The rest of the squad was emerging too. He wondered if the orks had really expected that tactic would harm them.

He had barely formed the thought when the heavy slugs slammed into him. The demolition had been a first move. The orks now struck with more and heavier weapons. Above, the more nimble foot soldiers were climbing along the ragged edges of the hole towards the bridge.

Gared said, 'I need to get back up.' There was urgency in his voice. And pain.

'What...' Styer began, but then he felt it too.

Beyond the background psychic pressure of the orks. Blasting through it.

Suddenly here. A great flood.

A terrible presence.

Andoval stared at the disc. He shouldn't continue without Orbiana present. The wards on this laboratorium were very basic. Their protection would be inadequate for the path he would follow. Orbiana's abilities and her strength would be his security. He would wait for her return.

He would just look at the disc.

He was no closer to being able to read the runes. He felt as though he should be. Orbiana had said they were so close. Her conviction was a fire so fierce, it re-ignited his own. They were out of time. She had taken him into this secondary laboratorium, one that even he had not known about. Hidden here, the great work had a stay of execution. It would be brief. Inquisitor Furia and those dogmatic giants would look for him, and they would find him.

You stand on the threshold, Orbiana had said.

Was that true? Did he? He hadn't known this to be the truth until she had spoken, but she was so certain, she had to be right. Her truth was his. So it had always been, in all the years of his service.

His data-slates sat on a lectern. On the work surfaces of the laboratorium were the instruments of his art. Stasis tubes of the samples of ork flesh they had been able to preserve. A coffin-sized isolation chamber containing far more dangerous samples. Rows of vials that were the means by which he was to perform a grand alchemical feat for the glory of the God-Emperor.

Orbiana was taking a long time, time they did not have. Perhaps she was fighting even now for a few more moments, and he was wasting them.

He mustn't. The work was too important.

And now his body was moving back and forth between the lectern and the equipment. His soul was consumed by the disc.

He held it in his right hand. His eyes traced the concentric arms of the runes, spiralling out and spiralling in. They shouted something just beyond the horizon of meaning. His mind raced for that horizon. Desperation drew it closer. He would cross it. Orbiana knew that he would. Duty to the Imperium demanded that he would.

And so he would.

He felt the blossoming of inspiration.

The thread of possibility had already appeared to him while Orbiana was on Squire's Rest. He hadn't recognised it for what it was, then. It had been an idle

thought, a suggestion of fancy, almost a dream. He hadn't taken it seriously, yet he had also followed it, and he was surprised to find now just how far he had done so.

Spiralling in. Spiralling out.

The motionless disc spinning in two directions at once.

His ideas caught by the double whirl. Bending, curling, twisting into new shapes, spreading into new vistas of possibility.

The runes were as obscure as before, but that didn't matter. They were not an answer. They were a suggestion, an invitation. He was answering a call. The source of the inspiration was on the other side of the horizon line, and it was up to him to construct the means of crossing the line.

And so he did. Revelation was upon him. Perhaps it was the eye of the God-Emperor. How else were his thoughts guided so surely? This was his epiphany: he had been wrong to focus on the ork physiology as the starting point for the creation of his plague. He must begin with the plague. He must craft the great disease, and when his work was perfect, then it could be modified, then it could be turned into a shaped charge that would detonate in a single race.

He moved to the isolation chamber and reached for the control box with his left hand. His right still held the disc. One-handed, he operated the box as never before. Inside, at his command, mechanical arms extended to seize the canisters of poison. Needles of monomolecular width extruded. The building blocks were collected.

Spiralling in. Spiralling out.

Right hand vision, left hand creation. He felt the perfection of what was coming into being. It was a sublimity of disease. It braided contagion and virulence and pain and corruption and despair. A great spiral of elements. It had a name.

Could he suddenly read the runes? No. But he did know the name of the plague. It was *bonewrack*, and he knew precisely the horror of its symptoms. The greenskins would die in agony.

He moved faster. He was no longer teasing out an idea but working in the rush of fever. There had been barriers to the idea, but they had been weak, and there was a great pressure, created by millions of rampaging beings, and the wave was toppling the barrier, battering it to nothing, opening the way for the inspiration, for the sublime.

He ushered forth a great coming into being.

Its perfection was noticed. Its perfection was a call.

A summoning.

At the last, Andoval realised what had been done to him, and what he had done. He had very little time to repent, because the thing that answered this invitation took his body as raw material. The thing used his own flesh as the medium for its own coming into being. It zeroed in on the artistry of his plague. It used that focus to climb out of the empyrean into which it had been cast. It remade the body of the mind it had manipulated.

With a cry of exultant vengeance, it was born into the real.

At once, the real began to die.



CHAPTER NINE

THE VOICE OF THE PLAGUE

The door blew off its hinges. It sent Furia tumbling the short length of the passage. She banged off the walls and landed hard. Pain jabbed her back to full consciousness. Something monstrous was bellowing. Its voice was loud enough to shake the walls and deck. It was also liquid, seeming to come from deep under water, as if a polluted sea had found its tongue and was shouting curses. Syllables of anti-language bubbled and roiled. Meaning festered in a cauldron of rot.

Furia wanted to block her ears. The roar would soon be comprehensible. She had no desire to hear what would be said, especially when she could not fight the speaker. And now a ripple passed outward from the chamber. It raced over and past her, expanding to consume the entire ship. In its wake came decay. The air became slick. The cladding and the flagstones of the deck and walls turned cold and porous. They sweated a thick slime. They softened. It seemed to Furia that she was lying on sponge.

The being of filth spoke. Its words assembled themselves into Gothic. '*KIN OF THAWN, I HAVE ANSWERED YOUR CALL.*'

The walls shook again. The words sank into Furia's head. They were poison. They were dangerous because she sensed their corruption enveloped an even worse core of truth. Her body was broken, but her mind and her will were not. Her life had been shaped entirely to combat the daemonic. She blocked out the words, refusing to let them contaminate her thoughts. She quarantined the truth.

She would examine it in a context that was not created by the daemon.

And now she had to move. She had to fight, and she could not do so lying here, waiting for the eye of the enemy to fall on her. She commanded her body to act.

So much of her was broken and missing. Most of that was flesh. If she hadn't suffered her wounds on Angriff Primus, if she hadn't been reconstructed, she would already be dead. But her bionic half had kept her alive. She still had one arm. She made it reach ahead of her. Her fingers sank into the dreadful softness of the deck. She gripped and pulled herself forward. It felt as if she were breaking her ribs again. Splintered knives stabbed at her guts. She denied herself the luxury of crying out. She reached again, and pulled again.

Metre by agonised metre, she dragged herself back into the web of corridors. To move away from the triumphant daemon was little enough as a struggle, but it was something.

And so she was not in a direct line of fire when the second, far worse ripple came. The one that destroyed that which had already rotted. The one that opened the way wide for the plague march.

The first ripple extended over the ship in seconds. Even the orks paused. The texture of the vessel changed. In the lower levels, Klas Brauner stumbled in the gloom. His feet left depressions in stone. He fell against a wall, and recoiled from its glistening touch.

In the *Harrower*, Warheit saw the ripple even as he continued to blast at the ork fighters and boarding torpedoes. The *Scouring Light* shivered. The movement was quick, organic, something impossible for a ship a thousand metres long. The appearance of the sloop altered. The change was a subtle one. The structure was unchanged. But the silhouette looked softer, as if it had started to melt, or the edges were eaten by insects. Its lights dimmed. Over the vox, he heard the shouts of his brothers, and he knew the worst had happened.

A few moments later, he saw that he was wrong. The worst came then, when the *Scouring Light* moved again.

And in the trench the orks had created outside the bridge, Gared sensed the great exultation even before the words found them. The thing that he had sensed probing the weak spots of the materium in Orbiana's laboratorium, the consciousness that he had detected through the ork-created interference, had arrived. The rubble beneath his feet crumbled as the disease took it.

And then the voice: '*KIN OF THAWN, I HAVE ANSWERED YOUR CALL!*'

‘Lies,’ Vohnum snarled.

No, Gared realised. He had been wrong to think he had managed to pierce the ork psychic storm and detect that thread of daemonic sentience. It had reached out to *him*. It had wanted to be seen.

‘We are known,’ Styer said. ‘How?’

Then the second attack came, and there was no time for answers or thought. The *Scouring Light* shook hard. There was a deep, reverberating series of booms. Metal tore and stone shattered. An invisible battering ram, big as a Land Raider, punched the length of the ship’s hull, through walls and bulkheads. Decks heaved like waves in a storm. They tore and collapsed. A massive tunnel formed from bow to bridge. When the blast hit the superstructure, it knocked Grey Knights and orks off their feet. The greenskins who had been climbing their way to the bridge fell like rotted fruit.

As Gared stood once more, he could see down the tunnel half the length of the ship before it fell into gloom. The explosion was followed by a miasma. The air turned a dirty brown streaked with coils of grey. The coils had coherence. They writhed and multiplied like bacilli. It was as if the new tunnel was really a throat, exhaling foul vapours.

Then, as he now knew it would, the army came. The hosts of disease boiled up from the lower reaches of the ship. They piled over each other in their eagerness to spread their gospel. They were beings whose flesh was mottled grey and green, oozing pus and slipping off their bones. Things that had a vague resemblance to humans clutched rusted, pitted blades. One-eyed, their heads weighed down by curving horns larger than their skulls, they shambled forward, chanting. Their song was monotonous, a single sound repeated endlessly. It sounded to Gared like a count that could not get past *one*.

Leaping over the lurching daemons were beasts with clawed forepaws and the bodies of massive slugs. They gambolled like canines, shattering wreckage with their weight. Their tongues lolled from gaping, fanged mouths, drooling viscous toxins.

And between the feet and paws of the larger daemons, climbing on their shoulders, swarming up the walls of the tunnel in their uncountable numbers were small creatures. They were tiny abominations that walked and crawled and squirmed, plump boils given legs and arms, fat lesions that had learned how to laugh. Their gurgling coiled around the chants and the growls, and the sound itself was enough to make a mortal sicken and die.

For Gared, there was no mystery in the monsters surging forward. He knew

the taxonomy of daemons. Plaguebearers. Beasts of Nurgle. Nurglings. There was strength in naming the enemy. It forced language and meaning onto beings that sought to destroy both. It was a means of combat before the first blow had been struck. And it was a shield against the cancerous irrationality of the Ruinous Powers.

But sometimes logic had a cancer of its own. Gared sensed that a virulent form lurked behind the words they had heard, the shout of the daemon, still unseen, who commanded the horde. It knew who the Grey Knights were. The worst damage its words could do would be if they were true.

If they had summoned it.

He had to reach the bridge.

As the daemons came into sight, they collided with the rear ranks of the orks. The two forces fell on each other. The battle was brutal, but its violence was mundane. The beasts leaped on the orks, coating them with slime, but the greenskins did not collapse with a sudden onset of plague. The daemons had to tear them apart with their claws. The orks fought back hard. The trench exploded with the violence of brute and obscenity. The conflict moved upwards under the pressure of the endless advance of the daemons.

At the front, the orks sought to capitalise on the effect of the collapse they had engineered. They had disrupted the Grey Knights' squad formation. They attacked in a swarm, isolating the battle-brothers from each other, striking with chainblades and guns, killing many of their own, but landing many blows. They were striving to overcome the unbreachable wall of Terminator armour through the accumulation of the numbers and attacks.

It was a crude strategy. It might also, Gared thought, be effective.

Ten metres down the trench, moving to join the fight, barking orders and striking down any soldier slow to respond, was a giant ork in tank-like armour. The chieftain's eyes burned with malevolent cunning. Gared had no doubt that this was the ork who had ordered the mining of the deck. He ignored the blows raining on him and stretched out his hand, striking at the monster with a blast of warp lightning. One bolt hit the ork's armour, lighting it up with a crackling web. The warlord roared, withstanding the energies and exulting in the challenge. The rest of Gared's attack went awry. To the left of the warlord was a trio of ork witches. They wore necklaces of skulls, and they brandished long iron staffs that were linked together by barbed chains. They reacted as one, taking Gared's lightning as their own. They were energised by the collective war rage. With bellows that were the savage release beyond laughter, they hurled the power

back at him.

The electrical explosion incinerated the orks surrounding Gared and hit him like a maglev train. His psychic hood flared nova as it sought to neutralise the blast. He seized it, rode the crest of its exterminating power. He would not be dishonoured by such a blow. There was fire in his head, and shrieking white noise. The world around him, rotting and convulsed by disease, vanished. He brought it back. His howl was one of rage, pure in its righteousness. The energy was on the point of vaporizing him from within as it built and built, but he would not release it, not yet, not until he worked his will and made it *his* shape, *his* servant.

He unleashed the force, multiplied by the sorcerous exchange. It devastated the real. The materium screamed. It tore itself open before him. He spread his arms, and the wound became a maw. Between him and the advancing orks there was a devouring *nothing*. The greenskins fell into the jerking, twitching barrier. The warp took them. It ended them, consuming existence.

Gared turned from the rift and began to climb the slope of the rubble, towards the bridge. After a second, the wound healed itself with a severing *snap*. He glanced down and saw limbs fall to the ground.

The warlord pointed at him, shouting. The orks within earshot started firing at him. Two of them raised rocket launchers. The first missile hit the rubble just to his right. The blast pried at him with wind, flame and shrapnel. He had sunk his fingers into the rotten stone, and hung on. Before the second ork could fire, Styer burst through the scrum of orks surrounding him. He sent a bolter shell through the skull of the rocketeer. The greenskin squeezed the trigger convulsively as it died. The missile went low and wild. Its explosion sent ork body parts flying.

‘We have you covered, brother,’ Styer voxed to him. ‘Climb hard. I will follow.’

Gared didn’t look down again. He placed his faith in his brothers, as they did in him. He had to reach the bridge.

He climbed fast, but others had been faster. The creation of the daemonic tunnel had shaken loose the orks as they had been within reach of the doors. The survivors had recovered, and the door fell to xenos grenades while he was still a few metres from the top. Along with the orks, the advance symptoms of the plague host streamed in. Nurglings scabbled along the walls and the ridges of the fallen floor. They were fast, bloated insects. As they crossed the threshold onto the bridge, the voice from the depths spoke again.

‘*ONE. THE ONE GIFT. NO OTHER. I WILL KNOW ITS PROMISE.*’

And from the battlefield, that monotone chant of the Plaguebearers took on a new significance for Gared. It *was* a count of one. With that realization, he began to hear it differently. He did not know whether it was the chant or his perception that had altered. The chant was condensing into syllables, into a name. The name of the gift.

He hauled himself up the rest of the way. Styer was a just a few metres behind him, alternating hands as he climbed, blasting orks and nurglings with his storm bolter. Gared ran onto the bridge, and into the domain of nightmare.

The walls, the ceiling and the floor of the bridge were consumed by leprosy. The engravings of the vault had lost definition. The lines of the pillars at the four corners of the bridge had softened. White marble and gold were turning a fungal grey. Only the holy weapon that Gared had come to retrieve was untouched by the rot. Massive, unmoving, impassive, it waited for him, while everything around it fell to ruin.

The defenders of the bridge were all mortals: the crew and two squads of warrior acolytes. Easy prey for the orks. Plentiful prey for the plague. The orks were butchering the acolytes when Gared arrived. A few of the humans were still fighting. Just a few, and these most determined would be dead before the greenskins reached them. When the doors had been breached, the disease had rushed in, pervasive as a cloud, quick as despair. The bridge was covered in bodies twisted into the perfection of agony.

Gared remembered the warped skeleton in the Mehnert tomb.

The chanted name crystallised: *bonewrack*. The unleashing of the plague was celebration and baptism.

Montgelas had collapsed before the oculus. A laspistol still dangled from his fingers, which had curled backwards through the trigger guard. He had two profiles at once. His eyes and nose faced left. His jaw faced right. His skull was not broken, though, because he was still drawing breath, still opening his mouth to scream. His spine, arms and legs bent and rippled. Every bone in his body had been warped, and was warping, would go on warping until the pain killed him.

The rest of the crew were the same. The plague was fast, but there was no mercy in its speed, only intensity. Lying on the floor, draped over work stations, even sitting because their deformations kept them vertical, the crewmembers had become arabesques of death. The acolytes' flak armour snapped ribs and arms as it resisted the pressure of their change.

The orks, unaffected, began to lose interest in the slaughter as the humans ceased fighting. They turned their attention to the great prize that stood in the

centre of the bridge. The device had the silhouette of a headless Grey Knight. It was three times the height of the orks. Unclean xenos hands reached out to claim the Dreadknight.

Gared opened fire. A few seconds later, so did Styer. They annihilated the greenskins and purged the bridge of the nurglings that cavorted over the writhing bodies. Before they were done, the rest of the squad had reached the bridge. They held the entrance, hammering shells into the orks and daemons.

Inside the bridge, the war paused for a few moments.

Gared eyed the tormented mortals. He regretted that there was neither the time nor the ammunition to spare to grant them peace.

Worse than his regret was the sick conviction in his gut.

‘So this is the result of Orbiana’s great work,’ Styer said. ‘We were too late to stop her madness.’

‘No,’ said Gared. ‘To the contrary: we were precisely on time.’

‘What do you mean?’

As he walked towards the Dreadknight, Gared spread his arms to take in the whole of the bridge. ‘We have done this,’ he said. ‘This is our work.’ Fear was alien to him. So was despair. But he did know horror, and he was learning of its full richness in this moment.

Approaching the bridge, the rising chant of *bonewrack, bonewrack, bonewrack*.

And the voice again, the giant, vessel-shaking, plague-speaking voice that claimed a dread familiarity: ‘*ARE YOUR THERE, KIN OF THAWN? THIS DAY IS LONG ENOUGH IN COMING!*’

‘Our work,’ Gared repeated. He placed his hand against one massive leg of the Dreadknight. He wondered if atonement was possible.

The voice. The terrible voice. The voice that should not be, shouting its commands throughout the ship. Brauner cried out when he heard it. He clutched his head, trying to squeeze out the worms.

The great wave came. The deck rose. It crested. Bulkheads broke away. Walls tumbled in foam. On all fours, Brauner clutched at the floor and rode the storm. The ship changed around him, and under him. It tossed him. It battered him. He had no firm purchase, and he slid. He grabbed the first edge his hands found and hung on, and after a few seconds the storm subsided. He stayed prone for several minutes, unsure of where he was. The strange softness beneath his fingers couldn’t be the ship, could it?

It was, though. And the *Scouring Light* still had power. A few lumen strips in his vicinity had survived. When he raised his head to look around, he saw that he was still on the lower deck. The ceiling was buckled, and the floor was warped. The greater changes had carried on above him, though. He had the impression that a huge blow had travelled diagonally upwards. He had just missed being caught in its path.

He stood with difficulty. Nothing was broken, but his body was a bag of exhausted pain. He almost reached to steady himself against a wall but snatched his hand back at the last moment. He wavered, undecided for a few more moments, then continued down the same path. He was heading towards the greater damage. He had no reason to choose this route over another. It was, though, the closest thing he still had to a purpose. He hadn't heard any orks near him for a few minutes. But there were other sounds. He thought he heard shuffling, mutterings, the scuttling of wet insects. The ship was turning into something that belonged in the myths of frightened children. His faith demanded that he reject the conclusion his terror had reached.

He found that he could not.

As chastisement, as duty, he moved deeper into the twisted bow region of the *Scouring Light*.

The noises of horrors remained above him. There didn't seem to be anything at the same level. Then, around the buckled remains of the next intersection, he heard something heavy being dragged. Lasrifle at the ready, he rounded the corner. From the shadows came a shape, pulling itself along the deck. It was long, thin and incomplete. It was draped in rags and moved with the jerkiness of a malfunctioning machine, and the relentlessness of obsession. There was blood and flesh on one side of the struggling machine.

As he paused, uncertain, the thing lifted its head. It had a face, bisected between the machinic and the organic. The bronze visage was still intact, a stained idol of judgement. Bone showed through the flesh on the other side. Some of the wounds were too neat. Brauner recognised the work of Orbiana's strange gun. His finger tightened on his rifle's trigger.

Then he saw the pendant dangling from the being's neck. It was the same rosette that Orbiana had brandished. The same absolute authority whose name Brauner knew better than to ask.

He had overheard the Grey Knights mention a name. He spoke it now. 'Hadrianna Furia?' he whispered.

The apparition nodded. She gestured at her throat. He understood that she

could not speak. Shouldering his rifle, he moved forward and bent to help her. The density of her augmented limbs made her heavier than she appeared, but he managed to get her upright. Her right leg was injured, but with his aid was able to support weight. She could walk, slowly.

‘I’ll take you to...’ He trailed off. Take her where? There were no rear lines.

Furia pointed. Her remaining arm, bronze like her face, was a rigid, commanding sign.

Brauner nodded that he understood. They began to make their way back towards the stern, one dragging step at a time. Above them, the sounds of battle and madness grew worse.

And that voice, that terrible voice. It kept coming. With every syllable it uttered, reality decayed.

‘Blasphemy,’ Vohnum said.

The exclamation was curt, an instinctive reaction to Gared’s statement. Styer also heard surprise and puzzlement in his tone. Of course there was. True blasphemy was as foreign a concept to the Grey Knights as contemplation was to the orks. But what Gared had said must have been incomprehensible to Vohnum’s way of thinking.

Styer wished it was to his. He wished he didn’t see the dark, inexorable logic of events taking shape before his mind’s eye. He watched Gared kneel before the Dreadknight. The Epistolary crossed his arms over his chest and whispered a prayer of greeting before he climbed the adamantium-alloy leg and began the process of putting himself in harness.

Styer said, ‘The relic that Orbiana brought back...’

‘As dangerous as we thought,’ Gared confirmed.

‘We did the right thing,’ Vohnum said. He, Borsam and Gundemar had formed a barrier in the doorway. They fired at every daemon and ork that approached. Ardax and Tygern, in the rank behind, moved forward to fire as their brothers reloaded. They were living fortifications. They would not be enough when the main force arrived.

‘Yes,’ Gared said. ‘We did the right thing.’ The command harness clamps came down over his shoulders, fixing his torso in place. ‘And in doing that right thing, we forced Inquisitor Orbiana into a corner. Clearly, she made a desperate attempt, which has ended in disaster.’

‘You think that if we had left her to her devices, her safeguards might have been sufficient?’

‘Perhaps. Perhaps not. But we made certain that her safeguards were *not* sufficient when she proceeded regardless.’

‘This is speculative,’ Vohnum objected.

‘When I was in the mausoleum,’ Gared said, ‘I found a ring with hexagrammic encoding. Touching it destroyed it. The daemonic probe I fought was blocked until then. It must have been seeking since the death of Mehnert, since his body was distorted after death. The relic must have been calling it. But it lacked direction until I broke those wards.’

The complete pattern unveiled itself to Styer. It was as sickening as if it had been an actual plague. And maybe it was. ‘Because we came, Orbiana’s departure from the system was delayed,’ he said. ‘The kroozer and the second wave of ships are here only because we are. If not for us, Orbiana would have found her relic and extracted her forces.’ He closed his eyes for a moment, just one, the single wince he would permit himself. ‘We brought the orks. We held the *Scouring Light* here. We created the circumstances in which a desperate, foolhardy risk was taken.’

‘This nexus of events could only occur at these coordinates,’ Gared said softly.

Styer surprised himself with a harsh rasp of bitter laughter. ‘Brother Vohnum,’ he said, ‘you are vindicated. The prognostication was accurate. A daemonic incursion was foretold to occur in this region, and now it has. We made sure of it.’

Vohnum said nothing. He kept shooting.

‘Is this where prognostication takes us?’ Styer asked Gared. ‘To fulfil our own prophecies? If we had ignored the prognosticators, would the incursion never have happened?’

‘We could never have ignored the warning,’ Gared said. His preparations were almost complete. Once the Dreadknight’s mechadendrites connected to his synaptic implants, he and the huge framework would be one. He would have a new body.

‘You’re right, brother,’ Styer agreed. ‘We must always act on the warning.’ To do otherwise was treasonous. Heretical. Unthinkable. But he was faced with something worse than his earlier doubts. He had mistrusted what had appeared to be inconsistencies and nonsensical aspects of the prognostication. Now they were all explained. And what did this mean? That the Grey Knights were the puppets of fate? That they were destined forever to fight daemonic threats that arose because of their own actions?

He could not accept that.

Gared saw where his thoughts had taken him. 'I am the pilot of the Dreadknight,' he said. 'I move its limbs. It does not move mine.'

'Your wisdom gives us hope, Brother-Epistolary,' he said. 'It is time we destroyed the enemy's hope.'

'How does the daemon know us?' Borsam asked.

'We shall demand that answer of it,' Styer said. 'We will rip it from the fiend's throat.' The question was a good one. Dark answers occurred to the justicar, answers shaped by the pattern he had confronted. He would not countenance them yet. If they were false, he would not give them power. If they were true, he would learn that only as he destroyed the foe that awaited him.

To Gared, he said, 'Are you prepared, brother?'

'I am.'

'Then begin.'

Styer strode towards the entrance. His questions were wounds. He would withstand them. They did not change the honour of the battle in which his squad was engaged. A great evil had erupted here. It intended to blight the Imperium. Destroying this threat gave meaning to Styer's existence.

Behind him, Gared intoned, 'Awake. The Emperor calls upon thee, oh Dreadknight. The Imperium calls upon thee. I call upon thee, and I offer my body and my soul to thee. Be the fire of my limbs. I shall be the fire of your heart. Lend me your strength and fortitude, and I shall reward thee with righteous purpose.' The bridge filled with the deep, powerful hum of the Dreadknight's plasma reactor coming to life, filling its warrior heart with anger.

Gared's prayer was a call to duty for Styer too. Strength and purpose. Faith. They were the iron of the Grey Knights. They resided in him. They resided in his brothers. As the moment of great battle loomed, his doubts and questions faded before the vital elements of his being. They would return, but they meant nothing now. He lived for the righteous war against the Ruinous Powers, and here their minions came to feel his wrath.

They would pay for his doubts. They would bleed for his questions. And their master, whatever foul being it was, would suffer tenfold for the answer to the questions – the answer that Styer pushed to the back of his mind, that he would not countenance until the threat was vanquished.

Renewed by prayer, fuelled by anger, Justicar Styer moved a single step past his brothers. He stood at the edge of the shattered deck. He looked down at the spectacle of the xenos filth and daemoniac obscenity battling with each other, at the rising tide of enemies now within striking distance of the bridge.

Behind him, Gared shouted, 'In the name of the Emperor!'

The Dreadknight took its first booming step.

The furnace of war raging in his heart, Styer voxed Warheit and Saalfrank. 'Restrict your fire to the defence of the *Tyndaris*. Allow the orks unrestricted access to the *Scouring Light*.'

Warheit acknowledged. Saalfrank asked, 'Justicar?'

'There is much here to keep them occupied,' Styer told him. To his squad he said, 'Let the foes tear each other apart. We will pass through them as a scythe and send their leader shrieking back to the immaterium.'

Styer raised his daemon hammer high. 'I am the hammer!' he shouted. His voice boomed over the great cavern that had been created in the centre of the ship. Let every enemy hear him and tremble. 'I am the right hand of the Emperor, the instrument of His will, the gauntlet about His fist, the tip of His spear, *the edge of His sword!*'

'*WE ARE THE HAMMER!*' his brothers echoed.

They plunged down the slope. The vortex of green tide and cauldron of plague reached for them with a gaping maw.

The Grey Knights hurled themselves into war.



CHAPTER TEN

FATHER OF FLIES

Breathing was pain. Knives to her throat, coals in her functioning lung. Every inhalation wracked her body, yet she couldn't get enough oxygen.

Unconsciousness hovered at the edge of her vision. Furia denied it purchase. To surrender to it would be a dereliction of duty. She still had a mission.

Her lost voice was a curse, but the old soldier, Brauner, was attentive to her gestures. Their progress was slow, but it was still progress. The journey was a long one. They had most of the length of the ship to travel. A little less than a thousand metres. With the full use of her legs, she could have reached her destination in a few minutes. At their current pace, it seemed leagues away.

The damage to the corridors lessened as they made their way toward the stern. The alteration of the vessel's essence, though, was pervasive. The softness, the tactile evidence of decay, was everywhere. Furia noted that the power to all primary functions was still on. The *Scouring Light* had been corrupted, but it remained spaceworthy. The Ruinous Powers wanted the vessel for their own purposes.

She would disappoint them.

Brauner's face was grey with exhaustion and horror. His jaw was set with the determination to march through terrors. Furia felt a stab of pity for the man. His encounter with the daemonic was upending everything he had been taught. That he was still fighting spoke well of his tenacity.

They were amidships before something came for them. The decks above

vibrated with the sounds of gigantic battle. Furia's augmented ear distinguished the footsteps of the Dreadknight from the beat of explosions and gunfire. There was also the bellowing of orks, and other, more insidious sounds. And the worst voice still shouted its welcome to the Grey Knights. Whenever it spoke, Brauner gasped. It was a wonder that the man forged on. Perhaps the hundreds of battlefields of his career had forged his spirit into an alloy strong enough to withstand the poisonous sound of the daemon's speech.

'It knows them, doesn't it?' Brauner whispered.

Furia nodded. The echoing words were full of the satisfaction of vengeance. This was an enemy that this Brotherhood of the Grey Knights had fought before. The daemon had a particular hatred for Justicar Thawn. That suggested a name to Furia. She hoped she was wrong.

If she was correct, her journey had an even greater urgency.

A sound detached itself from the battle above. Heavy footsteps, the scrape of claws against the surface of the deck. Brauner heard it too. He hesitated. Furia pointed forward. Brauner nodded and they kept moving.

The sound was ahead of them. They were in the main passageway. Ahead, after a staircase leading to the upper decks, the hall carried on into darkness. There lumen strips had been destroyed there. Just in the last few minutes, Furia guessed. The shuffling gait came from the deep night into which she and Brauner were about to step.

At the point where the shadows took over from the light, she had Brauner prop her up against the wall. She reached for her belt. He raised his lasrifle. They waited.

The thing in the dark was impatient. When they didn't come to it, it rushed out of the dark. It was a plaguebearer. Its horn curved to the left from its skull, oozing sacks of flesh and bony protuberances jutted from its torso. As it charged, it chanted *bonewrack bonewrack bonewrack*. It brandished a serrated blade almost as long as Furia was tall.

Brauner recoiled. The reflex saved his life. The plaguebearer's swing came within a finger's width of his face. Crying out in disgust and spiritual pain, Brauner fired. The las seared the hulk's flesh. Pus boiled and fat burned. The daemon barely noticed. With a throat of bubbling phlegm, it said something to Brauner in syllables that were of no language, but had dark meaning for his soul. He stumbled back as if struck. His arms went limp and his gun lowered.

Furia grasped the psyk-out grenade from her belt clip. She threw it at the Plaguebearer. Her arm was strong. The grenade hit the daemon in its soft gut. It

sank into the sticky flesh and went off. The blast itself was small and muffled by the Plaguebearer's mass. The hall filled with a particulate cloud. It was highly psi-reactive. Furia and Brauner were not psykers, and were unaffected. The plaguebearer's warp-essence took the brunt of the blast. It squealed like a grox in an abattoir. It stumbled, badly stunned.

Now, Furia thought. Shoot it.

Seeing the monster could be hurt, Brauner recovered his nerve and shot the daemon in its eye, blinding it. The plaguebearer shrieked and swung wildly. The sword hit the wall hard enough to jolt out of the daemon's hand. Brauner kept shooting, backing out of range as the plaguebearer followed the source of its pain and tried to snatch him. It passed before Furia.

The inquisitor slid to her knees. Muttering invocations to purity, she reached for the sword. It was slick, but her hand was not organic, and so was immune to the weapon's disease. If she still had movable lips, they would have curled in moral disgust. Vowing to serve full penance for using the enemy's foul weapon, she reared back. Still on her knees, she turned her upper body into a pendulum, using the blade's great length and weight for momentum. She reached as far behind her as she could before toppling over, then rocked forward, bringing the sword back down in a slashing arc. She let fly. The sword plunged into the daemon's back. The plaguebearer stopped in its tracks. Its legs collapsed beneath it. Its bulk slammed to the deck. Its gargling scream scraped the air raw.

Yelling incoherent hatred, Brauner drained his power pack, frying the daemon with las. He concentrated all his shots at its head. When he had to change packs, the abomination was barely moving. Furia dragged herself over and grasped the sword's hilt. She pulled herself upright, pulled the blade out of the daemon's back, then swung awkwardly but with enough force to decapitate it. She fell to her right as the plaguebearer's head rolled to a stop by Brauner's feet.

The body of the daemon began to liquefy, its essence dissolving into the contaminated deck and walls.

Brauner stepped around the festering mass and helped Furia up. She pointed to the stern again, giving him orders and purpose before he could think too long about what he had seen. He nodded, shaken but still coherent. They started forward once more.

They headed for the engines.

And now, at last, he fought the enemy they had come to find. Styer swung the daemon hammer with the full strength of faith. He knew fierce joy as the

Nemesis force weapon crushed the abominations that dared trespass on the Emperor's galaxy. His weapon was joyful too. It crackled with unleashed energies as its purpose was fulfilled. Here was the enemy it had been forged to destroy.

The squad drove through the mass of struggling monstrosities like a torpedo. Individual orks and daemons, beings that would have torn apart mortal humans with amused contempt, could not stand before the strength of a single Grey Knight. Against a squad acting as a single, devastating entity, they fell like squalid vermin. Numbers were their only recourse. Within minutes, the effect of Styer's command made itself known. Ork reinforcements poured into the trench. The Grey Knights moved through a convulsion of war. Xenos brute and daemon clashed to reach the Space Marines, and clashed for supremacy. The orks sought pillage and war. The daemons were acting with greater purpose. The will they served wanted the ship, and it wanted the Grey Knights.

Styer kept catching glimpses of the huge ork warboss. It was fighting to close with him, but the waves of daemons and the speed of the squad's advance blocked its attempts. It raged with frustration.

Greenskins and daemons smashed into each other. And Styer's squad pushed deeper and deeper into the struggling mass. Behind the battle-brothers came Gared. The Dreadknight crushed foulness with every step. Its hands were doomfists. When Gared punched downward with the left, he struck with the colossus that was now his body. Eldritch light flashed as daemons were vaporised and orks were smashed to pulp. The armature's left wrist also bore a heavy incinerator. Its flame burned with the blue light of a star. Gared torched furrows on either side of the squad, carbonising orks, burning the daemons with psychic heat. The Dreadknight's right hand carried a Nemesis greatsword. No enemy yet had been worth its obliterating edge. On the wrist was a gatling psilencer. Gared used it sparingly. Styer guessed he was preserving his strength for the greater enemy that awaited them. When the Epistolary did fire blasts from it, the psychic bolts hit with the force of the Emperor's judgment. They disrupted the physical integrity of the daemons. Plaguebearers and beasts of Nurgle erupted, then vanished. Nurglings popped like foam.

The Grey Knights used little ammunition. There was no need. Their enemies crowded in, hurrying to their demise. They advanced in a wedge, hammer and sword and halberd eviscerating and crushing. Purging. They moved deeper into the trench, deeper into darkness and disease. Styer walked through a storm of rent daemon flesh. There was no pause, no slowing for anything. He was

annihilation given human form.

And the great enemy called to him still. *'HURRY TO DESTINY, KIN OF THAWN! YOU HAVE SERVED ME WELL! I WOULD WELCOME YOU IN KIND!'*

Between the thrusts of his halberd, Vohnum said, 'The beast wants us to overcome its defence.'

Styer grunted. Was it holding back, luring the Grey Knights instead of truly fighting them? Was this legion of pestilence bait? He didn't care. Everything would be put to fire and sword. 'If the beast wants us to meet,' he said, 'then it is hastening its own demise.' He smashed the midsection of a beast. Its paws scabbled at his holy armour. He trampled it into the other bodies. 'Is that not so, Brother-Epistolary?' he voxed.

'We must make it so,' Gared answered.

A suitable note of caution. Faith without thought could shade into arrogance. If there was a welcome ahead, it was because the daemon had faith in its power. It was Styer's duty to teach his foe the folly of its own arrogance.

Deeper still into the trench. They were approaching the lower decks now. Fewer orks had made it this far. The daemonic attacks became more concerted but to no avail. The Grey Knights were fate coming to call.

You have served me well.

The idea, the answer to evil questions that Styer had held at bay, broke through his personal wards. He faced it even as he fought. He dealt with it *because* he fought. He wrought destruction on the daemons and greenskins with even more ferocity. He heeded Gared's warning. He would not deny the possible truth of the idea and would not confront threat with arrogance.

And the idea was this: if it were true that the Grey Knights had ensured the fulfilment of the prophecy, perhaps events had not conspired to this end through happenstance. If impossible coincidence was not the cause, that left unalterable destiny, something his faith in the God-Emperor would not allow him to accept, or the actions of another agent. Perhaps events had been helped along. It would not have taken much. Orbiana's actions would have placed her at risk of being influenced by Chaos. A whispered inspiration, a nudge of intuition, little more than that could have brought the *Scouring Light* to the Sanctus Reach and the bonewrack icon.

Even so, what Styer had to accept was the immense strength such a being must possess to influence events beyond the empyrean. It had orchestrated its unleashing into the materium.

He realised he was already regarding the idea as a fact.

So be it. That changed nothing. He and his brothers must and would banish this thing. They would cut its triumph short.

The trench became a tunnel, a tall one, higher than the Dreadknight. The space was more constricted, and the daemons were almost a solid wall of slavering, gelatinous flesh. Sword blows rained down on Styer and he battered his way forward. The beasts tried to bite through the ceramite. He and his brothers destroyed every horror that approached the squad. The concentration of daemons did nothing to slow them down.

Almost as if the creatures were parting before them, opening the way to the final revelation.

The wall closed behind them. The tunnel opened up into another huge space that had been carved out of the interior of the ship, one that took up most of the bow. The walls of the chamber showed the detritus of what the spaces had once been. Metal storage crates, tapestries, bulkheads and marble cladding littered the floor and rose in heaps on the periphery. Every surface, the walls and the ceiling, dripped with a phosphorescent mucus. The air was filled with buzzing swarms of flies and flickering spores. Daemons filled the space, a rippling sea of plague. And in the centre, their master sat upon his throne.

The daemon was huge, bloated like a toad. Three horns grew from its head. The central one was short and hooked. The other two were long and curved. The right-hand one was broken. It oozed something red and green that hissed when it touched the daemon's shoulder. Its jaw was huge, stretched in a grim, knowing smile over a metre wide. Two tongues licked out from between the rotting, jagged teeth. Green flesh hung from the daemon's frame in folds of glistening fat. Lesions suppurated. Bubbles of cancer sprouted from them, gathered definition and faces, and tumbled down the vast body, squealing in the fevered joy of their birth. They joined the hundreds of their kin, forming a babbling, shifting mound that supported the platform on which the daemon sat.

The throne was an assemblage of toxic wreckage. Styer saw all the paraphernalia of a great laboratory, along with instruments whose function he could not guess. Everything was encrusted with filth. The daemon's arms rested beside braziers whose flames touched its flesh, scorching it black as they heated iron alembics to a white glow. Coruscating effluent flowed from tubes at its base.

Behind the throne, the air was torn and bleeding. A rift had been opened in the materium. It ran the entire height of the chamber, pulsing with non-colours. Its edges were corrosive of reality. From within came an endless parade of

squirming, lurching monstrosities. The daemonic host grew larger and stronger with every dark second.

For all of the daemon's taunting, it gazed at Styer with a seriousness of purpose. Its amusement had been a mask. Its eyes were narrowed, malevolent. They were also the eyes of a sage.

'YOU HAVE FOUND MY LOST BONEWRACK,' said Ku'gath, the Plaguefather. *'YOU ARE NOT THAWN. BUT I SHALL GRANT YOU THE SAME GIFTS I OWE HIM.'*

Styer experienced the vertigo of punished hubris. No, he was not Thawn. Who in the Chapter could claim to be? The immortal had fought Ku'gath during the Curwen Infestation. He had destroyed the daemon's physical form, achieving a victory of legend. But in the end, the only means of ending the incursion had been Exterminatus.

Seven Grey Knights stood before the Plaguefather. Justicar Thawn was not among them. But they were seven Grey Knights.

Without despair, and without hope, Styer charged towards the throne.

They reached the enginarium. They had encountered no other daemons. A few clusters of orks, new arrivals on the ship, had crossed their path, and Brauner had managed to shuffle himself and Furia into the shadows until the greenskins passed. Their route had been otherwise empty.

The enginarium crew lay in pieces about the control chamber. The orks had been here, slaughtered them, and left. They weren't interested in holding territory on the ship. Killing everyone would accomplish their purpose.

The control stations sat at the base of the monolith of the warp drive. Beneath the deck were the massive tubes and reactors of the plasma drive, stretching the entire aft section of the sloop. The warp drive's containment was a hulking column, a tree of adamantium and iron and containment fields. Brauner eyed it suspiciously. The ship-wide rot was present here too. 'The engines can't be stable,' he said.

Furia nodded vigorously.

'Oh,' Brauner said, as he realised why they had come.

Furia pointed to a bank of controls to the right of the warp drive. They limped their way over. Brauner helped Furia into the seat before the central panel. He marvelled that she was still alive, conscious, and functioning. She pointed to the vox handset on the console before her, then at Brauner.

He picked it up. Furia watched him. He thought about their purpose here, and

who should be told about it. Trying one channel after another, he called out to Justicar Styer.

Ku'gath's jaws widened in satisfaction as the Grey Knights pounded towards him. Styer felt nurglings burst beneath his tread. He held his daemon hammer over his shoulder, preparing a devastating swing. Its head flared as the weapon responded to the proximity of so powerful a daemon presence. All the Nemesis weapons of the squad were aflame with anger. The collective psychic righteousness of the battle-brothers was in Styer, and he projected its fury before him. A plaguebearer tried to attack him but the energy of faith blasted the daemon apart.

Ku'gath waited until Styer was only a few steps away before he acted. He did not rise from his noxious throne. He made a hurling gesture. From his open palm came a hurricane cloud of flies. The swarm was a solid mass of black. It enveloped the Grey Knights.

It was like running into a wall. The flies covered Styer's helmet lenses. They hit hard enough to break his charge. His ears were filled with the hum of insects and the *tickticktickticktick* of a hundred thousand jaws biting at his armour. He tried to keep moving, but the flies came in even greater numbers. He was blind, trying to force his way through a toxic flood. He had no idea where he was heading. He swung the daemon hammer. The swarm cleared for a moment. Styer caught a glimpse of Ku'gath raising both arms. Answering his gesture was a wave of nurglings on a tide of liquid corruption vomiting forth from the base of the throne. The vileness washed over him. The flies swam in torrents, fastening themselves to his armour. The sheer mass of the attack slowed him to a crawl. The current turned him. He lost his sense of direction.

'The coward wants to blind us and flee,' Vohnum snarled.

'No,' Styer warned. 'This is not a defensive attack.'

As he fought to tear the veil of darkness from his eyes, and move his limbs again, Brauner's voice called out on the vox. 'We are in the enginarium, lord,' the old colonel said.

We. Furia was with him. At last. And with them there, the path forward was clear, despite the flies and filth. 'Begin the sabotage,' he ordered, grunting with effort to lift the daemon hammer over his head, raising it high, high, above the sea of insects and squirming daemons. 'Contact Saalfrank. Tell him to lock on for teleportation. At my signal, trigger it all.'

It would not be enough to destroy the ship. Ku'gath must not be allowed to

retreat into the warp on his own terms. He had to be imprisoned there once more.

Styer brought the hammer down with his full strength. It sent a shockwave through the nurlings and flies. The world flashed blue. He parted the sea of disease. The way forward to Ku'gath was clear.

The squad fired as one. Bolter shells, the incinerator's flame and psilencer bolts slammed into the corpulent daemon. Ku'gath snarled and his body shrank back from the blows.

'We will teach you worse than pain, abomination,' Styer shouted. Still firing, he sprang forward.

So did Ku'gath. The daemon leaned forward. Its throne slid down the mound of nurlings and rushed toward the Grey Knights on the undulating carpet of bodies. It came too fast for something so huge, propelled by the will of the Plaguefather. It moved at the speed of contagion.

The throne and the squad collided. Styer took the full brunt of the impact. He was struck by a racing mountain. Sheer mass mocked faith and strength. He was sent flying backwards and landed several metres back. The hordes fell upon him. He shook them off as he rose to his feet.

The rest of the squad was stunned. Only Gared moved forward. He aimed the Dreadknight's psilencer at Ku'gath, point-blank.

Ku'gath held Borsam in both hands. He dwarfed the Grey Knight. He lifted his prisoner before the Dreadknight's barrel and Gared hesitated.

'Fire!' Borsam yelled.

Ku'gath's expression did not change. He was still the scholar, more studious than enraged. As if performing an experiment, his huge limbs, pendulous with flab, strained. He tore Borsam in half.

And then, from behind, came one explosion after another. Flames washed deep into the chamber. The wall of daemons was blown apart. Disintegrating bodies came down as toxic slick as they lost coherence. The walking barrage of explosions continued. Behind them came the orks. The warboss had organised a mob wielding rocket launchers and unleashed them all at once. Then it came roaring in at the head of embodied rampage.

The space descended into an unending eruption of war.

Brauner winced as the tocsins began to sound. He followed Furia's instructions, and the two of them shut down security systems and containment fields one by one. The *Scouring Light* wailed. The vessel was diseased, and now a mortal wound was being prepared in its heart. Corrupted as the sloop was, the event that

Brauner was helping to usher in ran against every instinct. He had spent much of his life on vessels being transported from one war-torn world to another. He had lived through more than one void war. He had been aboard stricken ships. The fear of drive breaches had been great.

He understood the need to kill the ship. His palms still sweated as he turned dials to red and disabled fail-safes.

He wondered, too, as he steeled himself once more to touch the begrimed control surfaces, how much control they could have over the forces they were setting in motion.

Furia gestured him over. He obeyed. She handed him an object she had pulled from her belt. It was a melta bomb. She did not let go of the explosive right away but gave him a hard, meaningful look.

‘I know that we may well die here,’ he told her. ‘I am prepared. I vow that I will complete our task. No matter what.’

She nodded and released the bomb. She pointed at the base of the warp drive.

Gared’s mind and his body were separate entities. His body was suspended in the harness of the Dreadknight. He had no consciousness of it. When the final connections had been made between the mechadendrites and his synaptic implants, his awareness had flowed into the giant armature. Its arms were his, its legs were his, its weapons were his. The small figure attached to its chest was merely mimicking the movements of the great weapon.

He was the Dreadknight, and it was the Dreadknight that raised its arms in fury when Ku’gath ripped Borsam apart. The flesh body of Gared shouted his rage. The Dreadknight had no voice except force itself. It spoke now. He lashed out with the gatling psilencer and his amplified bolts pounded into Ku’gath. Massive burns blossomed over the daemon’s body. Ku’gath did not flinch, but he did respond. He lashed out, knocking the arm aside. Distracted, he did not see the greatsword slash in from the side. The blade went deep into Ku’gath’s flank. There was a blast of sheet lightning and daemoniac flesh parted with a hiss. Ku’gath howled.

Around his ceramite-plated, adamantium legs, the battle foamed. Gared’s brothers banished daemons by the score back to the warp, but for every one they killed, dozens more poured in through the rift. The tide of combatants rose, the weaker trampled down to become the new surface on which the strongest fought. There would be no end. The chamber would fill completely until there was only Ku’gath, enthroned above all atop a carrion mountain.

No, Gared thought. *No*, said the power of the Dreadknight. The heavy incinerator unleashed its flame over the open wound, and the colossal blade sawed deeper. Ichor spewed over the wrist and began to eat at the ceramite coating.

Ku'gath smashed at the sword arm. The Dreadknight withstood the blow. Gared redirected his psychic energy from the psilencer to the greatsword. He conducted a massive charge of warp lightning through the blade. Forces of the immaterium clashed and huge burn started inside the daemon. It spread. Pus boiled. The sickly green began to glow with incandescence.

Ku'gath opened his jaws wide. He unleashed the greatest storm yet of flies. The cloud grew until it filled the chamber with darkness. Suffocation and blindness fell upon the combatants. Thousands of embodiments of the jaws of decay fell upon the force field that protected Gared's body. The strain triggered surges from the plasma reactor. There, too, the jaws gnawed. A million attacks engulfed the Dreadknight. Each was insignificant. Together, they were entropy itself.

'NOTHING IN THIS REALM IS ETERNAL,' the daemon intoned. The words were not just a taunt. They were instruction.

Erosion began.

'Brothers!' Gared cried out, with voice and mind and soul. *'Give me your strength!'* And he began to chant the Songs of Battle.

His brothers heard him and they answered him with voice and mind and soul. He became the one and all. He saw all their struggles as their psychic strength joined his war. He was with Vohnum and Tygern and Gundemar and Ardax as they held back the hundreds of plaguebearers that came to add their blows to the Dreadknight's plasma reactor. They could not see except in the flashes of Nemesis weapons striking daemons. Ardax had lost his left arm, torn off at the roots when the swords of decay had succeeded in chewing through the seams of his armour. His blood was on fire as it fought a hundred simultaneous infections. But he fought on, and he fought with Gared.

And Gared was with Styer. The justicar was caught in the confluence of seas, between the crashing waves of daemons and orks. The warboss had reached him. Two giants of armour, they traded blows of such force that lesser foes died from their proximity to the impacts. The ork's chainaxe was so massive that it withstood direct contact with Styer's hammer. The flies covered both, turning them into silhouettes of violence. In the moments of flame and energy discharge, Styer saw where he would land the next blow. The warboss, even taller than he

was, returned each hit with a vengeance. Its armour was damaged, but enflamed with battle, the brute's strength grew.

Stretched to their limits, his brothers reached further. They joined with him. They were one. A single will coursed through the Dreadknight's sword arm.

Ignoring his wound, Ku'gath grasped the pilot's protective force field. He squeezed it as if he would shatter an egg. '*EVERYTHING ENDS,*' he said. '*RECEIVE THE GIFT OF THAT TRUTH.*'

The field crackled violet. Its integrity wavered. The flies broke through to the Dreadknight's control linkages.

And now the Dreadknight truly did roar. The collective battle cry of the squad shook the defiled walls of the *Scouring Light*. Gared twisted the greatsword and sawed upward through the huge torso of the daemon. All the other weapon systems shut down. All power, all faith, all will went to this single act: a great severing. And when all that strength was still not enough, when Ku'gath's gelatinous form sought to re-form around the movement of the sword, Gared found yet more. His very identity became the severing. His blow fuelled itself with his very essence. He made of himself a burnt offering that he might have the strength for this great task.

The greatsword moved, cutting the daemon in half. The semblance of muscle parted. The lie of bones crunched and snapped. Ku'gath screamed as the blade bisected his head.

And as the abomination fell back, a butchered hillside that gibbered and flopped, and Gared fell into the dark, he felt the strength of the justicar still present. And Styer called, '*Now!*'

To Grey Knights, to Saalfrank, to Furia and Brauner, the single word, the command to end it all.

Now.

And so it came: the great light of the ending.



EPILOGUE

The annihilating explosion of the *Scouring Light* swept the ork squadrons out of existence. It overwhelmed the void shields of the *Tyndaris*, but the critical regions of the hull retained their integrity. Crippled, many of its decks open to vacuum, or scoured by flame, the strike cruiser orbited a planet fallen to the green tide.

It was cold victory, and a silent one.

It was still a victory.

The *Tyndaris*'s primary teleport homer had locked on to the armour of the Grey Knights and the implanted transmitter in Furia's augmented arm. She had grasped Brauner at the last, and brought him over. They had even recovered the mutilated corpse of Borsam. His progenoid glands could be salvaged.

A victory, then. Yes.

Very cold. Very silent.

Styer found Gared in the chapel. The Librarian wore his meditation robes. He kneeled before the great iron aquila, as still as the statues of the Brotherhood's Champions that stood along the walls. Gared had been here since his release from the apothecarion. Styer had given him a full cycle before intruding.

Gared looked up when he entered. He stood and joined Styer in the central aisle. His eyes were sunken. His face was shadowed, its lines deep. These were the signs of the more profound scars on his spirit.

'Brother-justicar,' Gared said. 'How do we fare?'

‘Well enough, brother. For a becalmed ship.’

‘Are repairs possible?’

‘The most necessary are, yes.’

‘With its last citizen?’

Styer nodded. ‘Brauner is now in Inquisitor Furia’s service.’

‘So he chose that path.’

‘No. She declared it. We took his choice from him when we left Squire’s Rest.’

‘You mean that I did.’

Styer said nothing.

Gared continued, ‘I have been reflecting on the prognostication.’

‘As have I.’ He had been wrestling with the event since their return. The insight, when it came, was a balm.

‘If their accuracy is because they are self-fulfilling prophecies...’

Styer held up a hand. ‘Even if that is so, it is not cause for despair.’

Gared’s smile was hollow but genuine. ‘Still doubting, I see.’

Styer returned the grin. ‘That is my nature. The doubts remain, but their target changes.’ He turned serious. ‘But as I say, if it is true that our actions in some way contribute to the very incursion we must combat, then knowing this is itself a weapon against the Ruinous Powers.’

‘It is?’ Hope showed in Gared’s exhausted face.

‘Yes. We will use that insight to shape the battlefield in our favour.’

Gared’s grin broadened, becoming hungry. ‘I am eager to put that tactic into practice.’

‘So am I, brother.’

There was a debt owed. Styer’s squad had been manipulated. He would repay that insult a hundredfold.

On that count, there would never be a doubt.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

David Annandale is the author of The Horus Heresy novel *The Damnation of Pythos*. He also writes the Yarrick series, consisting of the novella *Chains of Golgotha* and the novel *Imperial Creed*. For Space Marine Battles he has written *The Death of Antagonis* and *Overfiend*. He is a prolific writer of short fiction, including the novella *Mephiston: Lord of Death* and numerous short stories set in The Horus Heresy and Warhammer 40,000 universes. David lectures at a Canadian university, on subjects ranging from English literature to horror films and video games.

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